

BERLIN

Arlene Shechet

NATURE MORTE

One could call it ironic that during the opening of Arlene Shechet's exhibition at Nature Morte, one of the porcelain sculptures on view, *Shadow Box* (all works 2012) was accidentally broken by a visitor. Shechet decided to leave the piece—now pieces—on display, including the shards shattered on the ground. After all, the show was about fragility and fractures—about “Breaking the Mold,” as its title put it. And the remains of this incident also said something about the other twenty-eight works present. Most of the sculptures could be described as damaged but—unlike *Shadow Box*—in a delicate and controlled way. Shechet's sculptures look like beautiful accidents. Take *Spill*, which shows a female figure with broken arms whose head is covered by a teacup. Or *Wasabi Plate*, which presents a severed head on a plate with burn marks around it. The pieces all suggest deviations from something they once were, or were supposed to be.

Shechet has a long history with ceramic sculpture, but hadn't worked with porcelain before. She produced these latest pieces during a six-month residency at the famous Meissen factory in Germany. Meissen is not just a trademark of porcelain; it's a symbol of tradition, dating back to the eighteenth century, when the first European porcelain was produced in its factory near Dresden. Its success continued even under the GDR, where it was one of the few companies to turn a profit. For many Germans, the brand is still associated with the East, and also with solid and conservative German values. It has become common to invite contemporary artists into this kind of high-end manufacturing, but for Shechet the residency had its obstacles. Her approach as a sculptor is not directed toward the perfectly finished end product for which Meissen stands. Instead, she is interested in showing traces of the production process and finding unanticipated forms. To be able to do things her way, she had to shake up some of the manufacturer's perspectives and routines.

Shechet focused on material that is usually overlooked or regarded as trash or a by-product of the process, and she made those into her originals. In this redefinition of the object, her use of color plays a decisive role. In *Asian Vase*, half of the mold for a small vessel has become a sculpture with colorful dots on the spots where the two halves would be connected. Also, through unexpected transitions between shiny, glazed surfaces and matte parts, the appearance of the objects changes. Taken together, this collection of in-betweens, molds, errors, and false starts shows what normally goes unnoticed or gets discarded in the porcelain factory. Among my favorites were the rectangular corner pieces with a grid form, such as *Thumbprint* and *Platinum Drip*. These objects were produced by an extruding machine as part of a process of recycling the porcelain. In Shechet's hands, they look like Minimalist sculptures that were caught in an accident, after which their injuries and imperfections were accented with glaze and paint. You might call them battered ornaments; it's their potential effect on a surrounding interior that lends them their subversive beauty.

—Jurriaan Benschop



Arlene Shechet, *Platinum Drip*, 2012, extruded brick, porcelain, platinum, 15 3/4 x 4 3/4 x 4 3/4".