

Art in America

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How Arlene Shechet Makes Her Recalcitrant Materials Come Alive



Arlene Shechet in her studio. Photo: Christopher Garcia Valle

This spring, Storm King Art Center is getting a serious makeover. Since its founding in 1960, the 500-acre sculpture park in the Hudson Valley has been gradually populated by world-class works: the modernist abstractions of David Smith and Mark di Suvero; Louise Nevelson's glowering black cabinetry; towering monoliths by Ursula von Rydingsvard; and, most recently, Martin Puryear's Lookout, an elegant viewing chamber in vaulted brick. The collection is all the more impressive for its beautiful setting, a landscape that has inspired artists for two centuries and counting.

There has, however, been one thing missing: color. Walk around the grounds and you'll see sculptures in many materials—wood, stone, bronze, plenty of Corten steel—but hardly anything painted. If there's paint, it's bound to be bright red, the most aggressive possible choice against so much green. Where are all the other colors? Arlene Shechet asked herself this question when she was commissioned to make an exhibition for Storm King, where, as she said in her studio in January, "there are so many works I love, which I've learned from, and works I don't love, which I've also learned from."

The result, unveiled just this May, is a suite of six monumental sculptures called "Girl Group." The title announces, in no uncertain terms, the arrival of a feminist sensibility in a historically male-dominated site. Though made of steel and aluminum, the works unfurl like fabric in a stiff wind. One sculpture, titled Maiden May, is executed in emerald greens and raw aluminum. Another, As April, has lemon yellow as its dominant



View of the exhibition "Skirts," 2020, showing from left, *Iron Twins (for T Space)* and *Deep Dive*, both 2020, at Pace Gallery, New York. Photo: Phoebe D'Heurle

tone, with accents in chartreuse. A third, *Midnight*, stretches billboard-size across a hilltop, a lavish composition in orange and rosy pink. It's a palette more often encountered on the fashion runway, or in Mannerist painting, than in modern sculpture.

These knockout works are only the latest, if possibly the greatest, evidence of Shechet's insatiable curiosity. She has a way of continually noticing her own blind spots—and those of the prevailing art world—and illuminating the unseen possibilities they hold. Though well known for mixed-media sculptures that assert themselves powerfully in space, never before has she worked at the scale of "Girl Group." To achieve it, Shechet collaborated with five specialized fabricators near her studio in Upstate New York, the collaborations requiring a leap of faith. She is always looking to solve new problems: "To be an artist," she says, "means to be alive with learning."

THIS KIND OF CURIOSITY has rendered Shechet's career anything but predictable. She was born in 1951, in Forest Hills, a leafy middle-class enclave in the Queens borough of New York City. Her father was an accountant, her mother, a former librarian and an artist in her own right—a frustrated one. She had studied at Hunter College and

maintained a studio in the basement of their family home, but was discouraged from pursuing a career by the gender norms of the time. Nevertheless, she exposed her daughter to art at a young age. They made drawings together, and took regular trips to the Museum of Modern Art. On one occasion, Shechet stood in awe before Robert Motherwell's 11-foot-wide painting *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* (1965–67) as her mother wondered what her child might be seeing in that gigantic, Rorschach-like abstraction.

The answer, it turned out, was the future. "That experience turned me on to the possibility that you could exist on a level that's not concrete," she told the magazine *Upstate Diary* in 2017. "More ethereal, more unexplainable, more mysterious, stranger worlds which were far from the bourgeois world I was brought up in." As a teenager in the 1960s, she considered a career in political activism—such a thing seemed possible in those days—after bouncing from one college campus to another: Skidmore, Sarah Lawrence, a semester in Paris, Stanford, and then NYU. Finally, at RISD, she committed to being an artist, this being the one profession that could contain her boundless curiosity, and allow her to continue exploring multiple lines of inquiry.

After graduating in 1978, Shechet stayed on to teach at RISD; seven years later, she took up a position at the Parsons School of Design. Meanwhile, she met and married Mark Epstein, a man of gentle wisdom who is a prominent writer on the interconnected subjects of Buddhist meditation and psychoanalysis. They have two children, Will (a successful musician) and Sonia (a curator at the Museum of the Moving Image). Up until 1995, when she left Parsons, Shechet had to balance studio time with teaching and child-rearing. She was constantly making work but had little opportunity to show it.

Her first breakout moment came when she was in her 40s: a series of plaster Buddhas, modest in scale but potent in affect, with surfaces expressively embellished with skins of paint, somewhat reminiscent of Claes



Arlene Shechet: Madras Buddha (with Stand), 1997.

Oldenburg's early Pop still lifes. In lieu of conventional plinths, she would set them on furniture she found on the street, "the Western, funky version of the lotus the Buddha sits upon." In parallel, she was making vessel forms and square mandalas. Their blue-and-white palette referenced blueprints, and they could pass for Chinese porcelain or Dutch delftware from 50 feet away, though they were actually cast in pigmented abaca paper, a process she developed at Dieu Donné Papermill in Brooklyn.

In the '90s, Shechet's work clearly reflected the intellectual and spiritual interests she shared with her husband. (The title of his 1998 book, *Going to Pieces without Falling Apart*, could be an apt description of her artistic practice, both then and since.) These weren't, however, interests shared by the art world at the time. Commodity-based conceptualism—alternately bone-chilling and extravagantly self-regarding—was the order of the day: think of Cady Noland, Rosemarie Trockel, and Jason Rhoades, whose versions of sculpture made frequent use of found objects. In this environment, Shechet's commitment to craftsmanship and her otherworldly iconography could not have been less in step. (About the only positive feedback she got, at first, was from fellow artist Kiki Smith, who liked how unfashionable the work was.) With the passage of time, this early work of Shechet's has come to seem increasingly prescient as other spiritual women artists, like Hilma af Klint and Agnes Pelton, have finally gotten their due.

Shechet's interest in Buddhism may seem surprising to those who know her. Prolific, social, and hyper-verbal, she hardly comes across as a stereotypical Zen personality. But as anyone who has looked into the matter will know, Buddhist teachings are entirely compatible with explosive, ambitious creativity. The true path need be neither straight nor narrow. "What I really came to understand was that the radically non-judgmental Buddhist idea was an essential insight for how to behave in the studio," Shechet told the *Brooklyn Rail* in 2015. "I just don't fall into a place where I'm so comfortable that I start making what I already know too well."

It was only in the aughts, when she began working in clay, that Shechet fully realized the possibilities of this principle of "non-attachment." She had encountered ceramics in art school, but felt no attraction to it, partly because, at the time, she saw the department at RISD as mired in its own parochial issues. She had, however, explored the typology of the vessel form in her cast paper works, recognizing its metaphorical connection to both life and death—"the domestic equivalent of the stupa, the sacred space," as she says.



View of the installation "Building" 2003, at Henry Art Gallery. Courtesy Arlene Shechet Studio

Shechet began thinking too about how we use vessels to sustain ourselves, and ultimately place our remains in them. These latent associations came to the fore after she, horrifyingly, witnessed the first plane slam into the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. She happened to be walking across the Brooklyn Bridge just as it took place. In the months that followed, living in Tribeca, she felt as if she were inhabiting a crematorium. Her ultimate response was a powerful work called *Building*, shown at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle in 2003; it comprised numerous cast porcelain vessels with smudged, ashy surfaces. "I invented an idea of painting into the plaster molds with grey and black glazes and stains," Shechet explained, "and then the porcelain was cast in those molds over and over until they turned white." The works hauntingly capture presence and disappearance in a kind of anti-monument to the events of 9/11.

This initial foray into clay was done in collaboration with the ceramics program at the University of Washington, led by Japanese American artist Akio Takamori; the forms in *Building* were wheel-thrown by the students. It was only in 2006 that Shechet began working sculpturally with the medium on her own: ever exploring, she found this generative technique fairly late in her career. In art world terms, though, she was once again an early adopter. Despite the achievements of such figures as Lucio Fontana and Peter Voulkos, whom she greatly admires, clay was still widely devalued. "Very little had been explored," she has said. "I could look at it almost as if no one had thought about it before."

Shechet began teaching herself to build complex forms by hand, and investigating the vast alchemy of ceramic glazing. A solo exhibition at Elizabeth Harris Gallery, in 2007, served as the coming-out party for this new body of work—and, in retrospect, a whole new era in American ceramic sculpture. As Roberta Smith noted in a review for the *New York Times*, Shechet's works seemed all but "debt-free" in their relationship to previous sculpture: "sexy, devout, ugly and beautiful all at the same time." She might have added "alien," for they came across as previously unknown life-forms, bladders with distended limbs and tentacular appendages. They seemed to reach out, to breathe in, to quietly digest. Some had cloudlike forms atop them, like cartoon thought bubbles. The sensitively modeled surfaces, sheathed in black and gold glazes, enhanced the impression of emergent sentience.



Arlene Shechet: *June Noon: Together*, 2023 (left) and *Wednesday in October: Together*, 2022 (right)
 Photo: Damian Griffiths / Courtesy the Artist and Pace Gallery

It was immediately clear that Shechet was on to something big. Her new body of work helped inspire—and played a starring role in—the genre-shifting 2009 exhibition “Dirt on Delight: Impulses That Form Clay,” curated by Jenelle Porter and Ingrid Schaffner at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia. (I served as an external adviser for the project; Porter would later curate Shechet’s first museum retrospective, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston.) At the same time, Shechet was expanding her productive capacity. She and Mark bought a place in Woodstock, a modernist building, unusual in that neck of the woods, designed by architect James Mayer in 1964. Shechet established a studio there, and also set about transforming the surrounding landscape: wild thyme and moss instead of lawn, a green roof atop the house.

These new arrangements had a decisive impact on Shechet’s work. She now had the space to create (and fire) larger ceramic elements, and neighborhood access to chunks of raw timber, which became a key part of her vocabulary. These days, she also operates an even larger studio in nearby Kingston, shuttling back and forth between the two. This literal division of labor might drive some artists to distraction, but she finds it helpful. It allows her a constantly refreshed, un-precious, and “non-attached” view of her own practice.



Arlene Shechet in her Studio. Photo: Christopher Garcia Valle

Generative discontinuity does seem to be the one given for Shechet—it is, quite literally, her working method. She always has multiple sculptures going at once, and often cannibalizes her own work, incorporating remnants from past compositions in a perpetual chain of association. In some works, like *All in All* (2016), she stacks up components cast from one another in different materials. Normally, her scale approximates that of the human body, lending the works an anthropomorphic effect, and encouraging what Shechet calls a “body to body” relationship. Her titles, which are fantastic, often emphasize the idea of sculpture as a verb: *Ripple and Ruffle* (2020), *Deep Dive* (2020), *Day In Day Out* (2020), *With Wet* (2022), *Teasing and Squeezing* (2022).

Shechet’s forms, meanwhile, tend toward the totemic, with purposeful confusions between the sculpture proper and the base that holds it off the floor. Metal, wood, and ceramic elements, usually in a combination of raw and brightly colored surface treatments, are choreographed into elegantly disjunctive arrangements, as if they’d slip-slided into felicitous alignment. The sculptures feel fast, fresh. Given that she is dealing with such recalcitrant materials, it takes a huge effort to keep them that way.

SHECHET’S WORK HARD/PLAY HARD AESTHETIC is also evident in her curatorial work, which began in the 2010s as a sideline, but has grown into a major aspect of her practice. As with her plinths, it can be hard to say just where her curating stops, and her art starts. It began with a two-year residency (from 2012–14) at Meissen, the fabled porcelain manufactory near Dresden. Here, in the 18th century, an alchemist finally cracked the porcelain code, and Europeans at last had direct access to the coveted material, previously imported from China at fabulous expense. Granted access to the Meissen archive—including its impressive repository of casting molds—Shechet plunged in and eventually emerged with a whole new artistic vocabulary, in which the manufactory’s refined, traditional wares seemed caught in flagrante delicto, a veritable orgy of figurines and functional forms in slapstick, sometimes mutually penetrating, positions. She made molds of molds, slip-casted plaster in porcelain, and manipulated their conventions even as she studied them rigorously.

This hilarious virtuosic body of work has taken on a life of its own over the past decade, partly because decorative art curators have seen in it an opportunity to reanimate their dormant collections. In a series of exhibitions at the RISD Museum, the Frick Collection, and most recently, the Harvard Art Museums, Shechet has playfully installed her associative configurations alongside historic porcelains, making antiques seem strange and new again. Shechet has also curated other artists’ work—notably in “From Here On Now” at the Phillips Collection (2016–17), “Ways of Seeing” at the Drawing Center (2021–22), and “STUFF at Pace Gallery” (2022)—but her most significant acts of arrangement are of her own sculpture.

In 2018 Shechet made another jump in her career and expanded her reputation as an artist’s artist when she joined the gallery giant Pace. “My artists have always talked about her,” Pace CEO Marc Glimcher told ARTnews at the time. “Hers are the kind of shows where artists come back with their minds expanded.” Since then, she has been getting more and more opportunities to place her work where it will be encountered by what she calls “random humanity.” Here again, the friction of chance encounters proves generative. For her project at Madison Square Park in New York, *Full Steam Ahead* (2018–19), she emptied a central fountain, turning it into a sort of playground for art works and visitors alike. Nearby, a sculpture in carved wood called *Forward* lounged on a short flight of steps, like a Henry Moore having a cigarette break. When kids climbed up on to its lap, it somehow seemed complete.

The Storm King setting is much less chaotic. In order to encourage a restful interactivity suited to the site, Shechet provided custom seating of her own design. This gracious gesture recognizes visitors as people out for a relaxing day, rather than hardened souls on an art pilgrimage. But to be sure, the real invitation comes from “Girl Group” itself. Shechet describes the six sculptures as “grappling energy,” which accurately captures the way they inhabit space. The scale and materiality are different from her previous sculpture, but her trademark thrilling, vertiginous instability remains. Above all, this is an installation to enjoy—to post on Instagram, yes, but more important, to travel around, under, and around again, in a landscape now punctuated with joyful, sophisticated colors.

True to her conviction that the most important part of making art is what you learn from it, the making of “Girl Group” has involved just this sort of active search, an iterative back-and-forth of digital and analog techniques: on-screen renderings and paper studies, technical drawings, and industrial-scale metalwork. Linear elements, threading through and whipping round the volumes, feel drawn in midair. All told, Shechet has had ample opportunity to be inside the work, in both mind and body. At a certain point she was at one of her fabricators’ shops, surrounded by the sublime complexity of what she herself had created. “I know every inch of these things,” she thought to herself, “and yet I felt like I didn’t know anything. The sculptures were so large they had become unfamiliar to me.” In Shechet’s view, that was a mark of success. For how could she, or anyone else, learn something from sculpture, if it were not more than meets the eye?



Arlene Shechet: *2 in 1*, 2013. Photo: Meissen / Courtesy Arlene Shechet