

THE ARTIST'S VOICE SINCE 1981

BOMBSITE

Arlene Shechet

by Jane Dickson

Posted Sep 2010, ART



Studio View, *So and So and So and So and on and on*, 2010. Photo by Cathy Carver. All images courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery unless otherwise specified.

I'd been out of touch with Arlene Shechet for a while until I had a vivid dream in which she was sitting in a cluttered, sunny room—apparently reading. Without glancing up she waved her hand and sent a little brass pot floating across the room toward me. I did a dream double take and asked if I'd really seen what I thought I had. "I can do a lot of things," she replied with a Cheshire smile. I woke thinking "Call Arlene. Find out what she knows that I need to hear." Our conversation over brunch was so illuminating that I asked to continue it as an interview for BOMB.

JANE DICKSON I'm really excited to talk with you. I would love to start with your soap.

ARLENE SHECHET (*laughter*) Oh, okay.

JD It's the first work I remember when I met you more than a decade ago. I went to your studio and you had all these soap remainders that looked like worn bits of beach shells. You saved soap scraps for their sculptural quality?

AS I saved them because they were perfect sculptures in a way. They didn't just have fabulous forms, they had wonderful content. They were banal but had deep emotional resonance for me. When my kids took baths we had shaped soaps to start with, which would get worn down by rubbing on their bodies, washed away but not completely. Do you remember those days when the kids would have bath parties? Other kids would come over and everybody would get in the tub and that would be an activity.

JD Yes, a cool-down activity.

AS Then kids started bringing me soaps from their baths at home. I began to feel like, Oh, everybody gets this, it's not just my own private language. Maybe that's what makes things into sculptures—they're not just a private language but also some reflection of the world. The soaps reflected this idea of fragility and strength, starting out as something that had a distinct image and then they went through some process; they were beaten up, or washed away, or coddled, or nursed into some other form but the original nugget is right there. Its fragility was also its strength. Of course, when you have kids you're feeling fragility constantly. I'd already started to define the Buddhist framework that I was working within and it all came together for me. I actually made pieces out of soap on and off for a couple years. I made drinking glasses out of soap.

JD Drinking glasses out of soap? That's a perverse concept.

AS I know. "Wash your mouth out with soap." Maybe that was one of my first thoughts about the vessel, the container, which I hadn't remembered at all.

JD The idea of washing and of things being worn away continues into your worn-down Buddha sculptures and then into the paper pulp.

AS Worn or maybe transformed, with information both evident and buried. When I was making the Buddhas, which were really process pieces, they were done with this idea of paying attention to my time in the studio in a different way.

JD In what way?

AS Going a couple of steps backward, I came to embrace Buddhism as relating to my studio because I felt that it provided this whole different framework for me. It provided a lot of answers about being in the studio, how to act in the studio, and in terms of imagery and things to think about and look at. It was a full package. It came about when I was doing too many things at the same time—teaching, trying to have a studio practice, and having babies. I know you understand this—there's nowhere to go. I was basically inside some space all the time, but without a lot of personal, mental space.



Studio view, New York, 1997. Hydrocal, acrylic paint skins, found furniture.

JD That dreaded concept of trying to juggle it all...

AS I needed to be able to transform my mental space to not feel like I was constantly somewhere else, that I should be preparing something for my students, or for my kids, or I

should be having a studio visit, or I should be working on that unfinished piece. Instead of feeling torn apart, I needed to feel more whole.

I had already done a lot of thinking and reading about Buddhism, but it hadn't really taken hold in my studio. I had a Buddhist teacher that I talked to, especially at that time, because my best friend was dying. She was very young and it was a real tragedy. I was completely blown away. I was in this place where I was watching life bloom with my kids and then life wither, and the teacher said to me, "Don't make it too dramatic." I thought that was interesting—that it's just part of it, the package that we're in. The big philosophical ideas were enticing, but that simple level of acceptance stopped me in my tracks.

JD Accepting death, that's something we Westerners have a hard time with.

AS Of course, meditation is what every Buddhist teacher would recommend as the answer to everything. I said, "I don't have time to meditate." I'd already tried to get up earlier and to stay up later, but I was so sleep-deprived that it felt like a failure. My teacher tried to describe my studio time as a kind of meditative practice and I resisted it completely. I would say, "You're not aware of what it's like to be in the studio. This is not some ideal state where I'm—"

JD —dreaming, communing.

AS Yeah. "I'm cursing and breaking things and thinking thoughts. So get over it, you really don't know." We had this dialogue for a while and finally one day I said, Why am I resisting? Of course, that's one of the Buddhist precepts—to pay attention to what you're resisting, to where your aversions are. So I said, I'm going to pay attention to what he's saying and try to change my life in the studio. I changed my materials and completely put everything else aside. From that the Buddha sculptures grew.

I was working with wet plaster, a material that changed, and was a kind of time-keeper. Working with this wet material, without the benefit of an armature, forced me into this state of awareness that in Buddhist terms would be called meditative consciousness. I could work with plaster in a short amount of time, and it was riveting. One day I was making something that was blobby and looked, I thought amusedly, like a Buddha. In a different state of mind it would have looked like a pile of shit. I realized that the Buddha was an image of comfort. By that time my friend had died. I became aware that having an icon was really a reminder to me to stay awake, in the broadest way one could use that word. I quietly grew a family of Buddhas without telling anybody. It was my private icon family. I began to understand how I could have this meditative time and awareness in the studio that I couldn't find anywhere else.



Blue Velvet, 2010, fired ceramic, wood.

JD Do you do a literal meditation when you start in your studio?

AS No. It comes and it goes. It also made me notice things in different ways. It made me pay attention to breath and breathing, and this is information that I have then used very specifically to make sculptures. Breathing became form. That was the beauty of it, not that I could bring the classic Buddhist practice into my studio but that Buddhism as a language is elastic enough to give me space and let me focus on things that, without the framework, I might not focus on at all. Do you have a meditation practice?

JD I'm working on it.

AS Yeah, we're overworked as it is. It's like, Oh God, do I really want to work on another

thing? So instead of working on it, I'm struggling to incorporate, to inhale it. You were talking about being in the garden this morning. There's a poet, Stanley Kunitz, who did this great writing about the garden, and being in the garden state of mind—taking what you have and using it in a different way. That's the kind of permission that a classic Buddhist teacher wouldn't necessarily give you, and I do think that a more classic meditation can put you in some transformative place more quickly. But I'm so much an action person, a moving around person that the goal is not to create another job for yourself but—

JD —being present with the jobs you're already doing.

AS Just figuring out where the little opening is that becomes a bigger space.

JD Earlier you said you had focused on the transformation between liquid and solid. That's a thread that seems to run through a lot of your work, starting with the soap and then the plaster Buddhas, going from liquid to solid—

AS —Yeah, because plaster sets in 30 seconds or something like that, so it was a very dramatic way to see time.



Mountain Buddha, 1994 Hydrocal, acrylic paint skins 12 x 20 x 12 inches. Private Collection.

JD I'm interested in tracing the use of water throughout your work. There's the paper pulp and the new clay work that you're going to show this fall.

AS It's really about fluid. I think fluid relates to an idea of change and fragility. But doesn't almost every artist's material go from fluid to—

JD —not if you're chiseling marble. (*laughter*)

AS Okay, that's true. But even if you're painting, isn't it the case? Do you experience the wetness?

JD I'm really enjoying the gushiness of paint at the moment, but I tend to use so little, and often I've used oil stick, which is just sort of scumbling the lightest veils of color. . . I envy the freedom of a gushy, messy painter. I'd want to revel in that abandon more. In *your* work, there's a glee in mess, which many sculptors share. . . you have to be okay with making big messes.

AS Maybe that's the driving force?

JD Sculpting is a really assertive thing. It's like, I'm not going to pretend I'm not here and not disturbing anything, but rather, Look out, deal with this. All of your work seems to start as gush, in one way or another. The molten glass is gush you couldn't touch, the paper pulp, and the clay—

AS —it's the formless becoming form. I'm looking to catch a moment in there. I'm actually working in this fluid state, but all of these materials have to stop being fluid in order to then make it out of my studio. What moment is it that I'm going to stop time? Maybe that's what my "casting water" works were all about and also, possibly, what the making of paper is all about. That paper is made in a very wet environment, but typically the wetness is taken out when it's pressed and dried. I've focused a lot on trying to keep the air bubbles in there as part of the image. In the glass also, trying to keep it as molten as possible. I think that the act, the fluidity, is a big part of my work. With clay, I feel, everything looks better in its wet state. I try to stay close to that, create the finished piece so it has the information of its making. Even though it will forever remain the same, I want it to have a whisper of where it came from.



So and So and So and On and On, 2010, glazed and fired ceramic, glazed kiln bricks, 19 x 14 1/4 x 49 1/4 inches.

JD I was just looking at one of the paper pulp pieces—you did blue prints of floor plans of Buddhist stupas. There are places where the blue of the carefully laid out mandala-like floor plan has bled into the white paper so traces of the water remain in the dried piece. It embodies what you're talking about. You're not interested in making something perfect so that we can't see where it came from.

AS Those blue and white pieces are informative of and very related—as distant as that might seem—to what I'm doing in the new work. To reach that permeability of the image I'm taking an architectural drawing. An architectural plan embodies audacity—the audacity of building something. What could seem more solid than a building? Then I undermine the idea that anything is permanent and solid by putting the image of water into the plan and into the structure of that building.

JD Those stupas are not meant to be entered?

AS Right, those are architectural reliquaries. They're not permeable in the way an inhabited building would be. They're about walking around them. We have big, bold architecture—we're walking around, walking in, living in buildings. Then we have this smaller domestic architecture, which became for me the vessel, the vase in particular. We live with those forms, we use them in various ways in a kind of domestic language of memorial architecture.

JD Sacred space...?

AS A smaller sacred space incorporated into our daily lives. "Sacred space" is a vocabulary that I'm not so comfortable with, but it's basically that. The vase form, that hollowness . . . One thing led to the other, and when I was making those paper vessels at Dieu Donne, I started to channel blue-and-white porcelain which became a reference to ceramics that I hadn't planned on. It grew into another installation that I did at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle. It was actually mold-made with porcelain, also using the stupa form. Over the last decade, I've gotten closer and closer to using clay, and for the last few years I've been building things with clay. I'd been doing things with glass and the big thing I became aware of was that in glass nobody takes breathing for granted. Everyone's talking about blowing and breathing. People have done pieces (including myself) using that breath but—

JD —they contain the breath?

AS Yeah. But it had too much of a sense of removal. It's a very collaborative choreography and a wonderful process, but it has its downsides *because* it's collaborative and because it requires a lot of equipment. I felt that I needed to do something on a daily basis in my studio that I could touch. Clay fills that need. It's a great three-dimensional drawing

material. It records whatever you want it to record in a very direct physical way. And, as you said, I like messing around. I'm sort of sick of getting dirty (*laughter*) but not enough to completely escape it. Clay is mud, a thick liquid. It's necessary to pay attention in all of its states. It's very, very sensitive to time—you can only build things when they want to get built. It seems like it's very playful, and it has that quality, but it's also incredibly demanding. If you're trying to build something, you better not build it when it's not in its proper dried state. That could be ten minutes, ten hours or ten days later. The things that I build, when I'm building by hand, grow over months because I might be able to add only one inch of material in a day. I'm extending forms, and I'm challenging balance and gravity in such a way that they always want to collapse or tip over. This forces me to work very slowly and consequently I work on many things at once. The sculptures have to be built hollow, they can be like lungs with air moving in and out and they are always in this state of near-collapse. In fact, often things do collapse or fall over, and many don't make it, but I love working on that precarious edge. For me, that has obvious emotional, psychological, and philosophical meaning.



Small Smoke, 2010, glazed ceramic, brick and wood.

JD Somehow this makes me think of a series of paintings I did of circus elephants standing on those little-bitty stands...

AS —perfect.

JD I looked at them and thought, Wait a minute, I'm supposed to stand on that?

AS (*laughter*) That's supposed to hold me up?

JD Supposed to hold me and my life and my babies and the whole thing? Oh, my God!

AS Yeah.

JD And the elephants look like they're trying to act poised like, Oh, sure, no problem. That's what you're giving me? I'm going to try and have some dignity on this little tiny stand.

AS We live in such conviction and yet living has a certain absurd element and an absolute end to it. We're trying to cope with that and it's the big elephant in the room. In Indian iconography the elephant is huge, literally. The Ganesh form is the Hindu god that is supposed to banish obstacles in your path. The absurdity of having an elephant be the image that removes obstacles is also very funny. (*laughter*) Hindu and Buddhist iconography is filled with those kinds of wonderful, comic contradictions.

JD I guess even obstacles want to get out of an elephant's way.

AS The comic contradiction is the other thing I wish to have in the pieces I'm making now. I want them to be funny. People have referred to the openings—which are now more holes than limbs or a spout—as a sexual language, and it is. But they're also dancing limbs and classic vessels and aortas and, you know, they're everything. There's a hybrid comic clumsiness, while at the same time they have airiness and elegance. That contradiction is really interesting to me because I don't want to make something that's just an idea. I want to make something that's visceral. When I had my last show, I hadn't really concretized everything but

Gary Stephan came up to me and said, "Oh, these are about the human condition." That was such a good shorthand for what I'm interested in. It's so big I hadn't felt audacious enough to articulate it.

JD You talked before about the warts and bumps and bubbles in the final piece reflecting the process of its making. I'm curious, do you sketch them? Do you know where they're going to go or is it a completely organic process?

AS I never draw them. I have an idea, but I think if I drew it and tried to make it, I would not be paying attention to what is happening. Instead, I start and then I feel like the thing tells me what it wants to be. It's maybe the best part of making art—you start to create this inanimate object and then it starts talking to you and bossing you around, and then it rules. You must come to some compromise position and let it live. You're acknowledging that it's a living thing and you want to be alive with it. In a funny way, it's like having kids. You think you're the parent, but, of course, you're just the caretaker, and the witness. You're not in control of anything. I make drawings with that same approach. I tend to draw after I've already made some sculptures and then use that information to make the drawing, rather than the other way around.

JD I often make a quick coda version of an image I've long struggled over on a fresh canvas, thinking, Okay, now I know this by heart and I can juggle the elements with confidence. People sometimes think this is the preliminary sketch but really it's the "Look Ma, no hands!" finale.

AS As artists, what do we have? We basically have our freedom, so if we don't use it then what good is it? I've used many different materials. In terms of an art career it's not necessarily a smart move because you don't end up with a look—

JD —a signature.

AS But if you got the signature, wouldn't you want to escape the signature at some point?

JD You want to get known for something but you don't want to be trapped in it.

AS Exactly. When people identified me as the person who made the Buddhas, that was frightening to me. My studio upstate is around the corner from where Philip Guston's studio was. I feel like he's my godfather—I couldn't ask for a better one—and I think about him all the time. It's so interesting to read his writings and see what happened, how passionate people were about what a traitor he was, and how difficult it was for him to go from abstraction to representation when, as artists, I think we all know there's no difference at all. It all morphs, one thing into another.

JD I want to talk about glazes, because as a person who deals with paint, I'm curious about this issue. You're making a form out of clay. While you're making it, do you already know it's going to be green?

AS No, no. I wish I did.

JD As to the little clay work *I* did—I made a few pots and glazed them—I was terribly disappointed when they came out of the kiln. They weren't the color of the glaze samples I had painted on there, thinking, Oh, this is going to be gorgeous.

AS No, it's really tricky.



From left: Detail, *Unheard Of*, 2010, ceramic and metal. *Just Remembered*, 2010, ceramic, brick, wood, and metal.

JD So how do you deal with that? With glaze, you're painting a color that's not the color it's going to be. If you've loved the sculpture . . . I did that and I was like, Okay, I'll never make another pot and glaze it, because I feel totally betrayed. (*laughter*)

AS I feel like that a lot, it's the ultimate trial by fire. You make something, you think about it,

it takes forever, and you're in a place where you're at peace, and actually it looks great in its wet, brown state. But then, in order to make it hard, it has to get fired. After the first firing, called a bisque, it looks awful, so then you realize it needs some glaze on it. I was tempted to use paint to start with, because why would I make something and then put it in this box and crank it up to 2000 degrees to wait for it to start falling apart and cracking? Maybe this is an old-fashioned idea, but I felt that the integrity of the material introduces the opportunity to make something where the skin, or the color, is fused with the body, or the structure, in a way that nothing else could do. You're taking on this siliceous material, it's all the stuff that'd be in paint and glass, but melting it into the body of the piece can create amazing magic. It's so beautiful and right when it works, and so wrong (*laughter*) and upsetting when it doesn't work. I'm painting this gray matte fluid, but it is really a shiny green. You have to get it so that as you're brushing on the gray matte, you're seeing the green. So your brain is at one with this thing that's not actually the thing in front of you. It's a pretty interesting mental exercise and also invites a certain level of abandon. There's a level of not-knowing and non-control that I can either be frustrated and upset about, or embrace. But I'm committed to it.

JD Is it a one-shot deal? Can you re-glaze things?

AS If you're making small things, you can. But my works are rather large-scale for clay, and then they start to really come apart. Last night, I was up in the middle of the night thinking, Oh, my God, I should have drilled some little air holes in this one piece, because I might have trapped some air in those layers. When you trap air the whole thing explodes in the kiln!

JD Are you teaching yourself or do you have some clay experts to consult with?

AS I'm always teaching myself. I have had various assistants and they are all better educated at the clay stuff than I am. I resisted having those technical people for a while because if you get too caught up in the rules the pieces end up looking like a lot of other bad stuff that's being made. Now I feel secure enough with my own point of view that I can have them around, and it's so fun. I've been working for six months on a palette of glazes that I feel good about and I'm working with somebody who really knows about glaze chemistry. She comes up with some tech information and I come up with an instinctual method, and together we're balancing each other out.

JD I can't wait to see these.

Arlene Shechet's exhibition "The Sound Of It" is on view from September 10 – October 9th, 2010 at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York.