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“Why Not All These Things at Once?”

The sculptor Arlene Shechet’s work is held together by a combination of stand-up shtick, fairy tales, strong nerves, and high modernist sobriety.



Arlene Shechet: *Rapunzel*, 2024, at Storm King Art Center

Wood, stone, metal, clay. Before our current, more profligate era, sculptors generally employed one material at a time. The techniques associated with each—carving, casting, welding, forming—have all been available but used singly. Choosing one material would seem to preclude the others; rarely have artists thought to combine two or more in a single work. (The culture of installation art is a different branch of the tree.)

The sculptor Arlene Shechet works in the high modernist tradition using traditional materials—wood, glazed ceramic, carved stone, welded aluminum, and anodized steel—but she combines them into ensembles, achieving, in the rightness of her combinations, a kind of alchemy of style. What I mean by the modernist tradition is that her ideas are embodied in distinctive structures and articulate shapes. The narrative component of her art is a product of the formal component: the internal drama of the decisions about what to make and how to make it. For a sculptor, technique is thinking in three dimensions. There’s a path from idea to result; the way one traverses that path, how imaginatively or resourcefully, determines the character of one’s art.

Neither strictly abstract nor figurative, Shechet’s art is a work of parts—it’s relational, and it uses off-kilter, surprising harmonies of shape, material, texture, and color with aplomb. Her sensibility is contrapuntal; the disparate forms are joined together to create an imagistic gestalt that has a specific character: animated, jaunty, sometimes even giddy, occasionally somber. Her sculptures have a social dynamic as well: they can

be seen as a study in cooperation and acceptance. She will sometimes put a work under pressure to absorb an untoward or ungainly element in order to see how it adjusts to the intrusion. With all these components, Shechet's work really does need to be seen in the round; it doesn't come off in photographs. The camera is no match for the specificity of her surfaces and their quick-change, Scheherazade-like improvisation. As in the late fashion stylist Anna Piaggi's transgressively accessorized outfits, the in-your-faceness is mitigated by an inherent dignity and a quirky charm. Somehow an awareness of the passage of time gets into it too. Charm as the flip side of melancholy—it's not so strange. Most artists can be said to create their own precursors. Shechet's modernist lineage starts with the casually improvisational mode of Picasso's *Glass of Absinthe* (1914) and finds common cause with the Futurism of Umberto Boccioni before moving on to the sunny formalism of Anthony Caro, among others. That's only the beginning. Shechet crisscrosses a broad stylistic landscape: her work has echoes of funk art, postminimalism, European porcelain of the sixteenth to nineteenth century, late Baroque German wood carvings, and all manner of liturgical and devotional objects, to name just some of the comrades in arms who gather under her big tent. But this far-ranging list is not to suggest that her work feels dispersed or lacks focus; it is taut and highly resolved, even polished.

Last summer and into the fall, Storm King Art Center in the Hudson Valley hosted six monumental outdoor works by Shechet: constructions of painted aluminum and stainless steel, some as much as twenty feet tall, placed at various points among the A-list of sculptures from the last sixty years.

The Storm King landscape is uncommonly beautiful, and the stands of trees, the big, generous meadows, and the gently rising and falling swells of lawn are an optimal setting for the sculptures; here nature provides a sense of scale that enhances rather than defeats the works. A wall of trees becomes a framing device, a backdrop against which the drama of light and shadow plays out. The park's five hundred acres provide long vistas, wide avenues of mowed grass, and gravel walkways that emphasize contrasts of near and far and create a sense of anticipation and arrival.

Most of the big guns of the 1950s through the 1970s are present: Caro, David Smith, Henry Moore, and Robert Grosvenor. The park contains an enfilade of three perfectly placed, exquisitely tall Mark di Suvero constructions that exude an extroverted grandeur. Resting on surprisingly delicate "legs," their thick beams are angled at varying degrees off vertical and intersect at odd junctures, and they thrust up above the treetops like spirit fingers in a cheerleading routine. On the main concourse—a broad lawn bordered by a stand of trees on one side and a steep rise on the other—sits one of the best things Alexander Calder ever made: a black painted steel figure, both swooping and ascending, a cartoony, abstract pterodactyl, its vast curved wingtips lightly touching the ground, and topped with a smaller-than-expected circular "head." It's the perfect realization of a moment in aesthetic time: familiar, radical, and happy-making all at once. Among this august company, Shechet held her own.

The title of the exhibition is "Girl Group," and the spirit of Lewis Carroll, of something mischievous, presides over Shechet's sculptures; they are easy to anthropomorphize. Each is painted with two tints of mostly pastel colors: pale mauve, robin's egg blue, pink, canary yellow—the colors of marzipan or Jordan almonds, not often thought of as the colors of high art. Color, of course, must fuse convincingly with form so as not to appear arbitrary or merely decorative—harder than it looks—which Shechet mostly achieves. *Bea Blue* (2024) is a plump, rotund, pale blue, benign beast that appeared to be waddling down the mowed path on which it stood. From one side it's a curvaceous, lumbering sumo knight holding a too-small shield; from the opposite side it's an affronted pelican resting on a single skinny leg.

The aptly named *Rapunzel* (2024), a beautiful shade of cobalt blue-violet nuanced by bright pale mauve accents, has something in common with both the Chicago Picasso (itself an essay in sculptural "hair") and a playground slide or jungle gym. A flattened, shallow trough of metal swoops vertiginously from the apex, ending some feet above the ground. It's tempting to want to slide down it. Viewed from the opposite side,

the construction appears to be supported by a single giant foot. Up close, the tangled mass of wide, cake-pan cantilevered trough and narrow ribbon forms is turbulent, jumbled, almost menacing; from a distance it's a slow-moving anteater in a purple coat.

As April (2024) is a cluster of distorted rectangular shapes notched with semicircular removals, the planes welded together at perpendicular angles to make a top-heavy, squarish mass resting on a narrower base. It is painted in two shades of yellow—a warm cadmium yellow medium and a pale, cool, almost greenish lemon—and beribboned with unpainted metal extrusions. From certain angles the whole thing evokes an explosion in a plumbing supply house; the notched planes are interrupted here and there by flattened tubular forms, and a tangle of wires descends diagonally from a twisted spine. The construction appears to be going haywire. It's either having a nervous breakdown or skipping rope, either high comedy or low clown (I can't decide which), a slapstick gag in slow motion, a Beckettian tramp looking for a place to sit down. The crisp late fall day I visited, as the sun picked out the bright yellow notched shapes against the red-rust leaves of an oak, the vibrant ensemble felt satisfying, enlivening.

Maiden May (2023) is a viridian green figure in a longish coat balanced on skinny legs and surprisingly delicate “feet.” It could be a cousin to Rapunzel, or a friendly witch, or an old lady sweeping the street, or a panting cartoon dog with its tongue hanging out. It calls out to a stainless steel Cubi sculpture by David Smith a short distance away, seeking to strike up a conversation. The day I visited, the Smith was too reticent and self-contained to answer.

A consistent feature of the six large constructions featured at Storm King is an emphasis on negative space: the “empty” spaces between two or more twisting, torqued shapes that framed a view of sky or trees or fields, or in some cases glimpses of sculptures in the permanent collection. Shechet enshrines the continuum of inside with outside by means of interdependent Möbius-like curved ribbons of aluminum that sometimes bulge out from the corpus like a misplaced exoskeleton and other times pierce the primary forms like cartoon death rays.

Overall there is something sequential or episodic about this group of works, as if they are still in the process of becoming, like a story with multiple beginnings or endings, or like different versions of the same story. Walking among them I was reminded of the six narrators in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, how each one takes a turn at describing a sunrise or a sunset.

I am normally reluctant to equate aesthetics with gender. However, despite the handful of female artists over the years who have wielded the acetylene torch, there is something about large-scale welded steel sculpture in the great outdoors, the heft and thrust of it imposed on the landscape, that has decidedly male associations. Other considerations aside, the work takes up a lot of space and requires significant resources as well as not inconsiderable physical strength to produce. Sleeves rolled up, goggles pulled down, sparks flying—it's practically a poster image for the male artist at work.

This is, of course, romantic nonsense, and no one much cares about who does what anymore. Competence is its own reward; one either has it or not. Into this certitude Shechet brings a contemporary ambiguity. She exerts the same mastery over her materials as her male counterparts, but the way she interweaves her forms—extending them in space, doubling them back on themselves, seeming to expose the insides of a figure without discarding its carapace—is beguiling, witty, and complex. Interiority as a theme is often thought to denote a female sensibility, but Shechet casts it as part of something larger and more inclusive. She isn't content with just the image of interiority; her constructions sometimes make me feel as though I'm present at a dissection, looking at something under the skin, but not in a way that grosses me out. She is no stranger to Lautréamont's famous table, upon which a sewing machine and an umbrella are said to have met, giving birth to Surrealism. In some of her sculptures Shechet has them meet twice—first for laughs, then for tragedy.

The exhibition continued inside the museum building with a dozen smaller-scale works, primarily glazed ceramic forms levitated on powder-coated steel bases, and a few more involved constructions of ceramic, steel, and wood. If you have any doubts about the fine art status of glazed ceramics, Shechet's use of the material will reset your clock. She continues where the late Ken Price left off. The forms are again anthropomorphic, or maybe just biological, more on the level of digestive systems, or cross sections of muscle and tendon, lungs and breathing tubes. Some works feel embraced by what look to be ligaments, extruded straps of tissue turning in at the attachment points. This description perhaps makes them sound macabre or even repellent, but with their flocked surfaces and deeply saturated colors like dustings of rare earth, they are mysterious and absorbing.

Shechet is a collagist of a high order, a stylist in the best, destabilizing sense. "Joinery" is a term usually applied to woodworking, a test of the carpenter's skill. But it is also a habit of mind, a way of thinking about the world. For example, the way a film is edited, one shot following another to create meaning, is also joinery. Shechet's is an art made of parts, and the frisson, the spark, occurs where the pieces come into contact; that is the "shot-to-shot," in the parlance of film editing. The psychic glue that holds the disparate parts of her work together is itself made of stand-up shtick, fairy tales, strong nerves, and high modernist sobriety.

Humor, as well as its cousin, good-naturedness, is a near constant in Shechet's work. The devices that generate humor in literature—mistaken identity, mismatched couples, inflated self-regard, double plots, faulty assumptions, information given out of sequence or with one crucial piece missing—have visual corollaries, and Shechet exploits them all. Also present are the more theatrical varieties of slapstick: the pratfall, the double take, double talk—sculpture as screwball comedy.

Some of the works on view indoors at the Storm King show were a continuation of developments seen in Shechet's exhibition at the Pace Gallery in 2020, which laid out the ground rules for her combinatory sensibility. The works at Pace engaged with sculpture's traditional verbs—cutting, layering, stacking, and balancing—but imbued them with a refreshing crispness.

Here are two examples. *Touching Summer* (2020) is a Cubist-inflected stack of white-and-pink-stained boxy wood shapes balanced on a base formed by a glazed ceramic tube, like a thick-walled rigatoni. Cuts made in the wooden forms are filled with wedges of glazed ceramic and topped off with what looks, from one side, like a blond flattop hairdo of glazed ceramic. Viewed from one angle, this work resembles a postmodern apartment block; from another angle it gives one the impression of opening the door to a storage closet and finding the heterogeneous contents wedged into a precariously balanced column.

Deep Dive (2020) features a ceramic iceberg, or mountain, sliced in half and nestled into a right-angled, gray-brown base. The iceberg is glazed an intense chartreuse, with one of the cut ends a vivid manganese blue. The two halves of the mountain appear to have crashed into the recumbent base and been left to lie there. The piece is dramatic, almost calamitously so, but with its pebbly, highly pigmented surface it also manages to be droll and weirdly chic.



Arlene Shechet, *Deep Dive*, 2020

This may sound like a tautology, but sculpture really is different from painting. As broad material categories go, painting is a matter between the painter and the painting, or at most between the painter and a single viewer; it implies interiority and a metaphorical worldview. Sculpture, by virtue of existing in the round, by displacing actual space, implies the public view. One shares space with it, walks around it, takes it in from different angles, as if ratifying the fact of its existence. Painting deals with representations or intimations: pictorial space is a matter of imaginative projection and, finally, an illusion. A car in a painting is a dream of a car, a metaphor of escape; in sculpture it's an actual thing—you feel as though you could kick the tires. That's another way of saying that sculpture is not as privileged as painting; it has to work harder to reach the ineffable.

All art says, to varying degrees, "This and not that." But none proclaims it as loudly as welded sculpture. Shapes cut from sheets of steel using an acetylene torch, with all the fluidity of taking scissors to cardboard, are testament to a mind confidently made up.

If certitude is the art world's drug of choice, coming upon a welded steel sculpture by David Smith is like opening the door to a crack house. One reason for minimalism's lasting appeal may lie in its unambiguousness as a counter to life's uncertainties. It argues for the one true thing. But what if more than one thing is true? By contrast, Shechet's work says, "Why not all these things at once?"

Now in her early seventies, with an exhibition history stretching back to the 1990s, Shechet has been on a path of nearly continuous growth for years. She has shown widely, including at several museums, but most of her long evolution has taken place out of the limelight. That, and the late arrival of big-time success, has given her work an unshakable identity. As a collagist and an amalgamator, as a colorist, as a shape generator, and as a no-nonsense feminist heroine, Shechet has few equals. Her work runs counter to the most valorized work of the previous generation, which typically was indivisible, unitary, and irony-free. That work—think Richard Serra and others—was out to stun or bore, but in any case it wore its radicality on your sleeve (with apologies to Edward St. Aubyn).

All that is now the past. For some time the combinatory mentality has held sway; it's a way of making things—combining stuff—that feels like being in the world today. Robert Rauschenberg coined the term "combines," and he might still be the thought leader in this. Whereas Rauschenberg really did drag stuff in off the street, Shechet's forms are highly refined, with acute attention paid to the attachment points where different materials meet. Rauschenberg was an action sculptor; his energy was his technique. Shechet actually knows how to make things; in her work fitted-togetherness is both the engine and the result, like the pleasure of a well-packed suitcase raised to an aesthetic principle.

It's something of a cliché to say that a work of art pushes past boundaries. And yet what pleasure it gives when it happens to be true.