

# THE ARTIST'S VOICE SINCE 1981

## BOMBSITE



Joel Shapiro  
by Michèle Gerber Klein  
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*20 Elements*, 2004–2005, wood and casein, 122 × 132 × 85 inches. Installation view at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo by Sophie Boegly. Copyright Musée d'Orsay. All images copyright Joel Shapiro / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The first time I went to see Joel Shapiro to talk about his work I found him in his enormous studio in Long Island City, Queens, which is close to where he lived as a little boy. He was riding around on a scissor lift in front of a vast sculpture that looked like flying forms either leaping or soaring, fighting or playing with each other, until I realized they were anchored tightly, suspended by intentionally visible cords. In one corner of the same space was a small chair with a seat that

could be interpreted either as a slightly pouty mouth or a grumpy flower from a Lewis Carroll *Alice* book. Its blossom was so precariously positioned on its stalk that all could tumble in the smallest breeze. It made me laugh out loud. And Joel helped me sit on it, very delicately, so I wouldn't fall. Then we looked at little handmade maquettes he was making for larger sculptures; I admired his vibrant, hand-mixed colors and his carefully hung, seemingly carelessly assembled collages.

He took me next door to another big building filled with his famous figures, endless (almost musical) variations of abstract assemblages prancing, tripping, balancing, and appearing to express feelings they clearly could not possibly have. I was reminded of an old Yoga saying, "The magic is in the repetition," because it was like being lost inside a prestidigitator's sleight of hand. At the end of our visit, I was sent home with a bag full of books containing essays on his work. It came to me when leafing through one of these—where I found an image of the juxtaposition he made in the Musée d'Orsay that reminded me of another fairy tale: Oscar Wilde's "The Birthday of the Infanta," a story of how the dwarf in the Velázquez painting falls impossibly in love with the princess—that Joel is a quintessential romantic. His work is about longing and impossibility. While this may be only partially true, it is accurate to say that throughout our conversations he was by turns funny, adventurous, ornery, down-to-earth, contradictory both with himself and with me, and also surprisingly revelatory. And I had the impression of being given a glimpse of something I had not seen before. So, through his work Joel also reminded me of another more ancient myth—one with many faces, sometimes kind like Dante's *Virgil*, or frightening like Chiron, or beguiling like Barrie's *Peter Pan*—of the artist as guide to another where.

**MICHÈLE GERBER KLEIN** How intimidating.

**JOEL SHAPIRO** I'm not intimidated.

**MGK** It looks like a scary crab, this recording machine. So here we go. Tell me about your first show.

**JS** My first one-person exhibition?

**MGK** Yes, your first one-person exhibition at Paula Cooper, when you were—

**JS** In 1969? I think, or '70? When I was young?

**MGK** Yes. Were you a child prodigy?

**JS** No! I was the opposite. I was a thwarted child. My first show was a long time ago. *That* I can tell you.

**MGK** And . . . you had shelves?

**JS** I'm trying to think back . . . I showed a series of shelves. In the small room in Paula's gallery, 1970, I think. It was good work. It was about material and finding a structure that can contain the work. It was one of the many things I was doing—the real issue is that you're always doing so much work. It's an ongoing issue; somehow I've never really settled into one thing. People may know me for one thing, but I don't think that's the nature of the work. It's a broader investigation. But to some extent, exhibitions unfortunately seem to be thematic or structured around the most apparent idea.

**MGK** Did you personally install your first show?

**JS** Yes, it was all about the installation. The first individual work I exhibited at Paula's was one of these drawings for a group exhibition—fingerprints, mine, thousands of fingerprints in ink running across a big sheet of paper. The shelves

were one thing, but I was doing a massive amount of different work at the time that was always trying to find a physical manifestation of thought in material and form.

**MGK** You're not doing a performance. You're making a material object that's about your thought.

**JS** Yeah, I was investing the material with *attitude*.

**MGK** But you invest it with life, I think. How did you meet Paula?

**JS** I showed Brooke Alexander some fingerprint drawings and he suggested that I show them to Paula. That was the beginning. She came to my studio. There were lots of overlaps. Everybody knew each other. It was when Paula's gallery was on Prince Street. I met her in 1969. She picked some work for a group exhibition and then she offered me a show. I showed there for 20 years, a long, fertile time; particularly long when you're young.

**MGK** Sometimes you haven't even lived that long when you're young. When did you start doing the little sculptures?

**JS** Well, I was never terribly interested in big sizes. The work was not preconceived, or at least I wasn't conscious of that. The work was all about *size* and there was no need to make anything larger. Size was determined by the content. The drawings were big and preconceived to the extent that you make certain choices that contain the activity. When I finished a drawing, I'd cut the piece of paper off the roll, but it was never as if I was setting up to be large. That work *needed* to be large.

**MGK** Yes, but your first sculptures needed to be little.

**JS** The shelves were not particularly small—they were very matter-of-fact and determined by the hardware. They were what they were and the big choices were what material I was interested in and how to handle each material. But I was doing other things. I was carving these stone balls. Carving wood. Making things. I did a lot of work with clay that was about an accumulation and a passage of time; I was trying to find some form that I could possibly believe in . . . which was hard.

**MGK** How was clay about accumulation and passing of time?

**JS** It was about making endless piles of stuff. I did these pieces where I would toss dowels to accumulate a large form that built up into the air as the dowels interlocked. A lot of the work was very spontaneous, very much determined by the materiality and edited by whatever I may have been feeling. It was an interesting moment. But I worked with paint and I worked with sticks and stone . . . no bones.

**MGK** (*laughter*)

**JS** Plaster and clay—and plaster plus clay. At some point, that investigation of physicality, how material responds to it, became boring and limiting. My interest in structuring the work around some reference outside of myself became less and less engaging. So I began to make stuff that had to do with my immediate experience and with materiality, I mean, all of those other things that I had investigated came into play and were utilized. But I had to figure out a way to make sculpture and to have some faith in the form. It meant something. I always felt that my ideas—I doubted their significance and meaning. I didn't have this massive, driving sense of I had a sense of . . . purpose but it wasn't conventional in that I wanted to do a large body of significant work. I just tried to make work that was relevant to my experience.

**MGK** You were more playful.

**JS** Well, I guess, playful. Tentative. Sensitive. (*laughter*) Anyway, so I began to work.

**MGK** You made the birds; you said to me one was for each hand.

**JS** Yes, I made one in my right hand and one in my left hand.

**MGK** That's playful.

**JS** It was playful in a sad sort of way. The body of work evolves. You see what's going on. You're working within some context. Or you're cautious of what's been done or what's going on and that informs the work.



*Untitled*, 1972–1973, bronze, 1.75 × 3.75 × 2.75 inches. Installation view at the Clocktower, New York. Photos by Robert E. Mates and Paul Katz. Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.



*Untitled*, 1971–1973, milled gray cast iron, 3.5 × 2.75 × 3 inches. INstallation view at the Clocktower, New York.

**MGK** So what informed you in the beginning? What was going on then?

**JS** In the '60s? Well, I wasn't interested in Pop Art. I was interested in artists' strategies: Bob Morris questioning the possibility of making sculpture, Richard Serra's enthusiasm, Carl Andre's and Donald Judd's reduced palates. Sculpture was very vital and full of possibility. Conceptual art seemed awfully illustrative and pedantic. I thought my problem was to describe an emotional state, my own longing or desire. The work was small but ambitious, and it was much more abstract. To what extent that was successful . . . Gee, if I still smoked I'd have a cigarette now. Maybe I'll have a Nicorette.

**MGK** (*laughter*)

**JS** That was the impetus behind the small work. And it wasn't so much about smallness; it was about appropriate size. And by alteration of size and context you could establish scale and interaction. So the first big show I had after those shelves was this progressive accumulation of material that was almost like a parade of sorts. It was essentially groups of single and multiple accumulations of shapes: spherical and conical. I installed it in a kind of line. I was anxious or nervous; it was slightly more rigidly installed than I would do it now. I mean, one's style evolves too as one matures; it becomes less anxious. Then I had a show at the Clocktower of that single bridge milled from a block of steel. It was



in a vast space—maybe its impact was more meaningful because of that great spiral staircase. You had this utilitarian structure that moves you from one point to another point and then that was really about a mental process, a key of invoking memory that's about change and possibility. But I don't think that it was necessarily about *smallness*.

**MGK** But when you make a bridge or a house and you make it really little you make people look at it in a different way.

**JS** Dwelling on smallness really misses the point. The work is about my experience, and if you care to participate, to look, then you bring your own history to the situation. These were familiar references—bridge, boats, coffins—very much about the everyday.

**MGK** How is scale different from size?

**JS** Well, scale is a relationship of size and an experience. You can have something small that has big scale. Objects tend to have no scale when they're meaningless. But scale is about a relationship and I think size is about measurement.

**MGK** So the small sculptures are about scale, not size.

**JS** They're all about scale and the small size was an aspect of their scale. And of course scale is about relationships, to the viewer's size, essentially. Scale is also in relationship to what you've just encountered and what you may have encountered 15 years ago. It's this very active thing that's changing and altering as time unfolds, consciously or unconsciously. Size is a factor of scale, but scale is much more interesting.

**MGK** Although you've made huge things. The flying pieces are big.

**JS** Yes, I've made big things. They're not colossal. They could be monumental. I'd like to think that they're not too bloated.

**MGK** (*laughter*) Too bloated?

**JS** Bloat is a disease of sculpture.

**MGK** Nothing you make is a statue.

**JS** I'd like to think that's true. It's not too hard to differentiate. Of course, what I find inert, others might find meaningful. Very subjective stuff. It's about the component of work that differentiates art from objects.

**MGK** That's a good question.

**JS** It's a serious issue that has to do with the capacity of the work to evoke aspects of collective experience or re-frame experience in some new way. Without that, the work becomes just some dumb statue or yet another stupid, or at best amusing, object. It's how much can be vested in the form.

**MGK** That's a lot of what your work does, not just the early work. It takes very simple things and makes them either seem to be moving, or dancing, or alive. I look at them and *think* I'm seeing something and then realize that's not what I'm looking at.

**JS** If I'm in the right frame of mind I can see that aspect of the work. Making art that enriches one's experience is a lofty ambition.

**MGK** You've also said to me that there are no new forms, no new shapes.

**JS** Let's say nobody's going to invent a shape that we haven't seen. Maybe they

will with a computer. It's conceivable. Individual artists create things that are new all the time, but it's not necessarily a new form, it's a recombination. I guess every once in a while there's a massive breakthrough, where the necessity or their vision is so strong that it makes one aware of a new way of interpreting the situation. That's happened in sculpture.

**MGK** Who?

**JS** Degas. One of many—Giacometti, Brancusi . . .

**MGK** You love Degas.

**JS** Let's say I can see beyond who he was and recognize his contribution. Did I say I wanted to meet him? Why? Give him a boot in the ass for his nasty take on Dreyfus. He was visually impaired when he was working on sculpture, maybe that had an—

**MGK** Beethoven was deaf. What difference does it make?

**JS** It did make a difference because I'm sure Degas would not have—

**MGK** Done what he did if he could see?

**JS** I think the work seems to spring from the mind and tries to describe movement, possibly, from memory. I'm not sure of his physical condition at the time but—the work is natural, and seems to be about his experience, and observations.

**MGK** Well, it's more humanistic.

**JS** Yes! It's more natural. It's that intricate question of addressing a situation where there's a big continuum of thought—close to but radically different from, say, the sinuousness of the Baroque. There are many aspects in common, limbs projecting into space . . . There is a continuum of development in how artists alter more or less the same form. Degas and Rodin are naturalistic—no ideal form—the form is based on observation. Regardless, the communality of sculptural discourse binds the whole lot together: Rodin, Giacometti, Carpeaux, and Canova . . . and some anonymous sculptor carving into a hillside at Ajanta.

**MGK** Let's talk about your work in the concrete. I want to talk about the way you play with things being on the ground and not on the ground, against gravity—and with it—and movement and balance.

**JS** At one point, I stopped making the smaller pieces.

**MGK** You told me you got happy.

**JS** Let's say "expansive," which is joyful in itself. It was also the recognition on my part that the work was destined to use the ground or the room as a base or a point of origin: a reference—like the picture plane in painting. The equivalent would be Greenberg and flatness. But I wanted to make work that stood on its own, and wasn't limited by architecture and by the ground and the wall and right angles. I wanted the work to differentiate. It was about an experience that was not architectural or using the plane as a means of organization. Does that mean anything?

**MGK** Yes. That's why half of them look as though they won't fall over but are so precariously positioned that they would tumble instantly if you had not grounded them.

**JS** Some of them are falling over; there's a point where even anchoring a piece becomes a drag. Well, not a drag, but it's limiting. There's a limited amount of possibility of expression within a relatively reduced vocabulary that I've worked

with. I'm not going to invent some new shape. I've not been terribly interested in the repositioning of found objects. I was more interested in the reconfiguration of and repositioning of relatively known, simple geometric forms. As long as the work was bound up by architecture or predicated on architecture, you know, it would only have limited possibility. I wanted to overcome that. I found that if I made a sculpture and inverted the sculpture, or moved it, flipped it upside down, its meaning was entirely different. How do you encounter the form? Its inversion can be a meaningful event.



*Untitled*, 2009, painted wood and spectra, dimensions variable. Photo by Brina Thurston.



**MGK** You make great juxtapositions. The sculpture by the tramway in France—in Orléans—that one can look at next to both the cathedral *and* a really modern building.

**JS** Outdoor sculpture in particular has to function in the real world: in traffic, against fabulous architecture, hideous architecture, cars, and strollers . . . it's very not ideal. It's not framed or on a pedestal. It has to endure and function out there.

**MGK** You also made one in juxtaposition in the d'Orsay. You were invited to the museum and asked to create a work in relationship to one in the collection.

**JS** I chose *La Danse*, the great Carpeaux that was commissioned for the Opera Garnier. The work is all about complexity with an internal hierarchy, plus super sexy. It is a masterpiece; aside from that, Carpeaux was entirely dismissed by arch modernists and I thought worth a close look. Also the work is bristling with life and I think has a strange dark component in the facial expressions of the various players—from orgasmic to demonic. Anyway, it is part of the big picture.

**MGK** You made a very complicated piece that seems to be dancing in all directions.

**JS** I was working on really complicated forms that derived from a capricious organization of multiple elements.

**MGK** It has all this rhythm in it.

**JS** Right, but the rhythm corresponded to the Carpeaux. I didn't actually look at the Carpeaux and then make the piece—I chose the work for its uncanny similarity to what I was doing. I was interested in the complexity of its expression, in Carpeaux's spirit, not a mimetic process. I'm interested in where vision or intent overwhelms the special context. I think that's what sculptors are interested in doing. At least that's what I'm interested in doing.

**MGK** What are you drawing?

**JS** Nothing. I'm doodling. But you never know when a doodle will end up being a drawing. Doodle is a vulgar term. Anyway, what else?

**MGK** Okay, let's talk about your drawings then.

**JS** My drawings?

**MGK** Since you're drawing.

**JS** Essentially, I'm more of an abstract artist than a representational artist, I mean, it *looks* like stuff—

**MGK** I think you walk the line.

**JS** Yes, I walk that line. So you have a page to draw on, or a wall. It's not easy, but it's more immediate—at least you're not building the goddamn thing. I make stuff; I'm actually trying to create this new form. And it's not coded in the way a page is. But I can put together form in a fairly fast way with models and wood, too. Lately, I've been drawing rather than making sculpture. I've been concentrating on two-dimensionality. I haven't been putting too much wood together. I haven't grabbed a stick in a while.

**MGK** You told me you make sculptures out of your drawings though, sometimes.

**JS** I've never made a sculpture from a drawing.

**MGK** What about that drawing that looked like a cat's cradle and then you

showed me the sculpture that looked like a spiderweb that was inspired by it.

**JS** That was somebody else you interviewed.

**MGK** On the contrary.

**JS** I said that?

**MGK** Yes.

**JS** If anything, the drawings might anticipate the complexity of the sculpture.

**MGK** Oh, so they're the thought of the sculpture.

**JS** Drawing can be very complex. They feed back and forth. I would use drawing as a means of defining what the sculpture was about, as clarification of thought. So, all those early drawings of boundaries have nothing to do with architectural rooms. They have to do with the projection of kinds of masses of space, more condensed against less condensed.

**MGK** It's very alchemical.

**JS** Not so alchemical; it's attitudinal. You can differentiate space via line—that depends on its nature—how much you put into it. The sculpture's been very fluid over the last five or six years. Drawing seemed frozen, not much other than a reflection of what I knew. Recently I've been drawing and I think it has caught up with the sculpture. It is really about where you choose to focus. It's fun. I've been cutting paper and stapling and gluing it to the page.



*Untitled*, 2009, pastel and charcoal on paper, 30 × 20 inches.

**MGK** Would you call that drawing—making shapes that aren't really flat with paper?

**JS** Essentially I look for some configuration that means something to me. Don't ask what. It's much quicker to push shapes around and find something with collage than drawing and developing single forms that in the end might have no meaning. I'd rather find the image and then draw. My mother, when her cognitive ability was fairly gone, did a series of collages that I thought were inspired. The forms looked whimsical but actually were visually resonant. I think I took the cue. She was 97; the abstraction of Alzheimer's—lots of scrambled experience. Drawing as a means of discovery, old-fashioned hands-on, is just too slow. I fucked around a bit on a computer but it's so format-driven—it all

looks like a printed page. So you have an idea, or at least an idea of what you don't want, and you start to stick stuff together until you find something. Once that's established, then I can draw it out. The drawing is a mirror of some other moment. Although it never works that way since you end up changing the whole thing and shifting around drawn elements—kind of messy and labor-intensive but I'm fairly masterful with the eraser. That's what I showed in Paris.

**MGK** The drawings that you made from collages?

**JS** Yes. And then they change.

**MGK** What do you mean, they change?

**JS** I mean that once I'm in them, I might change them. They're not literal—there are no rules.

**MGK** (*laughter*)

**JS** It's so I can find the form.

**MGK** When you're making a sculpture, how important is your personal movement; what you're doing physically to create it?

**JS** I better be conscious of it. I'm very aware that I'm ripping something from here and sticking it there and taking this from there and recombining it and shooting it and inverting it and pulling it apart again and putting it back together again. I'm aware of all the activity that's going on. Dominant-hand pattern, how right-handedness might affect work—I try to remember to watch that but always lose sight in the frenzy. I'll make a sign.

**MGK** It's sort of like doing meditation or yoga. (We're getting to India by this route.)

**JS** Yoga? Maybe. It starts out as an ordeal and it's difficult and it's extremely gratifying, and sometimes there is this moment of real ecstasy when you actually have accomplished something, and that's wildly satisfying. I should say that that's the measure: when something's really good, it's a new experience. It's emotionally new. It's fresh. It's sort of transcendent, but . . . I always think of meditation as lulling.

**MGK** No, you're really concentrating on what you're doing. It just feels as though it's empty.

**JS** I lived in India for two years growing vegetables and looking at art. Yoga was not part of the program and the little I've done seemed like self-inflicted torture. A lot of stuff you just toss together and it happens. Just like that. It's fast; it's spontaneous. It's great. In fact, I would say that's the really interesting work, when that happens. It can be very labor intensive. But labored work looks labored.

**MGK** Okay, tell me about India.

**JS** It's a large country in Southeast Asia.

**MGK** (*laughter*)

**JS** With a population of 1.3 billion people. I can show you a picture of me in India. I was a kid. I was 22. And I wasn't seeking nirvana. I was in the Peace Corps. I was doing my time in what I thought was a meaningful and fun way. And I looked at a lot of artwork. I had a chance to really see stuff that was not in museums. I grew up in Sunnyside, Queens, which is architecturally significant but it's different from India. (*Searches through some photos.*) I thought I had this picture from India.

**MGK** How is Sunnyside architecturally significant? That's you in India! Oh, you were young, and you smoked cigarettes. You were so young!

**JS** Sunnyside had great scale. There's a cuter picture.

**MGK** You look as though you're having a good time. Tell me about India.

**JS** It was great and overwhelming. I was very free, unencumbered in the middle of deep culture.

**MGK** What did you find most attractive?

**JS** It was different from Queens.

**MGK** About the art.

**JS** It was very present, part of everyday life. And it was not compartmentalized, which happens in our culture. It was pervasive. The iconography seemed to correspond more with real experience, ecstasy, misery, jealousy, death, etcetera. It was about the abundance of life.

**MGK** It's about living.

**JS** Yes, and very explicable in terms of one's own experience: the necessity to create some aspect, some divination of a god that represents a human state. Now, that may well be true in Western religion, too.

**MGK** I don't know, Joel.

**JS** It's so refined; it's only the experience of saints. It's very exclusive.

**MGK** The saints chiefly suffer and have epiphanies. They're defined by how they're killed.

**JS** No, Western religion is about a miserable world and the ecstasy of the afterlife. And Hinduism seemed to me to be very alive and in the present; full of pageant and ritual. I remember one of my first experiences of observing deep religious fervor and faith and how extraordinary that seemed. It was that first night I was in Hyderabad. I went to some remote part of the city where people were walking through hot coals. This is not a fantasy; this is real.

**MGK** And they didn't appear to be hurt.

**JS** People walked through the coals—it was amazing. Anyway it started to get really violent. Huge crowds, and the threat of a stampede; the cops were trying to keep this crowd from surging. I'm in the front of the crowd and I'm thinking, Fuck man, I'm dead. I'd get burned alive. I wasn't ready to walk on fire. But other people were doing it. I mean, it was like a goddamn barbecue.

**MGK** (*laughter*)

**JS** And then you walk back through the town and somebody is on the side of the road dying, in the last throes of life. Heavy stuff. Or a corpse is being walked down the street on the way to a burning ghat, shrouded in white and covered with flowers—very matter of fact, entirely open—life continues.

**MGK** So how do you think that affected your work?

**JS** I'm not sure. India gave me the sense of . . . the possibility of being an artist. Art was totally important to the entire culture. Art was pervasive and integral to the society and that became very clear to me. How it affected my work is a more complicated issue. I think the struggle in my work to find a structure that reflects real psychological states may well use Indian sculpture as



a model. I don't know if it was spiritual, but I spent a lot of time in temples.

**MGK** That was spiritual, or maybe it was a physical experience?

**JS** Do you mean the impetus? Definitely spiritual: what *physical* effort it was, this creation of form and space. And it just appears in the middle of nowhere. A flat spit of land, or a beach. It was this *real* experience of art, not conditioned art. I'm going back this year.

**MGK** I wanted to talk about your flying pieces.

**JS** The one in London? You mean the large suspended one? Oh, and the one that's downstairs. Fuck everything else, the only thing I want to do is stick stuff in space, because that's what I've always tried to do. Why accept any limitation of architecture? Except as a foundation. I think they have great expressive potential.



*Untitled*, 2002–2007, bronze, 160 × 333.5 × 155 inches. Photo by Ellen Labenski and Collin White. Courtesy of PaceWildenstein, New York.

**MGK** I think they're wonderful.

**JS** They are not constricted by much other than my drive at the moment and the physical limits of space.

**MGK** You could do them outside. You could suspend them between houses.

**JS** Not so sure about them outside. They need some sort of frame, some structure as a limit.

**MGK** Do you have dreams of flying?

**JS** No. It's where you want to do a piece that's so tensely attached to the ground that you sense the torque and twist of it, so it's really asymmetrical but pulled hard. So it feels like it's going to rip away.

**MGK** And your upcoming show at Paula Cooper?

**JS** I think it's in February. We have not talked too much about it—it will be early

work that has not been seen.

**MGK** What about the new work?

**JS** I need to find space. But I haven't really brought anyone over to look at it.

I might show one in Los Angeles in January. I could do one outdoors. LA Louver has a defined outdoor space that's perfect. It is actually where I first showed one of those pieces four or five years ago. I like to work but I'm tired of doing all the ancillary, bullshit aspects of work—sending images, doing this, doing that.

**MGK** Isn't that what one has assistants for?

**JS** It's complicated. It's a complicated body of work.

**MGK** One thinks it's simple and immediate, and it's totally deceptive.

**JS** No, my body of work is not simple. It's seen as that, because it has a kind of visceral appeal. Some people know the figures, but they don't know the rest of the work.

**MGK** Well, it all has humor. Your chair makes me laugh every time I see it.

**JS** Life's humorous.

**MGK** Give me an example of a piece that you really love that is unfamiliar.

**JS** (*Flips through papers.*) Oh, here's a work that nobody knows.

**MGK** Oh, that's the one I was talking about that you said came from a drawing, the one that looks like the spider's web!

**JS** I think the drawings that were similar came after the fact—but they all come from the same place.

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