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Parallel Strains: Arlene Shechet's Ceramic Abstractions

by Thomas Micchelli on October 19, 2013



Arlene Shechet, "Idle Idol" (2013), glazed ceramic, wood base, ceramic: 30.5 x 15 x 12 in, overall: 89.5 x 13.5 x 13.5 in (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Brimming with knockabout energy, Arlene Shechet's polymorphous clay sculptures at [Sikkema Jenkins](#) — exuberantly colored columns, clumps and sacks of glazed ceramic — feel almost illegitimate in their sensuality and humor, a reaction that immediately calls into question why a word like "illegitimate" would spring to mind in the first place.

Most likely it is because Shechet's art, which is both fun to look at and a serious consideration of a medium's potential, evinces a kind of populist formalism, to choose a contradictory term, that subverts modernism's high/low dichotomy — an ossified attitude that continues to lurk in the shadows despite efforts to expunge it.

While sharing the same lumpy vertical format and compact size (between 17 and 38 ½ inches tall), the pieces vary from the bulbously biomorphic to the woozily architectonic. They are presented on individual stands — a raw cut of timber, a metal platform, an elongated stool or a low tabletop — which add a little more flavor to each work's distinct personality.

An open, boxlike shape appears, often in multiple iterations, on many of the pieces. The boxes might be stacked like dwellings in a favela ("Stories," 2013) or pop off the surface like apertures into a termite mound ("The Possibility of Ghosts," 2013). The repeated use of these simple geometric forms, so closely associated with the minimalism of Donald Judd and others, feels like a nudge toward, if not a kind of maximalism, then a recognition that the formal rigor espoused by minimalist art is only part of the picture, that a better measure of experience is to balance the pure and reasonable with the impure and unaccountable.

What exactly are we to make of the blue Medusa-like coils atop the dimpled greenish-ocher cloud in "Idle Idol" (2013)? Or the way the two mud-colored forms are joined by horizontal bands in "Out and Out" (2013), as if they were the lovers of Constantin Brancusi's "The Kiss" (1916) in bondage?



Arlene Shechet, "Out and Out" (2013), glazed ceramic, glazed bricks, wood base, ceramic: 26.5 x 21 x 15 in, overall: 71.5 x 27 x 16 in.

In light of our 97-year distance from the Brancusi work, and the impatience with modernism that has waxed and waned over that time, Shechet's sculptures present a fertile alternative to the formal progressivism that took over critical thinking in the postwar period and the reactionary postmodern pluralism it spawned.

Tapping into a parallel strain that emphasizes evidence of the hand and guided by a freewheeling imagination, these sculptures have more to do with the crumpled and squeezed forms of George Ohr of the "Mad Potter of Biloxi" (1857–1918), than the pared-down elegance of Brancusi's artistic progeny (despite the fondness Shechet shares with the Romanian master for unique pedestals).

The title of the exhibition is *Slip*, which the gallery press release interprets as a reference to "the liquid clay used in casting" as well as "Shechet's idiosyncratic forms, which seem to slip or morph when viewed from different angles or on different days." The statement also mentions "the feminine

slip and the slop of the studio," along with "the 'slipping' or falling of slapstick comedy and the slip of the tongue that lets something reveal its deeper nature."

The show also slips under the threshold of comprehension, starting with the relentless texturing of the sculptures' surfaces, from coarse sand to muddy clumps, swarming pockmarks and pearlescent sheens. The visual material is so rich that there is almost too much to take in.

You try to explore the swells and hollows of one work as two or three others hover in your peripheral vision, demanding equal time. The interrelated diversity of the forms circulating throughout the exhibition's fourteen works lead you from one piece to another to another without coming to a single conclusion, as if the sculptures were the scattered chapters of an unfinished book.

In a way, the open-endedness of Shechet's practice, manifest through the continual realignment of a simple vocabulary of shapes, with each configuration adding and discarding ideas as they stream past, can be viewed as an unassuming metaphor of infinity. Not the triumphant phallicism of Brancusi's "Endless Column," stretching out of sight, but the endlessly imaginative possibilities of form and surface waiting just beneath the artist's touch.

[Arlene Shechet: Slip](#) continues at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. (530 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through November 16.