

HYPERALLERGIC

The Transporting, Tactile Pleasures of Porcelain

by Leticia Wouk Almino
February 20, 2017



Installation view of Porcelain, No Simple Matter: Arlene Shechet and the Arnhold Collection at the Frick Collection (all watercolor illustrations by the author for Hyperallergic)

Porcelain is an unpredictable and unwieldy material. It is both incredibly strong and impossibly delicate. White as heavy cream, porcelain glows like alabaster when placed in the light. Porcelain is an addiction. I started working in porcelain about a year ago and can't seem to get enough. Predictably, I was excited to see the Frick Collection's new show, *Porcelain, No Simple Matter: Arlene Shechet and the Arnhold Collection*, which reflects on the past while also looking to the future of this ancient material. The exhibition features pieces of Royal Meissen porcelain from the Frick's collection selected by New York artist Arlene Shechet alongside her own work in porcelain, which she made during a series of residencies in Meissen, Germany, in 2012 and 2013.



The Royal Meissen manufactory, founded in 1710, was the first porcelain factory in Europe. Before then, Europe's ruling houses had been importing porcelain from China at scandalous prices, making porcelain an exclusive delight of the aristocracy. Madame du Barry, mistress of Louis XV, is said to have commissioned an entire garden of porcelain flowers to charm and delight the king. At the time, it was not uncommon to display and enjoy porcelain outdoors. Shechet makes reference

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to the historical connection between porcelain and nature by placing various playful porcelain animals in the Frick's garden. A milky white goat and kid are petrified mid-play, destined to tug at each other for eternity.



In the gallery space, Shechet blurs the boundaries between inside and outside. The porcelain pieces appear to float between layers of acrylic and glass, seamlessly blending into the landscape just outside the windows. The reflections of the greenery of the garden on a glass table create the impression that teacups

and plates are blossoming out of the bushes. Above this refracted foliage, a mischievous pair emerges: a Meissen bird and squirrel, caught just before the leap.



Shechet groups the Meissen porcelain by color, as was often done in traditional porcelain rooms. Departing from tradition, she mixes different services together, and whimsically groups pieces: a Harlequin admires himself in a reflective, chrome-coated plaster mold; a court jester converses with a small but robust lidded pot; a gilded cup with pointed handles seems to reach out toward a bowl with elaborately curling handles.

In the fantastic lecture by art history professor Meredith Martin that accompanies the exhibition, "Porcelain Rooms from Amalia von Solms to Arlene Shechet" (which can be watched in full here), Martin references a

stunning example of a porcelain room in Lisbon's Santos Palace. Dating from the 17th century, this small room was built with a soaring, gilded, pyramidal ceiling inlaid with more than 250 porcelain plates, creating a glittering constellation in blue and white.

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The Meissen pieces featured here were made from industrial plaster molds, which Shechet adopted as the basis for her work. She juxtaposes the process and the product, and celebrates the functional details. She glazes the holes in the mold (a necessary result of casting the final product), thus creating a pattern of concave party balloons. Shechet contrasts one of her pieces

with a Meissen Commedia dell'Arte figurine, who, unashamed by his protruding, golden belly, brazenly flirts with Shechet's "Asian Vase."



Shechet animates the objects, choreographing a dialogue across centuries. Like a scene out of *Alice in Wonderland* — although cast a good 150 years before it was published — a Meissen man converses with a bird equal his size while, behind him, Shechet's equally giant bug crawls in the direction of the verdant wallpaper beyond.

Porcelain once represented a culture of excess and the accumulation of wealth. It was considered 'white gold.' It represented beauty and passion, but also power and greed. At the end of the exhibition, Shechet has inserted gilded mirrors in the gallery's niches so the reflected porcelain appears bathed in an aurous light, transforming the stone walls to gold. She is tempting us, but we should be careful not to fall under the spell, lest we catch die Porzellankrankheit, or "the porcelain sickness." Touch a piece of it, and you travel across time and place. Porcelain is an escape from reality. It's too late for me, I've already gone through the looking glass.

