

IN PERSON

Practitioner of a Lonely Art

David Shapiro, Poet and Renaissance Man, Finds Companionship in Collaboration



Photo by G. Lane for The New York Times

David Shapiro in the sculpture garden at William Paterson College in Wayne, where he teaches art history.

By BARRY SCHWARTZ

WHEN most people picture a poet at work, they think of someone sitting alone in a silent room, writing. And that's not wrong. But for David Shapiro, a Newark-born poet and art critic who teaches art history at William Paterson College, it's only half the story.

For Mr. Shapiro, the poet's life and work would be incomplete without collaboration, and to prove it he has worked not only with his poets but also with artists, musicians and even architects to create composite arts of many kinds, from illustrated books and poem-paintings, in which words were incorporated, to operas and films. Mr. Shapiro once called for "a theory of collaboration to contrast some of the more extreme romantic and modern versions of individual creation." More recently he has insisted, Ewan critics are more collaborative than people think.

Part of Mr. Shapiro's latest collaboration on view through next Sunday at the Paterson Museum. For millennia, the story of the reticent Zouba from Egypt has been recited, re-told and analyzed, always revealing new meanings. In this exhibition, "The Plagues," Mr. Shapiro has joined one of his sketches from William Paterson, the artist Lily Prince. In combine images and words to cast a distinctly modern light on the central themes of the Plasoer who, the 18 plagues of Egypt. The exhibit includes their interpretations of six of

its tempting to say this plague is an especially timely theme in the age of AIDS, but both Ms. Prince and Mr. Shapiro seem closer to the French novelist Albert Camus in seeing plague as a metaphor for human plague. Ms. Prince, who grew up in Oradell and now has a painting studio in Manhattan, told how she had been surprised one day to find that the room where her exhibition hangs was being used as a temporary lunch room for disabled elderly people. Asked to give the group an impromptu presentation, she said, "All I could think of was, who am I to talk about plagues to people living with severe disabilities?" Her large-scale charcoal drawings combine representational motifs and abstraction to present a vision of the plagues as occurring anytime, anywhere, perhaps even in the context of a white, or possibly on a microscopic level that might easily remain unobserved.

An unusual aspect of this collaboration is that its two components were done separately. The drawings and poems were compared only when both were finished. Even so, there are lovely points of convergence. For instance, Mr. Shapiro turns the biblical concept of the plague of frogs on its head; for him, the plague is that the frogs "keep disappearing like receding lands." And we grow rare as frogs. Ms. Prince's interpretation may not be quite so definitely pointed toward the frogs' extinction rather than multiplication, but the fluttering asperities of the frogs' feet gathering toward the top of her drawing certainly suggests their departure more easily than their arrival.

While Mr. Shapiro's interest in the project was sparked by his affinity for Ms. Prince's mixture of reference and abstraction, his

method of composition was equally influenced by that of Jasper Johns, with whom he has also worked (and about whom drawings he has written a monograph).

"I was interested in the way Jasper is always quoting his earlier paintings in his new ones," Mr. Shapiro said in an interview. "He once told me, 'You quote too much,' and I said, 'Well, so do you!'" In this case, the idea of reusing old motifs in new contexts reminded me of the notion that God didn't make new plagues to send to the Egyptians; he used things that are already there. So I decided to compare these Plagues as certain collages of citations from my own previous writings. Actually, a line in my plague of darkness came directly from Jasper. He had been accused of being obscure, and I told him, "Well, we all love clarity." It was amusing at his reply: "But darkness is clear."

"I thought these poems should be very short," Mr. Shapiro continued. They are mostly unrhymed couplets, although a couple of them add a fragment of a third line and one of them, "Lacuna," extends a couplet length. My poems are too profuse sometimes, and I wanted these to be so pointed as the single drops of wine we pour from cup as each plague is named at the Seder. "This practice has been explained as an expression of sadness over the misfortunes suffered by the Egyptians." "God is keeping us all victims" is how my mother explained it to me when I was a boy.

If Mr. Shapiro's poems can sometimes be profuse, so he says, his talks do so. To engage him in conversation can be to enter a sometimes dazzling, sometimes disconcerting stream of free-associative con-

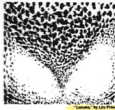
sciousness. It's also, mostly, to just sit and listen. Like any stream, his verbiage discourse tends to flow around obstacles, and your interjections and questions can seem to have no more impact on its direction than a river's stones and meander do on the direction of its flow. But that's really, because what you're hearing can be so engaging, so filled with illuminating and unexpected connections and observations.

It's not surprising to learn that Mr. Shapiro was something of a prodigy. He was born in 1947 in Newark, where his father was a doctor. By the time he was ten-age, he was playing violin in the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra. His first book of poems, "January," was published when he was 17. Of his second book, Mr. Shapiro remarked: "Poems From Deal is probably the world's only book titled after Deal, N.J. It was inspired by the apartments where we roomed when I was a child." Since then, Mr. Shapiro, has written many more books of poetry, of which the most recent is "After a Lost Origami" (Dover/Knopf Press, 1994), as well as studies of a number of modern and contemporary artists and of the poet John Ashbery.

Mr. Shapiro left Newark for Columbia University, where he became involved with the student movement. In a recent monograph, taken during the 1968 student occupation of President Grayson Kirk's office, he poses him with his friend, Francis Kirk, at his desk and smoking one of his cigars. "But I stopped them from breaking his King cigar," Mr. Shapiro says. "Twenty years later, he spoke with full consciousness of what he now calls his period of 'infatuated infamy.'" As an aside, he pointed that the image was recently reproduced by Life magazine as one of 60 photographs that changed the world.

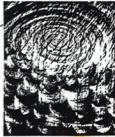
The disconcerting part of a conversation with Mr. Shapiro comes when you start to realize that he is thinking about what he can't always keep up with himself — that each story or reflection can lead to the next before he's had a chance to explain properly the point of the last. Mr. Shapiro says he must have realized the problem, for he has typed up some of his thoughts on artistic collaboration. Among them are "Collaboration: an exchange of free gifts. 'It takes a village to make a poem.'" "Not the mystery of influence, but the mystery of collaboration." "On Friday night, all musicians, philosophers, scientists, singers and politicians were permitted into my house. Collaboration re-makes this sense of social happiness and the flux of all the arts." "The best collaborator is most social and gives us the most shock."

His pedagogical bent was certainly all there. So was the elegant, almost nostalgic that permeates the restless and fractured syntax of his poetry, in the reminiscence of early nights at his parents' house. Perhaps most significant is the emphasis on music, the fact that he puts musicians before philosophers, artists and the rest. "Art is a great loneliness," Mr. Shapiro admitted, in playing string quartets with his family who taught him how to connect. "Maybe that's where my love of collaboration comes from." "From there, too, came the knowledge that the most connections don't necessarily come from perfect agreement." "My mother said that Elliott Carter's string quartets can be in a state of quarrel," he said. "Actually, my sister and I used to fight with our ears."



LOCUSTS

They are still here in the loiled trees in the blasted bodies. They are here lurking in the summer grass over the courts they float. They disdain. Only the males sing, rubbing their bellies. Only the males sing, and we, others, listen.



Art by Lily Prince

BAR. And so the snow fell And covered up the poetry

From the book by David Shapiro and Lily Prince accompanying their exhibition "The Plagues," at the Paterson Museum through next Sunday.