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ART REVIEW

Sculptor Arlene Shechet evokes inner life in new ICA exhibition

By Sebastian Smee | GLOBE STAFF JUNE 18, 2015

You have an interior life. It has to do, naturally, with your own personal history, with the ebb and flow of chemicals and hormones inside your brain, and with your body's itches and aches. But it carries on at a knight's leap remove from opinions and politics, from news articles hinging on the words "studies show," and from the tailored ads that appear in your inbox.

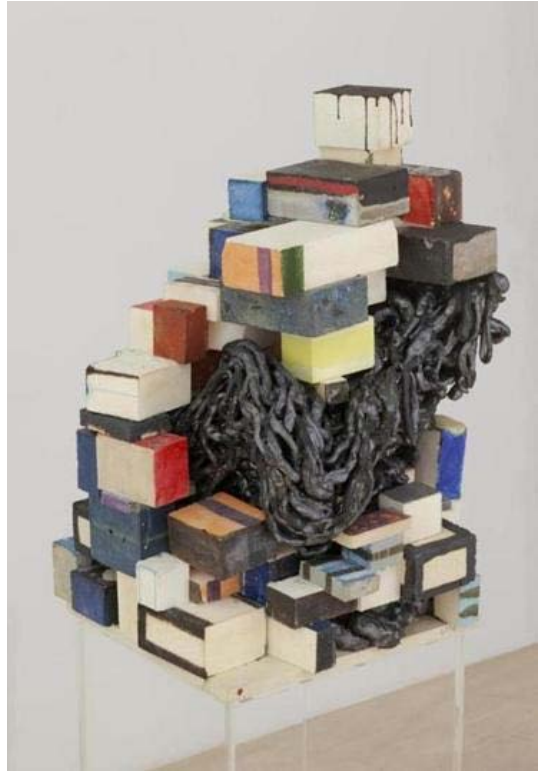
It is obscurely affected by the weather, yes, by the light, and by shifts in atmospheric pressure. Perhaps also by the last great book you read, your most recent humiliation, the last crazy-eyed or intensely beautiful person you saw on the street. But all in ways you would struggle ever to put into words.

Why should it be possible, then, for an artist to find three-dimensional forms that come to meet this inner life with such uncanny familiarity?

I wondered this as I spent time in "Arlene Shechet: All at Once," a career survey of the New York-based plaster and ceramic sculptor, at the Institute of Contemporary Art.

Shechet's work is ostensibly abstract, but it has a disarming — and occasionally alarming — ability to connect us with wordless interior cadences, forgotten pains, and epiphanies. Through recondite experimental processes, Shechet finds forms, colors, and textures for states of being that can approximate comedic collapse, gritted resistance, erotic exuberance, spiritual confusion, luxurious indolence, and private dismay. The approximations, mind you, are not in the work; they enter the equation only as we try to account for them.

The show, organized by the ICA's senior curator, Jenelle Porter, consists of installations of painted plaster sculptures, as well as cast porcelain and cast paper vessels, an array of large-scale works on paper, and some mouth-blown crystal vessels.



MARTIN BRADING

Detail of Arlene Shechet's "Tattletale"

The earliest works in the show are the products of a sustained interest in Buddhist forms — seated Buddhas, stupas, and mandalas — that emerged from a honeymoon trip to Java, where Shechet visited the ancient temples of Prambanan (which is Hindu) and Borobudur.

A subsequent installation of cast porcelain vessels, called “Building,” was the product of a commission for the Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington, where Shechet taught a course on mold-making and casting. The installation is arranged at head height on a long plinth. It evokes the Manhattan cityscape in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, which Shechet, who was living just a few blocks away, witnessed after dropping her children off at school in Brooklyn.

The vessels, which also suggest the symmetry and cyclical design of stupas, have sooty surfaces, in shifting degrees. These surfaces, suggesting the layers of ash over much of downtown Manhattan in the wake of the catastrophe, were produced by painting the interiors of molds that were then filled with liquid porcelain.

All of these early works suggest a suspicion of easy or obvious effects. They seem taken up with the possibilities implied by obscure, possibly even pointless processes.

For Shechet, these semi-blind, accident-embracing methods carved out not only time (she was juggling art-making with teaching jobs, aging parents, and young children) but creative potential. They were disciplines she imposed upon herself, ones that echoed not only aspects of meditative Buddhist practices but the well-known and influential injunction of Jasper Johns: “Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it.”

So far, so good. But Shechet truly hit her stride only in about 2007, when she turned from plaster and crystal to clay, producing a series of ceramic works that attempted to give form to human breath.

Shechet’s mother had died four years earlier, and she had spent much of the intervening period caring for her father, who died in 2007 of congestive heart failure — a condition that, in his final months, severely constricted his breathing.

Most of these early ceramic works, which are the size of enlarged lungs or what Porter aptly describes as “solidified puffs of smoke,” have dark glazes. Outwardly, they resemble bronze,



PHOTO BY CATHY CARVER

Shechet’s “So and So and So and So and So and On and On.”

hinting at Shechet's developing relish of inversions and ironies (bronze is usually associated with monumental public sculpture, not with the twisting, collapsing, and fugitive forms she was now chasing).

Some of these pieces, which have titles such as "Air Time," "Twin Rockers," and "Loll," are matte; others are shiny and metallic. Closer examination reveals subtle surface coloration, including outbreaks of orange and bloody red lurking in folds and hidden apertures.



PHOTO BY JOHN KENNARD

Installation view of sculptor Shechet's work.

They take up the first part of what is really the heart of the show — a long, luminous gallery of ceramic sculptures beautifully installed beneath filtered natural light that enhances the work's lively, evanescent qualities. They are mounted on plinths of split wood, metal cubes, stool frames, or stacked kiln bricks. Some of these bricks are themselves glazed with vibrant colors and incorporated into the sculptures.

From about 2009, these extraordinary pieces become as much about color as material, surface, and form. The colors and textures follow no script. Some of the hues are bold and brilliant, others sly, soft, and unplaceable. The textures are as rich and varied as those found in rock pools and forests, but they can feel unsettlingly synthetic, almost futuristic, too.

“A Night Out” is powdery ultramarine, with dark and glossy dimples and recesses. “Sound Sense” combines pastel greens, yellows, and mauves with a pointillist overlay of white. “No Noise” is a uniform bright ochre with an astonishing sea sponge-like surface. And “Idle Idol” combines a pitted and punctured lower half in yellows and greens (with splashes of blue and pink) and a tangled Medusa-head of floppy turquoise sausage shapes.

The forms, which suggest the influence of experimental ceramic artists like Peter Voulkos and Ken Price, are amorphous, asymmetrical, virtuosically blobby. At times they seem to be depicting the interior life (quite literally) of the body. They resemble casts of internal organs — livers and lungs, spleens and kidneys, sprouting delivery tubes, punctuated by orifices. But they are too idiosyncratic, too materially mashed-up, too frankly outlandish, for this interpretation to hold.

Each ceramic piece is also, and crucially, intricately involved with its base. Shechet’s supports tend to be symmetrical — either circular or rectilinear — but they are extremely various, and suggest an architect’s instinct for the palette of building materials: usually metal, or brick, or wood that is neutrally blonde and smooth, or dark, decayed, and cracked.

It’s in the harmonies and tensions between these colors and textures, between suggestions of both order and anarchy, decay and blooming freshness, that these works cough, splutter, and sing. If they really are the great analogs to interior life that I feel them to be, it’s because Shechet knows that this life, expertly attended to, has its own folds and wrinkles, its own hollows and protuberances; that it is at once fugitive and monumental, characterized by strange, dreamlike changes of pace, unreasonable, asymmetrical, and ultimately unknowable.

There is one final part of the show I shouldn’t omit to mention. It’s a gallery combining work Shechet made during a 2012-13 residency at the Meissen Porcelain Manufactory in Germany with actual 18th-century porcelain wares and figurines, some on loan from the Museum of Fine Arts, Harvard Art Museums, and the Rhode Island School of Design Museum in Providence (where Shechet both studied and taught).

Shechet’s own pieces in this curious mise-en-scene are witty collages of the body parts of figurines, amputated jug handles, dishes, and so on. They’re exuberant and inventive, as is the display itself, with its uneven shelves and plinths, mirrors, and display cases.

But as art, they feel negligible beside such works in the adjacent long gallery as “The Possibility of Ghosts,” “So and So and So and So and So and On and On,” and “Because of the Wind.” The last, a leaning accumulation of thick clay tendrils with a surface texture like blooming mold or lichen, placed on a dark base of glazed kiln bricks, is nothing less than a work of genius.

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ARLENE SHECHET: All at Once

**At: Institute of Contemporary Art. Through Sept. 7. 617-478-3100,
www.icaboston.org**