

## ARLENE SHECHET: *THE THICK OF IT*

JAMES KELLY CONTEMPORARY  
550 SOUTH GUADALUPE STREET, SANTA FE

**It was the dead of winter** in 1915 and Russian painter Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*, along with a dozen or so of his other highly conceptual paintings, was premiering in St. Petersburg. Malevich was at the forefront of the Russian avant-garde, but gallery-goers found his geometric paintings perplexing and art critics were skeptical. With what I like to imagine as a twinkle in his eye, Malevich defended his starkly abstract paintings by saying, "art does not need us, and it never did." Enigmatically independent and self-assured, the strange and lovely sculptures of Arlene Shechet share in this sentiment.

Classically trained as a sculptor, Shechet has worked with glazed and fired clay for many years, and with her most recent exhibition, *The Thick of It*, she advances the medium with intelligence and humor. Shechet revels in the inherent earthiness and humility of clay—qualities which shine in all of their imperfect, silly beauty. Various rendered in shades of metallic silver or matte, chalky grey, they are eccentrically abstract even by contemporary standards. They are curiously formless—often slumping or drooping as if they've had a little too much to drink. When one of them does resemble any kind of recognizable form, it invariably is more akin to an intergalactic or deep-sea creature than it is to an earthbound one.

Their amorphous shapes give them an air of precarious haphazardness without ever making them appear unfinished or carelessly crafted. They are nebulous little fortresses, resting on pedestals which are sculpturally significant on their own. Created with the same blend of self-possessed composure and raucous wit as the clay forms they buttress, they pay homage to the decorative and ornamental potential of classic ceramic art while stating in no uncertain terms that contemporary clay sculpture is indisputably and unapologetically innovative. This could mean a dense wooden column randomly splattered with black and dark blue paint. Or, it could look like an Eames barstool, with thin metal legs somehow supporting a spare plank at the top. Of course it could also mean a dense stack of pastel cement bricks, intricately wedged together to form a short podium.

One of the more striking examples of this collaboration between support structure and supported sculpture is *Rascal*. A slab of distressed wood is gingerly held aloft by spindly wrought-iron legs. Atop this is the actual sculpture, which sports a bulging, curvy build. The thing is primarily forest green, with lighter viridian patches spread across it like moss. Jutting out from the form are stumpy, limb-like appendages. Its chunky green "body" is capped with a bulbous, mushroomy sort of crown; altogether these elements make for a humorous contrast to the gauntness of the stool upon which it rests. There is something perversely comic about a pile of painted clay, resembling bile or Nickelodeon slime, coolly perched on a skinny stool.

This fascinating juxtaposition of elements is continued in *Beyond Itself (Red, White, and Blue)*. If some of Shechet's sculptures look like body parts (or functions), the fleshy, jumbled coils in this one are unmistakably suggestive of intestines. Fittingly, if nauseatingly, it is glazed all over in a Pepto-Bismol pink and its twisted segments are marked with vein-like dashes of crimson. Unlike other works in the exhibition, *Beyond Itself* rests on a wooden shelf that's covered with a streaky wash of white paint and attached to the wall. The placement of the sculpture on the wall adds playful intrigue to this somewhat macabre piece.

*Borrowed from Ghosts* is similarly titillating. Once again, Shechet's pairing of pedestal with art piece is quirkily perfect. This time a snow-white form all but hovers atop a narrow, bleached wood column. In its alabaster wispieness one can clearly see where its tenebrous title comes from; its appearance is positively otherworldly. Voluminously puffed upward at its base is a flattened spout, like a pursed cartoon mouth. Is it whispering or breathing? It's too silly to be scary, but in its diaphanous pallor it suggests a certain nuisance.

In their unusual mixture of austerity and wackiness, the marvelously weird sculptures of Arlene Shechet are keenly self-aware: they quietly but summarily overthrow the functional and decorative qualities we tend to associate with classic ceramic art. Despite their often goofy appearances, Shechet's sculptures nevertheless manage to communicate a sense of legitimacy and respect. They are stripped down and naked; they are humble and shapeless and ancient, or else impossibly young. What they are *not* is conventionally pretty—who cares? Prettiness is rather hilariously beside the point. Malevich would have been proud.

—IRIS MCLISTER



Arlene Shechet, *Rascal*, ceramic, solid wood and steel base, 59½" x 17" x 17", 2011

Arlene Shechet, *Beyond Itself (Red, White and Blue)*, ceramic and brick base, 12" x 8¾" x 5", 2011

