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ARLENE SHECHET *The Sound of It*

by Kara Rooney

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Freud defined the id as “the personality component made up of unconscious psychic energy that works to satisfy basic urges, needs, and desires.” The id was illusory—an unpredictable nerve bundle of gut sensibility and animal instinct that shifted in sentience from moment to moment. Steeped in psychoanalytic theory, it had no visual embodiment, no reality-based dimensionality—that is, until the sculptural forms of Arlene Shechet.

Using traditional wheel-thrown and hand-built methods for her most recent executions in clay, Shechet taps into the psychoanalyst’s collective unconscious of archetypal symbols. But, as opposed to the solipsistic endeavors of the id, the artist’s minions reach, clamber, and climb towards their viewers, at times seemingly at the expense of their own physicality.

“Blue Velvet” (2010) showcases this idea with cylindrical, dark coils that resemble a deep-sea anemone or other primitive organism. Installed atop a taupe-coated pedestal positioned below eyelevel, the work offers the viewer a bird’s-eye-view of the coils. The resulting perspective is one of peering into a terrarium or fishbowl. Similarly, “Because of the Wind” (2010), with its textural dichotomy of sand and steel, drives this notion of dialectical balance home—the sense of motion without movement—as if one could keep building, ad-infinitum, upon such borderless exoskeletons. Both works careen at angles of near-collapse, intentionally propelling the viewer into a state of nervous laughter as one awaits the fragile construction’s demise. Its beauty is that it never does.



Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY.

Rosalind Krauss, in her famous collection of essays on modern sculpture, claimed the defining characteristic of contemporary, three-dimensional form is “the way in which it manifests its makers’ growing awareness that sculpture is a medium peculiarly located at the juncture between stillness and motion...From this tension, which defines the very condition of sculpture, comes its enormous expressive power.” Arlene Shechet is no stranger to this theory. Like cancerous cells, her clay casts seem to grow—morphing, leaning, yawning, opening—inhibited neither by structure, nor by the laws of Newton.

Their amorphous shapes both adhere to and defy physics, offering an unmitigated allegory for human existence that is never closed, always changing, embodying that strange gulf between ugliness and beauty where most aesthetic practitioners are afraid to linger.

The figure is almost always referenced in the artist’s work, yet simultaneously expelled from the garden of reasonable interpretation. For example, bizarre appendages protrude from odd angles as displaced limbs and growths resist their figurative skin in “Small Smoke” (2009-10). Further plays on the notion of beatific irony constitute the make-up of “Beside and Beside” (2009-10), in which a final repast seems to be the subject at hand. Here, a nebulous shape in eggshell blue, violated by patches of mauve and fleshy pink, conjures the image of a deflated stomach in its death throws. The result is almost comical as attraction = repulsion in an unending loop.

Functionality takes an unorthodox twist in the back room of the gallery as Shechet’s prolific output boasts clusters of bowls, jugs, and other hollow vitrines of various sizes, all deflated by a contagion of uselessness. In line with the work of fellow female sculptress Jessica Jackson Hutchins, these objects serve no purpose other than that of their own existence. They are tautologies in mercury, terra cotta, and stone.

Most notably, *The Sound of It* substantiates the artist’s mastery over and subsequent inversion of the clay firing process. “Sleepless Color” (2009-10) reverses the role of glazing, leaving the freeform and twisted entity in its original, unglazed state while the kiln bricks below are given colorful attention in transparent lacquers of crimson, soft ochre, sea green, and deep, velvety browns. In other pieces, such as “Reclining Incline” (2009-10), a painted, hardwood pedestal in cobalt blue becomes the focal point of the work, its sculptural passenger resembling more of an organic protuberance than a fixed objet d’art. Indeed, the podiums constitute some of the more interesting elements of the exhibition, their unruly composition insistent on becoming part of the sculptural configurations, not separate from them.

Shechet’s creations defy human nature in that they are not encumbered by the theoretical construction of beautiful forms; symmetry, harmony, balance—these pieces know no such conceptual restraints, existing as eternally open and revealed. In the end, we are left to ask what

they want from us. Is it our pity? Our intellection? Our desire (and ability) to identify the beautiful within unconventional bodies? Impossible to pin down, their analysis is the task of the psychoanalysts from whose theory the work derives. For the viewer, their anarchic structures are enough to point us in the right direction.