

sculpture

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BOTTOM: CLEMENTS/HOWCROFT

BOSTON

Julia Shepley

Boston Sculptors Gallery

Julia Shepley's recent exhibition presented a suspended, kinetic installation in eight parts, as well as smaller wall reliefs and mixed-media drawings. Something that moves instantly grabs attention, particularly when you add the element of flickering shadows on surrounding white walls. The mesmerizing movements of *Sky Habitation* created an environment of ethereal beauty and visual excitement. The suspended units consist of hand-carved wooden chair parts and disks of clear plastic (Lexan) and wood joined with waxed linen thread. Each unit is carefully engineered to move with air currents and the actions of people "inhabiting" the installation (the gallery posted signs notifying viewers that they could engage with the installation and start the parts moving). Ambient air currents and a strategically placed fan helped to keep things in motion.

The slowly revolving forms were arranged in a confined space, suspended from the ceiling at different heights and positions. At times, they seemed completely abstract; other

times, they suggested machines and reminded one of tinker toy flying machines. Playful and teasing, the installation gave the feeling of glimpses caught out of the corner of the eye since you could never take it all in at once and things were constantly changing. The constructions also suggested shadow puppets and marionettes. Shepley has an ongoing interest in puppetry, and influences from this art form can be seen in her kinetic sculptures. Lighting, an important element in the installation, was controlled for maximum effect in emphasizing the moving shadows. Color was neutral and unassuming, leaving the attention on the movement and the shadows, like drawings in space and light.

Carved and put back together, the disassembled wooden chairs became magically transformed. Wooden and clear plastic disks pierced with wooden dowels, sticks, and other carved wooden forms made up another intricate and delicate layer. Shepley's constructions are low tech and hand-crafted with skill, her choreography of forms and shadows controlled by gravity and balance once the objects are set in motion. When I saw the work in progress in the artist's studio

in July 2009, I was struck by the engineering, as well as the manipulation and fragile balancing necessary to make these various parts move together in a dance of solid form and flickering shadow.

The 1950s and '60s were the heyday of kinetic art, though it has continued to attract artists. Shepley's *Sky Habitation* succeeded in providing visual intrigue and advancing the genre. The continual play and visual rhythms that join these disparate elements make the work compelling—real shape against its shadowy echo, object against its reflected shadow, form against void, solid against translucent, tangible against intangible.

—Jane Ingram Allen