

of translucencies and overlaps and shadings. In the works on paper (each is titled *Construction Site*) he spins fantastic ruminations on the shapes that he presents in his sculpture. Each form has squiggly, higgledy-piggledy contours. These nervous contours recall the work of the Polish artist Wladyslaw Strzemiński, whose quirky abstractions of the 1930s and 1940s have lately received a good deal of attention. In Macdonald's new drawings, the almost numbing variety of opaque colors suggests a childhood avidity, a refusal to make distinctions. These works on paper are a bit repetitious, but they do hold in the mind. Gathered together, they have a too-close-for-comfort immediacy that does indeed suggest a child's chaotic impressions of a gigantic construction site.

Joel Shapiro, somewhat older than Chris Macdonald, has been playing around with building metaphors and asking his own kinds of what-if questions since the late 1960s. In recent years he has too often asked the same question—what if I cast a Minimalist wood figure in bronze?—and come up with a joke on old-style high art that really amounts to little more than a sleek luxury product for collectors who want something to set on a bit of lawn near the swimming pool. But this season, in a series of smaller, sketch-like, painted-wood constructions in his show at PaceWildenstein, Shapiro returned to his elegant old goofball self. He is turning pieces of lumber into herky-jerky, clambering figures. Working with five or six pieces of wood, creating blocky, wall-mounted figures that are less than two feet in any dimension, he achieves an incisive informality. He has gone back to the basics. He is thinking small and casual. On this scale, the facelessness of Shapiro's figures is not disturbing, it is liberating. The figures are flourishes, evocations of high spirits. These compositions have a musical-comedy lightness. Shapiro is showing us the angles. He is having fun. The sculpture has a card-trick wit. It's not all that much, but Shapiro doesn't seem to be pushing his luck, so it's enough. Shapiro is proving that Minimalist simplicity is a renewable asset.

IN EVERY ERA, a little something is added to an ever-evolving definition of artistic rapture. During the Middle Ages, the use of exceedingly rare materials, such as gold leaf and lapis lazuli, made people open their eyes wide. Since the Renaissance, audiences have often been held by the autographic authority of the brushstroke, which, if the artist is a master, can be worth its weight in gold. In our own time, we have seen a new kind of attention focused on found objects and

non-art materials, on rusty metal, plywood, and Plexiglas. This attentiveness, by suggesting that the least likely materials can make a serendipitous impression, has inspired a new way of thinking about any and all materials, even the old-fashioned ones.

Since the 1960s, some artists have gone back into the art supply store with the expectation that they will find there some eye-opening experiences not unlike the ones that they have already had in the hardware store and the lumberyard. This idea of regarding old materials in new ways has led a number of artists who are associated with Minimalism to one degree or another to think of good old-fashioned paper—including everything from thin, inexpensive graph paper to the thickest, most richly textured varieties—as a wondrous find. Certainly Richard Serra's drawings, with their virtual lava flows of pigment, are the work of somebody who returns to paper with the steel mill in mind. A more delicate but equally deliberate angle is evident in the work that David Rabinowitch, a sculptor whose big Minimalist constructions are better known in Europe than in America, exhibited at Peter Blum this winter. In most of these works on paper, Rabinowitch is using a medium that he's developed himself, a stick or chunk made of ground charcoal and beeswax. It's as if he has taken apart a Conté crayon and then tried to put it back together in his own way.

THIS GROUP OF Rabinowitch's drawings, which is based on his observations of the elm trees in New York's Tompkins Square Park, is about verticality and angularity and massed forms. They exude a softness, a musicality, an intimacy. Rabinowitch's beeswax and charcoal combo melts and decomposes into the paper. When rubbed into luxuriously thick sheets of paper, this waxy charcoal creates effects of an unusual density, of a milky viscosity. I enjoyed looking at Rabinowitch's big drawings (often sixty by forty inches) up close. The relationship of mark to paper has an organic feeling; the grays are mysterious tones, with a loamy richness. By sometimes scratching into these tones after he's put them down, Rabinowitch further complicates his effects. The work is halfway between naturalism and Constructivism; the angular forms echo certain compositions by the Russian Constructivist artist Liubov Popova.

New materials provoke new meanings and vice versa. When Rabinowitch, an abstract sculptor, draws trees with a medium that he has dreamed up for the purpose, he is saying that an artist's relationship to his materials is as much a matter of old

things seen in new ways as is his shifting relationship to subject matter. Surely the salvaged planks and lumberyard-perfect lengths of Douglas fir in Chris Macdonald's or Joel Shapiro's work suggest a very different view of wood from the carved surfaces of earlier centuries. And I don't think there is any question but that these shifts parallel changes in our understanding of the tree, of the landscape, of nature itself. The way that, in the lumberyard, we see wood apart from trees is not entirely different from the way that, looking at certain works of modern art, we see artists attempting to isolate the tree from older landscape conventions.

When Courbet painted *The Oak at Flagey* in 1864, the tree had already begun to detach from its surroundings. This tree of Courbet's is a singularity—a found object; it is no longer an element in a landscape composition which includes a foreground, a middleground, and a background. Courbet wants to get at the strangeness of a tree, he wants to see it anew. And this new isolation of the object is in some ways related to a new sense of materials, to Courbet's manipulation of paint with palette knife and, maybe, sponges and rags—which are found tools. Fifty years later, in Mondrian's paintings, the tree is further alienated from nature, becoming in the process an embodiment of the geometry of the canvas and a portal leading to abstraction.

THE STORY does not end there. The tree that had become an abstraction can also be reintegrated into the landscape, as it is in the relief sculptures that Barbara Goodstein exhibited in her remarkable show at the Bowery Gallery this spring. The insistent unconventionality of this artist's technique, which involves building up mounds, ridges, and washes of white latex plaster on black-painted plywood boards and then adding found materials as grace notes, is an extraordinary way of acknowledging all that the landscape has been through in this century. Goodstein's work combines Constructivist techniques with a painterly sensibility, and that is only the beginning of the surprises and the reversals. She uses white plaster to evoke the weight of tree trunks and branches. She uses black painted plywood to suggest earth and sky. The work has a stark, high-contrast look. And the pared-down elegance of the means only makes the artist's touch more immediately evident. There is a surprising warmth to these compositions, in which the eccentricity of the technique is wedded to a classical visual assurance.

Goodstein's landscapes are meditations on specific places: a church and surrounding buildings in upstate New York; the