

'TO KNOW MORE, STRANGELY, ADDS MYSTERY': ARLENE SHECHET ON HER ELUSIVE CERAMICS AND HER ICA BOSTON SHOW

BY *Alex Greenberger* POSTED 07/14/15 12:05 PM



Arlene Shechet, *No Noise*, 2013, glazed ceramic on painted wood base.

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When I met Arlene Shechet, she was in her studio in Manhattan's Tribeca neighborhood, preparing for a talk at Anderson Ranch arts center in Aspen, Colorado. She was looking at installation shots of "All at Once," her show at the Institute Contemporary Art, Boston, and she was wearing a summery sky-blue button-down. This was on Friday, July 3, a holiday when many Americans were relaxing. Shechet was hard at work

She moved her cursor over a photo (her mouse sat on pad based on the Rosetta Stone), bringing my attention to the ICA Boston's version of her 2014 show "Meissen Recast." For that exhibition, following a residency at the Meissen factory, in Dresden, Shechet mixed and

matched porcelain figurines, at times literally breaking their traditional forms to create new abstractions. Asian figures are brought into contact with European ones; teacups are balanced on slanted plates. Set inside a glassed-in cabinet, a new network of figurines is created. “What do you think of this one?” she asked me. Too bleached out, I told her. “I agree, let’s use the ones from my iPhone,” she said. Her assistant scribbled a few notes.

Shechet is thorough, so deciding which pictures to use for her presentation—there were over 60 slides by the time I arrived—was going to take a while. As any artist will tell you, attention to the process, whether it’s creating a PowerPoint for a talk or building a large-scale installation, is important, but that’s especially the case for Shechet, whose ceramics and paper works often involve a very careful sequence of actions to reach a final result. Yet she is far from a perfectionist. She sometimes puts her gelatinous-looking, amorphous clay forms in the kiln with air bubbles or uneven glaze, allowing for little accidents that are out of her control.

“My way of working has to do with setting up parameters, creating situations, and then, within in those situations, I’m working to discover something rather than creating something I already know,” Shechet told me over lunch at a sunny café nearby. “So, if that is chance, then that is chance, but I think it’s more discovering, searching, and finding.” This, she said, was not quite the same thing as John Cage’s brand of chance, in which anything could happen after a certain set of instructions for experimental music were given.

“I like evidence of how the thing is made,” she continued. “I find that that actually makes something even more mysterious. To know more, strangely, adds mystery. I don’t even want to deconstruct that.” It was like she was demystifying her own process, I suggested, like her sculptures, with their vessels for air and acrylic skins, were very much making clear how she made the works. “But that kind of clarity—what exactly is that making clear?” she asked, rhetorically. “Someone who’s an artist, who can see the process, would maybe start to analyze it in a very concrete way, but most viewers won’t break it apart like that. So, it just is another language.”

Shechet kept bringing up various types of language. She mentioned her titles, which, like her works themselves, are ambiguous. (One work, a pair of reddish conical forms on stacks of kiln bricks, bears the comically frustrating title *So and So and So and So and So and On and On*.) Rarely ever do her titles provide straightforward answers to her work. “I don’t like to be descriptive, but within it, within the title, there has to be some kind of point,” she said. When I



Arlene Shechet, *So and So and So and So and So and On and On*, 2010, glazed ceramic and glazed kiln bricks.

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asked about “All at Once,” the title of her ICA Boston show, which was organized by Jenelle Porter, she said that it referred to the fact that it was a 20-year survey of her work. As if that answer was too easy, she also said, “It has to do with some kind of wholeness, some kind of bigger story.”

And, indeed, the larger picture is often the point when it comes to Shechet’s work. It’s easy, and probably even instinctual, to see So and So and So and So and So and On and On, and say that the pot-like clay objects are the work and the kiln bricks are pedestals. Not so, said Shechet. “My point of view is, whatever you’re putting out into the world, that’s what people are looking at. That’s the art. So, I just see it as an entity. The entity is important, from bottom to top, beginning to end, etc. All the parts need each other. They’re all essential.”

This, in a way, was a response to when she began working, in the 1980s, a time when it was assumed that, if you wanted to make a good sculpture, it was going to be in the vein of Minimalism or Post-Minimalism. In other words, no traditional sculptures or pedestals allowed. “It was such a no-no for things not to have pedestals, and I felt like that’s avoiding another interesting sculptural issue,” she said. “I don’t see it as the ceramic is the sculpture. I see it as the whole thing.” In response, she has often included wood, bronze, steel, and concrete as nondescript forms that look like pedestals for her ceramics, but are actually just much a part of the work as the clay objects themselves.



Arlene Shechet, *Tattletale* (detail), 2012, glazed ceramic, glazed kiln brick and kiln shelf, Plexiglas.

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This attention to the entire work, and to the entire process leading up to the entire work, comes out of Shechet’s interest in Asian philosophy, which she first came into contact with during the early ’80s, when she lived in Boston and listened to broadcasts of Alan Watts’ lectures about Zen Buddhism on the radio. She went on to make a series of Hydrocal works shaped like the Buddha and some blue-and-white paper works inspired by the shape of stupas and mandalas. (Shechet calls these paper works the “architecture of the mind.”) “I had studied some Asian art history, so in many ways, Asian art is a great teacher of the principles of Buddhism, Hinduism, those religions,” Shechet said. “I think I knew stuff, and then Alan Watts flowing over me and through me helped me re-learn it.”

History repeatedly winds its way into Shechet’s work. The most notable example is “Meissen Recast,” in which Shechet made the unusual decision to include Asian porcelain figurines, rather than just relying on white ones. She was able to expose the way that porcelain had, in fact, been discovered by the Chinese and then traveled

West through trading. But, in much less explicit ways, it also figures into her paper works, whose circular forms allude to centuries-old Hindu temples. When asked about this interest in history, Shechet chuckled. “The present doesn’t even exist!” she said. “We’re always in dialogue with history. It’s just a question of how far back you want to go.”

“Archaeologically, clay is what survives,” she said later. “That’s why I also find it very amusing when people speak about it as fragile and difficult. It’s absolutely the thing that will survive beyond any painting or anything else. Every story about every culture basically comes through a clay shard that’s been found.”

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