

Arlene Shechet's Unified Theory of Ceramics

by [Heather Kaplow](#) on September 2, 2015



Arlene Shechet, detail of "Idle Idol" (2013) (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)

BOSTON — The ads for [Arlene Shechet's](#) exhibition *All at Once* have been intriguing and unsettling. For months, headshots of strange, organ-looking creature-objects have been posted on billboards around Boston, in front of brightly colored backgrounds and beneath the slogan "Sculpture that Breaks the Mold."

It's a clever play on words, but a bit misleading: these are not sculptures in revolt against process. They are, if anything, sculptures that celebrate it. They envelop, encase, embrace, incorporate, are infested with, and ultimately become one with the artifacts of their making.

They don't break the mold, they marry the mold. And have moldy-shaped offspring with it.

[Jill Slosburg-Ackerman](#), a Boston-based sculptor and much-beloved teacher of sculpture at the [Massachusetts College of Art and Design](#), agreed to take a walk with me through *All at Once*.

The show has several potential entry points, but the main one is the furthest in the past. In the mid-1990s, we find ourselves in a relatively spare, peaceful gallery, with a handful of two-dimensional works on the walls that ease us into the third dimension. It is a temple-like space.



Installation view of gallery with Arlene Shechet's abacá prints, the installation "Once Removed" (1998), and various other sculptures, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (photo © John Kennard)

Shechet's blueprint-colored abacá prints function as both mandalas and stained-glass windows. In the center of the room, an installation of objects that look like icons — most of them Buddha-esque and shaped in hydrocal, but also bowls and vases formed from paper (the latter collectively titled "Once Removed," 1998) — sits contemplatively on simply constructed, artfully stacked, whitewashed pine plinths. Jill and I gravitate towards these first, then step back to look at the whole.

"It's taking the timelessness of that spiritual form and being spontaneous and expressive with it," Jill says. "So they're painterly, but then they have weight. And then the lightness of the paper pieces ... they are the color of not only blueprint but also sky or sea. They feel like landscape. So there is a sense of heaven and earth in this room."

Another thing that stands out in this room, and throughout the whole exhibition, is Shechet's love for the mechanics involved in working with her mediums. You see it here in the gloppy residue purposely left on the stands of some of the icons — in fact, the retention of the stands themselves is an ode to the act of working in the studio.

"You would have to [fact-check this](#), but I remember Arlene speaking many, many years ago — just as she was beginning this work — about these layers of paint," Jill tells me. "She made these skins of paint, and then probably these are painted on top of that."



Close-up on Arlene Shechet's "Once Removed" (1998), with other sculptures and abacá prints in the background (click to enlarge)

It feels like three distinct aesthetics and spheres of being — the 2D images and one cleaner Buddha standing back against the walls; the messier, more chaotic and weighty hydrocoal pieces; and the lighter, more delicate blue and white vessels balanced atop their molds — are sharing space here, intermingling in some ways and standing apart in other ways. For example, a set-apart 2D image, "Marking Tracks" (2000), seems to become a medium in the creation of one of the 3D objects that is part of "Once Removed," in that each of the vessels in the latter is formed from paper, and one of them comes from a print that looks a lot like "Marking Tracks." By the same token, if you inspect equally closely the edition of "Marking Tracks" that's hanging in the gallery, you'll see that it is not really flat; it is built up with layers of pulp and pigment, so it has some sculptural dimensionality as well.

Standing in front of "Once Removed," where vessels sit like mirror images atop the molds they were made on, Shechet's love of process becomes a prominent theme of our discussion.

"From an art history point of view, the history of the print is the multiple and the history of the pot is the multiple, so she's achieved that: by putting them all together it broadens the context," Jill explains. "They stop being so decorative — they are less involved with vessel-ness. Especially because you're seeing the one as a reflection of the other — one made the other."

I am taken by the idea that the pieces literally stand on their own history, so Jill gives me a primer on

Brancusi.

“What Brancusi did for sculpture was to integrate the plinth with the object, and he did it in this miraculous way where you can’t say what’s sculpture and what’s plinth, even though the piece is able to be raised up, and there’s usually a more precious section. But they’re in conversation, and I think this is every tabletop sculptor’s problem: where do you put the work?”

The rooms of *All at Once* are arranged chronologically, but each also hosts a range of mediums and has a strikingly different tone. When we pass from the first room into the one that adjoins it, we are transitioning from a light, open-feeling space to a dimmer, more closed-off one. We are also confronted abruptly by a wall. Well, a more traditional plinth, holding “Building” (2003).



Arlene Shechet, “Building” (2003), installation view at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (photo © John Kennard)

“Building” is a collection of monochromatic ceramic shapes, presented at just above eye level. They are momentarily disconcerting because you have to look up at them, after looking down so much at the work in the previous room.

These shapes aren’t exactly vessels, because many don’t seem to open, but they aren’t figures either. Some feel like fairy tale towers or chess pieces...but never quite. They seem to be tools or studies — almost worry beads — for exploration of a process.

“There was a kind of shock to this the first time I saw it, but then how painterly they are!” remarks Jill. “And how interesting Arlene is as a painter. How well she’s capitalized on forms we know in order to be expressive.”

I’m fascinated by Shechet’s choice to name whole groups of pieces that can be reconfigured in any

number of ways as one work. “Building” has an arc to its gradation of tone — from dark to light in the center to dark again — that feels like part of its identity, but the work could also be displayed in a different arrangement, with a whole different algorithm of light and dark.



Installation view of the main gallery of ‘Arlene Shechet: All at Once’ at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (click to enlarge)

We make our way into the main gallery and find ourselves among the pieces that look like organs. Some have a metallic finish, with hints of deep, bloody red peeking from their orifices; others have almost Caribbean color schemes and textures resembling terrycloth. Among them are some that look nothing like organs — they are clouds or piles or bindings. Here, our discussion of plinths from earlier returns immediately, and I realize why the images marketing the show felt like headshots: they were! These creatures are half formed in ceramic and half made of their always unique pedestals.

”The selection of elements creates a gestalt,” says Jill. “And they’re not necessarily predictably harmonious elements, but they become this one thing — this new thing — and they’re inseparable.”



Arlene Shechet, “No Noise” (2013), installation view at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (photo © John Kennard) (click to enlarge)

This circumstance, along with some of the mysterious titles of the first few works we encounter (“Sleepless Color” [2009–10], for example, or “No Noise” [2013]), leads to a discussion of sculpture and titling, which naturally arrives at the question of the show’s title: *All at Once*. Does it reference the “gestalt” of plinth and sculpture? The presentation of a group of works as one? The simultaneousness of the mundane and the spiritual? Or something else altogether?

Whenever Jill and I try to grapple with the big questions, we find ourselves missing the forest because we are distracted by the nuances of the trees — like the numeric markings on the bricks in “Is and Is Not” (2011) or sharp-edged impressions in the cement holding up “Good Ghost” (2007).

We make our way through the entire long gallery, picking our favorite pieces, tracing the movement from one surface, shape, finish, texture, presentation style to another, and then pop into a room off of to the side. It covers work that Shechet did at the Meissen Porcelain Manufactory in Germany, creating surreal commentaries on 18th-century taste and, again, process.



Installation view of Arlene Shechet's work from the Meissen Porcelain Manufactory at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (photo © John Kennard) (click to enlarge)

"It's the history of [commercial] production ceramics. "As well as her deconstructing it and reconstructing it."

Shechet's work distorting and mashing-up the progeny of these molds during her residency reminds me of the way a haiku or a sestina can liberate a poet. It has always been mysterious to me that free expression can be stimulated by such rigid formality. But Jill, reminding me of a [project she did at Providence's Nightingale-Brown House](#), sees another side of this work.

"It's so interesting as a kind of political statement about chinaware of this type. The chinoiserie, orientalism, racism, the exotic, all of that." She describes a historical Western obsession with chinaware, that, alongside an interest in Eastern religion, somehow resulted in the endless bits of flowery detail that Shechet has essentially made glitch art out of here.

We end our walk with a long look at what feels like the culminating piece of the show, "Possibility of Ghosts" (2013). Like many other pieces, this one revisits and reworks earlier themes (like the incorporation of the kiln brick), but it sits on the most unusual plinth of all: something along the lines of a coffee table. I see the work's shape as another Buddha, but more refined, and its platform as an invitation for some kind of action or reflection to occur (or materialize) next to it.



Arlene Shechet, "Possibility of Ghosts" (2013) (click to enlarge)

But from another angle, it's an abandoned office building being swallowed by raw, wet concrete. I imagine wind whistling through its many gray orifices.

"The intelligence that she brings to the form is unexpected," says Jill. "She's really thinking, really active. For me ... they're very intellectual sculptures, and compositionally they are very, very smart."

The intelligence seems almost bacterial to me. Rather than simply incorporating the stand in the way of Brancusi, these works metaphorically and literally digest and ferment all of the things that they've stood on while being developed — including the trial and error, the accidents of their own histories, and the histories of pieces that came before them.



Arlene Shechet, "Tattletale" (2012) (click to enlarge)

It's also reminiscent of our digestion of and incorporation with technology. At first I see Shechet's latest works as cyborgs — combining the technology of their making, bits and pieces of their habitats, and their "bodies" until there are no longer demarcating lines.

But then I wonder if process itself hasn't become her true medium.

As Jill says, in reference to the overall shapes and weights of the most recent pieces: "There's a perfect balance. Things are never precarious."

Or, put another way: Nothing is broken. Everything is made more whole.

[Arlene Shechet: All at Once](#) continues at the *Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston* (100 Northern Ave, Boston) through September 7.