

RICHMOND

Arlene Shechet
Anderson Gallery

Droll and crudely elegant, the nine clay sculptures in “Arlene Shechet: That Time” demonstrate the ubiquity of narrative. The works emerge from instinctual manipulations of clay that occur slowly in the studio through attentive play with gravity, juxtapositions of quirky shapes, and flirtations with contradiction and failure. Their stories reside in iconic abstract forms, solitary caricatures that sustain a double identity. While signifying a range of human characteristics, they retain the essence of their primal origins in dollops of thick mud or lumps and coils of clay. Regarding clay as a three-dimensional drawing material, Shechet pays attention to the medium’s living and mutable nature. The result is that the makeshift becomes a desirable (and permanent) presence, and the unrefined is appreciated as sophisticated. For Shechet, tragedy—in which artist and clay are “characters” susceptible to conflict and/or downfall through their protracted encounter in the studio—befits comedy. These tragicomic narratives involve triumph over adversity (clay’s temperamental nature), as well as a proclivity for surprising and humorous forms.

Shechet’s stories are unresolved and never quite defined. They connect with the viewer’s personal experience through a seductive anthropomorphism: their formal economy stretches beyond the immediate work through raw gestures that suggest emotional or psychological states of being. *A Night Out* (2011), a surreal bust soaked in a saturated mid-ultramarine glaze, reads as a double-spouted Aladdin’s lamp crowned with an Yves Klein

sponge, suggesting a fantastical, witty tale of intrigue. Like many of Shechet’s sculptures, this one has a robust irrationality and a tentative vigor. It signifies a transformation from dense clay into something distinctly human.

Although Shechet has talked about a border between mind and feeling, her work promotes a blurring of these two areas, associating ideas and the intellect with tactility and its generative friction. In Shechet’s unassuming stance for the intellect, there is an apt parallel between her sculpture—as in the stout work *Who and Who and How and More* (2012)—and the short novel *Too Loud a Solitude*, by Czech author Bohumil Hrabal. In Hrabal’s poetic narrative, set in Communist Prague, the importance and triumph of ideas is played out in the life of the protagonist, Hatá, who operates an obsolete compacting press for used paper and discarded or confiscated books, often masterworks of intellectual and creative thought. His press produces bales of compressed paper, a source of pride for Hatá, who sees them as visual art and signifiers for the density and elegance of ideas. Laced with the texture of contrasting images and situations, the rhythmic grain of repetition, and a bond to the sensory, each of Hatá’s bales can be seen as the product of a process that makes matter denser yet more metaphorical. Similarly indicative of a tendency toward paradox—a kind of conceptual friction and texture in itself—Shechet’s sculptures simultaneously belie and embrace the pleasure of ideas.

The Zen-like attention that Shechet brings to her making process and work is not unlike Hatá’s devotion to reading and ideas. In a description that conjures the physicality of reading, he says, “When I read, I don’t really read. I pop a beautiful sentence into my mouth and suck it like a fruit drop, or I sip it like a liqueur until the thought dissolves in me like alcohol, infusing brain and heart and coursing on through the veins to the root of each blood vessel.” To appropriate Hatá’s words: when Shechet makes a sculpture, she doesn’t really make a sculpture; instead, she makes a dark comedic reverie on physicality, the visceral, and the tactility of thought.

—Paul Ryan

