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Crafting *Slip*: In the Studio With Arlene Shechet

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Her work is precarious but her practice is steady. A recipient of numerous accolades, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and an American Arts and Letters award, contemporary sculptor Arlene Shechet is constantly on the move. Her work allures, in part, because it is possible to look at it and not have a clue what it is, yet find it familiar, even comforting.

Several weeks ago, in her secluded, sunlit studio in Woodstock, New York, Shechet tended to pieces in various stages of completion for *Slip*, a solo show opening this week at Sikkema Jenkins & Co., and shared a bit about her creative process. Below are snippets from the visit:



How do you approach the day?

At the beginning and end of the day I'm in the garden. It can eat all of my time. The day is very disciplined. You have to think of it as a job with many aspects. I'm usually here (in Woodstock) Saturday night with my husband; he writes up here on Mondays and goes back to the city Tuesday morning. I stay up here by myself until Wednesday night, but in summer I'm here most of the time. And when I'm back in the city I'm either working on two-dimensional drawings or paper pieces and/or doing my business. I try not to do my business here. That has helped me a lot. Now that I'm here working and I'm really a hermit, it helps a lot. I try not to know anyone here.



Why Woodstock?

We ended up here by accident. After 9/11 I just wanted to be out of the way and I said, 'Let's go upstate.' We found this house and I said, 'This is ok, but we're not going to live in Woodstock, I don't want to be around old hippies.' We stayed here that month, looking for houses in other places and I learned more about this place. Woodstock was originally a utopian artist colony, so I felt like the DNA of the place was actually about art in a much deeper way than I ever knew and understood. And also, it had an art supply store, three lumberyards, hardware stores and a really good movie theater. So that makes it way different. And also, it wasn't a right-wing community. A lot of upstate can be reactionary and I didn't want that. And also, it's not a weekend community, like Long Island. People are here and you're not displacing an impoverished underclass.

Will you share a bit about your process? Do you start with clay or in two-dimension?

I never draw. That would kill it. That is completely antithetical to everything I do. My whole practice is based on being present with what's going on, so I would never figure it out beforehand. I would be bored to death.

I try to make things that are hybrids. And I deal with the history of art. There are conversations with contemporary art, historic art, industrial objects, nature, but if it goes too far in any direction, I destroy it.



What's on your mind while making this?

I'm thinking about balance and imbalance, things on the precipice. Things that have a fragility, not just because they're made of a material that people think of as fragile, but because they're heavier on the top than the bottom, or they're leaning too far, you know, they're a little bit scary or unseemly or a little bit ugly, a little bit frightening...a bit of physical comedy.

You pointed out some wood pedestals, will all of your pieces stand on wood in this show?

Definitely not. I listen to the piece, the same way that I decide about the color. It takes me a long time, thinking about it, waiting for it to tell me what to do. I follow orders and push into it a bit, and I'm trying things, heavy lifting. Half of what I do is moving things around.

This looks like parsley, what else are you growing?

This is like my little farm. Whenever someone calls I go outside. If you ever speak to me on the phone, you'll know I'm weeding. These are herbs and figs and lemongrass, what you're standing in is thyme. Instead of grass, the whole backyard is thyme. You can walk on it. Pick it. Smell it. It took a couple of years to make it happen. On a hot day, it smells so amazing.



Like a Middle Eastern restaurant?

Yeah.