

Galerie Lelong

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Arlene Shechet, Storm King review – colourful sculptures both monumental and intimate

The artist's outdoor works are biomorphic yet baroque pieces that verge on architecture



Arlene Shechet wears protective gear in the fabrication shop as she works on an outdoor commission for Storm King Art Center. Photography by David Schulze

The pillowy green slopes of Storm King, an outdoor sculpture park in upstate New York, somehow soften even the brawniest, most overweening sculptures. Seen from the visitor centre at the crest of the hill, Mark di Suvero's steel behemoths appear like quaint bits of farming equipment. Zhang Huan's three-legged Buddha contorts in a clearing that is ringed by trees; only when you get near do you appreciate its massiveness. On the other hand, Arlene Shechet's pastel creations have the opposite effect: they grab the eye from a distance, then bewitch it close up. You could spot those high-gloss polychrome bursts from an aeroplane, dotting the landscape like a trail of jelly beans. Swing low and you might see them as painted creatures, shape-shifting from farm beast to monster squid to microscopic amoeba.

After decades of working in ceramics, Shechet has broken out of the gallery and into nature with *Girl Group*, a troupe of curvy, sexy, giddily mysterious metal forms whose dimensions are measured in dozens of feet. And yet they began life indoors. Start in the museum building and you'll find the works in embryonic form — not just as miniatures or maquettes, but as fully realised ceramics that absorbed her during months of pandemic solitude. Moulded into organic shapes that, depending on where you stand, morph from squishy-looking entrails into sea sponges or galaxies, all appear perfectly content indoors. None look provisional; none would seem to need translation or enlargement.

Instead, they ask viewers to focus on the porous, deeply coloured hide, on curving planes arcing into voids, on folds and lobes and holes. "Together: 9am" (2020), a purple object on a purple plinth, could be the head of a fish, its bulging eye and open mouth revealing green-pocked innards; a severed cow's head; a field of

mossy fungus. Shechet challenges us to interact with her sculpture as if it were alive. In its multi-layered complexity and vulnerability, each piece is one of us.



Arlene Shechet, *Together: 9am*, 2020
Photography by Eva Deitch

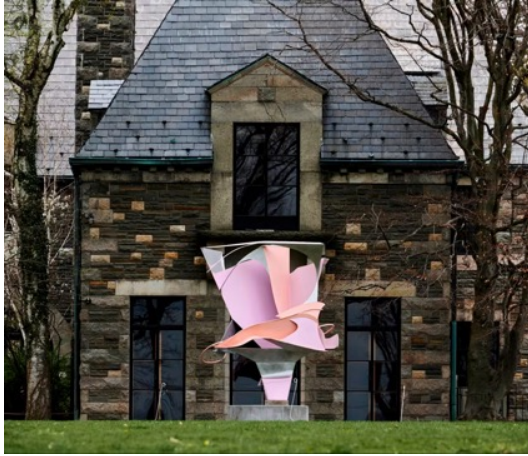


Arlene Shechet, *Together: 8pm*, 2020
Photography by Eva Deitch

“Together: 8pm” (2020) is a cuboid shape whose outer pigmentation has the look of a crusty bottle of old Pepto-Bismol, while its viridescent insides succumb to a spreading pink rash. Near the base, some dark green liquid leaks into a little pool. That almost embarrassingly intimate piece later generated “Dawn” (2024), a new welded-metal structure that flowers in the grass just outside the gallery’s window.

“Dawn” toggles between two tones: matte salmon and glossy lavender. The muted palette suggests motion — not the explosive sort, but a gentle lilt, a flickering grey light, a suspended levitation. Its substance consists as much of openings, slits and recesses as of bent aluminium sheets and curving tubes. At the same time, this 11ft-tall assembly is not exactly ephemeral. It’s hard and clanging, at once girly and macho. If the bumpy ceramic study inside suggests a soft internal organ unnaturally open to the air, “Dawn” is the full body — confrontational, unpredictable, even menacing.

Both the permanent collection and temporary exhibitions at Storm King are installed to bring out sculpture’s mutability, the way a piece glimpsed on the horizon takes shape as you draw near. In Shechet’s case, that constant evolution continues even at close quarters. She avoids the sense of front and back or the revelatory angle. Instead, she encourages viewers to circumambulate her works, duck inside, look up, step back and swivel. The way to appreciate an Arlene Shechet is to improvise a slow-motion dance.



Arlene Shechet, *Dawn*, 2024.



Arlene Shechet, *Midnight*, 2024



Arlene Shechet, *Bea Blue*, 2024

That fluidity makes the sculptures both biomorphic and baroque. They allude to flora and fauna but elude specificity. From a distance, “Bea Blue” (2024) could be a grazing sheep. Approach and it resolves into a roosting vulture, head ducked, wings hunched. Like a metal cloud, it contains a writhing mass of shapes that dissolve, recompose, zigzag and transform. It’s a rebuke to certainty.

Shechet’s sculptures call to each other across the landscape. From where “Bea Blue” ruminates, you can survey the whole Girl Group at once and see that they belong together. The show’s title evokes an cappella sextet whose members take turns as soloist. They are dressed in effervescent yellows, pinks, greens and blues — a bright relief from the black-and-stone palette that predominates at Storm King.

“Colour is something I feel in my body,” Shechet has said. “It’s not an intellectual thing. That’s one of the reasons I love it, because colour is a great communicator body to body with other people.” And it’s true that her multi-hued metals exert a powerful physical appeal, even from a quarter of a mile away. Down the hill and across a meadow lies “Midnight” (2024), the orange-and-flamingo apotheosis of Shechet’s originality and wit. This DayGlo nocturne rests in an open clearing like a radioactive spacecraft that’s just flown in from another galaxy. At 25ft long and 13ft high, it’s the bulkiest work in the show. It has wings, of course — or maybe fins. It’s a plane! It’s a whale, pierced by an enormous harpoon! It’s...

Well, what it really reminds me of is a Frank Gehry building, with those billowing metal sails and scaly fish-forms, the deliberately disorienting volumes and baffling geometries that lead the eye on explorations across smooth surfaces and into declivities. Gehry has made architecture semi-sculptural, and Shechet makes sculpture almost architectural. The two meet in a world that looks superficially irrational and arbitrary but springs from a rigorous expressive logic.

Shechet has a dark sense of humour, which she deploys strategically. Gehry is not the only superstar she tweaks: she also riffs on the virile exertions of Richard Serra, David Smith, Mark di Suvero and Alexander Liberman. Along the way, she points out that a metal sculpture can be assertive but also inviting, alarming and seductive, big but light. Her male predecessors in the Blowtorch and Crane Gang start to look blunt by comparison. She counters their stentorian statements — I Was Here; This is Art Now — with subtler, probing questions: What do you see? Why? And what does that say about you?