

## Arlene Shechet

01.15.14



View of "Arlene Shechet: Meissen Recast," 2014. Photo: Erik Gould.

*A Guggenheim fellow and Joan Mitchell Foundation grantee, Arlene Shechet is perhaps best known for her formally complex, often humorous ceramic works. Her upcoming museum exhibition at RISD features art that grew out of work with the Meissen porcelain factory in Dresden over the past year and a half. Here, Shechet talks about her latest body of work, and her show's both celebratory and subversive take on the long history of porcelain. The exhibition is on view from January 17 to July 6, 2014.*

**THOUGH I HAD NEVER WORKED IN PORCELAIN**, I knew a lot about it and was very interested in working in a factory in a different country. And Meissen was the first place in the West to develop porcelain, in 1710—it's quite the esteemed institution—so getting inside something so old and established and seeing that I could make something work was great.

My process there was quite open-ended. I kept thinking, "What is the essence of this place, and what do I really like about this place? What do I want to incorporate into the work I'm making?" I didn't want to go to the factory and just make porcelain versions of my other work in clay. The place is just brimming over with plaster molds of every size, shape, and form. Most people don't know—and I was even shocked by—how many molds it takes to create an object. For instance, a small figure, maybe six inches tall, could have twenty molds that went with it. These molds were industrial objects that looked to me like sculpture. They were very exciting visually, and the fact that they had a function made them even more exciting. The core of everything I did there became about exposing the mold in one way or another, revealing the system. Even in my pieces that have figurative elements, I've included the mold language of seams, parting lines, and symbols.

The workers loved it. People would just laugh—because I cast everything: serial numbers (the factory’s molds are all numbered), workers’ signatures, plaster drips. I wanted to make the series a celebration of the industrial object and the worker, but also to merge it with the extravagant object, the luxury material. Forming the hybrid was interesting to me. I pushed it by layering traditional motifs on some of the objects I cast—even gilding them and using platinum and twenty-four-carat gold—so that my production was a combination of high and low. And I think the workers—and then the executives—appreciated that what had been hidden was being exposed.

The show takes place in two areas of the museum: the historic Porcelain Room—an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century period room—and then in a contemporary gallery. In the historic gallery, most of the work is eighteenth-century Meissen, subverted with some of my recent works. In the contemporary gallery, it’s the reverse: my stuff with a smattering of historic things. My basic curatorial conceit is to use absolutely every one of the museum’s several hundred Meissen objects. Rather than creating a hierarchy of what to show and not to show—figures versus tableware, “art” versus the functional, what’s perfect and not—I’m including every piece in the collection. In the contemporary gallery, I’ve conceived the room as a whole to reiterate the idea of the mold. Two opposing walls include furniture I designed such that one side is the negative of the other, so the actual walls are like positives and negatives of one another. With the exhibition of porcelain pieces, protection is just a huge issue. I’ve tried to be innovative about it: On one wall there are sideboards and protruding shelves, and on the opposite wall everything is sunken and embedded. In other places, I’ve sliced through the wall so that you can see the fronts and backs of every piece.

Working at the factory, hanging these objects at the museum, and studying them for the last year, I’ve come to appreciate these eighteenth-century pieces from a contemporary point of view. I have things upside down and with their backs facing out, I’m using mirrors to do weird things, I’m stacking a bunch of plates and then putting figures in between them. Just about as much as the museum would tolerate, and so it’s a pretty racy view of porcelain. There’s wit and lightness in the original Meissen pieces, but also a dark side. I’d love for people to see them as new information.

— *As told to Dawn Chan*