

Art in America: 'Buckle and flow', by Faye Hirsch, January 2012

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ARLENE
SHECHET

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BUCKLE AND FLOW

BY FAYE HIRSCH

IN 1993, STRESSED OUT BY a life divided among teaching, child-rearing and art-making, Arlene Shechet tossed out everything in her studio and began afresh. A sculptor by training and disposition, based in New York but teaching at the Rhode Island School of Design (where she had received her MFA), she had been studying with a Buddhist teacher who advised her to treat her scant studio activity as "meditative practice."¹ Shechet began using plaster, which dries quickly; she found she could watch that transformation moment by moment. Her time in the studio

seemed to expand with that increased attentiveness. Mounding up the plaster, wet on dry, she noticed that the forms resembled the shape of a seated Buddha, and she began pushing them more deliberately in that direction. She embedded multicolored acrylic paint skins in the surfaces, and kept her Buddhas somewhat generalized, as if worn down by time. For the next few years, Shechet—who actually does not identify herself as a Buddhist but has adopted certain Buddhist practices—would make many colorful, roughly shaped Buddhas. But the ones she devised earliest—those semiabstract mounds, which radiate the subtle vitality of discovery along with an offbeat humor—were the most prescient of her later work.

Shechet's main medium is now clay—another substance worked while wet and, in its transformative propensities, possessing what she calls an "alchemical"

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Arlene Shechet: The Thick of It," James Kelly Contemporary, Santa Fe, through Feb. 4.



In ceramics, Arlene Shechet has found the medium that best accommodates her career-long penchant for transformative processes and accidental effects.

quality.² For the past six years she has been creating primarily glazed and fired ceramics, with some detours into handmade paper and glass (both also highly malleable). Her project is broad and ambitious, connecting to Western and Eastern art history of many eras. "I began working with clay," she says, "because I wanted a material with a history but also a plasticity that would allow me to make anything."³ No longer simple mounds, her still basically rounded forms rise and torque in dynamic trajectories, their coiled or gesturally modeled surfaces dappled with glazes of myriad colors and opacities. The ceramics are placed on bases of diverse shapes, sizes and materials, supports that, like those of Brancusi, are integral to the totality of the piece.

From 2007 to '09, Shechet fired her major pieces in monochromatic and metallic glazes, most of them dark

but some white; she added touches of color only here and there. In her 2009-10 exhibition "Blow by Blow," at the Tang Teaching Museum in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., these eccentrically shaped vessels of subtle hue stood atop narrow metal-legged stools of various heights, among which viewers strolled in a meditative atmosphere. Variations in opacity enliven the surfaces of the sculptures, so that they appear at once wet and dry, shiny and matte. Open flues and spouts reveal unglazed reddish interiors, adding additional chromatic details and enhancing an impression that the objects are breathing. Beginning in 2009, taking a cue from earlier, small vessels more adventurously and playfully conceived (she showed a group of these at Elizabeth Harris Gallery in New York in 2007), Shechet shifted to a more unpredictable range of textures and hues, still inviting accident and moment-



View of Arlene Shechet's
exhibition "Blow by Blow,"
2009, at the Frances
Young Tang Teaching
Museum and Art Gallery,
Skidmore College,
Saratoga Springs, N.Y.
Photo Arthur Evans.



**THESE ABSTRACT SCULPTURES
INHABIT THEIR SPACES LIKE
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by-moment adjustments to shape the object. Her aim, she says, is to constantly surprise herself.

In midcareer, Shechet—her children raised, teaching ended and studio practice all-consuming—has hit full stride. Solo exhibitions in 2009-10 at the Tang, the Denver Art Museum and Jack Shainman Gallery in New York met with critical praise. She received awards from the Joan Mitchell Foundation, Anonymous Was a Woman and the American Academy of Arts and Letters (all 2010-11). Her work is frequently encountered in group shows of hip young artists working in ceramics, along with veterans like Betty Woodman and Kathy Butterly. In spring 2012, she will do a residency at the storied Meissen porcelain factory outside Dresden, producing work that she intends to show in Berlin, at Nature Morte, in a solo show scheduled for next fall.

SHECHET'S SPACIOUS, AIRY STUDIO in Woodstock, N.Y., has been designed to accommodate the artist's improvisational methods. She works on many things at once, so partially completed objects are positioned around the large main space, covered in plastic to retain moisture. Though she might begin on the wheel (there are two, in a small side room), producing curved bottoms for her sculptures, they are then hand-built rather than thrown. Grabbing wet ropelike components from under plastic, she moves from piece to piece, working additively, smoothing, squeezing and coiling, aggressively building them to extreme tipping points of balance. In another room, completed red clay forms stand drying. In the back is her large, electric, walk-in kiln, always with several pieces inside, awaiting firing.

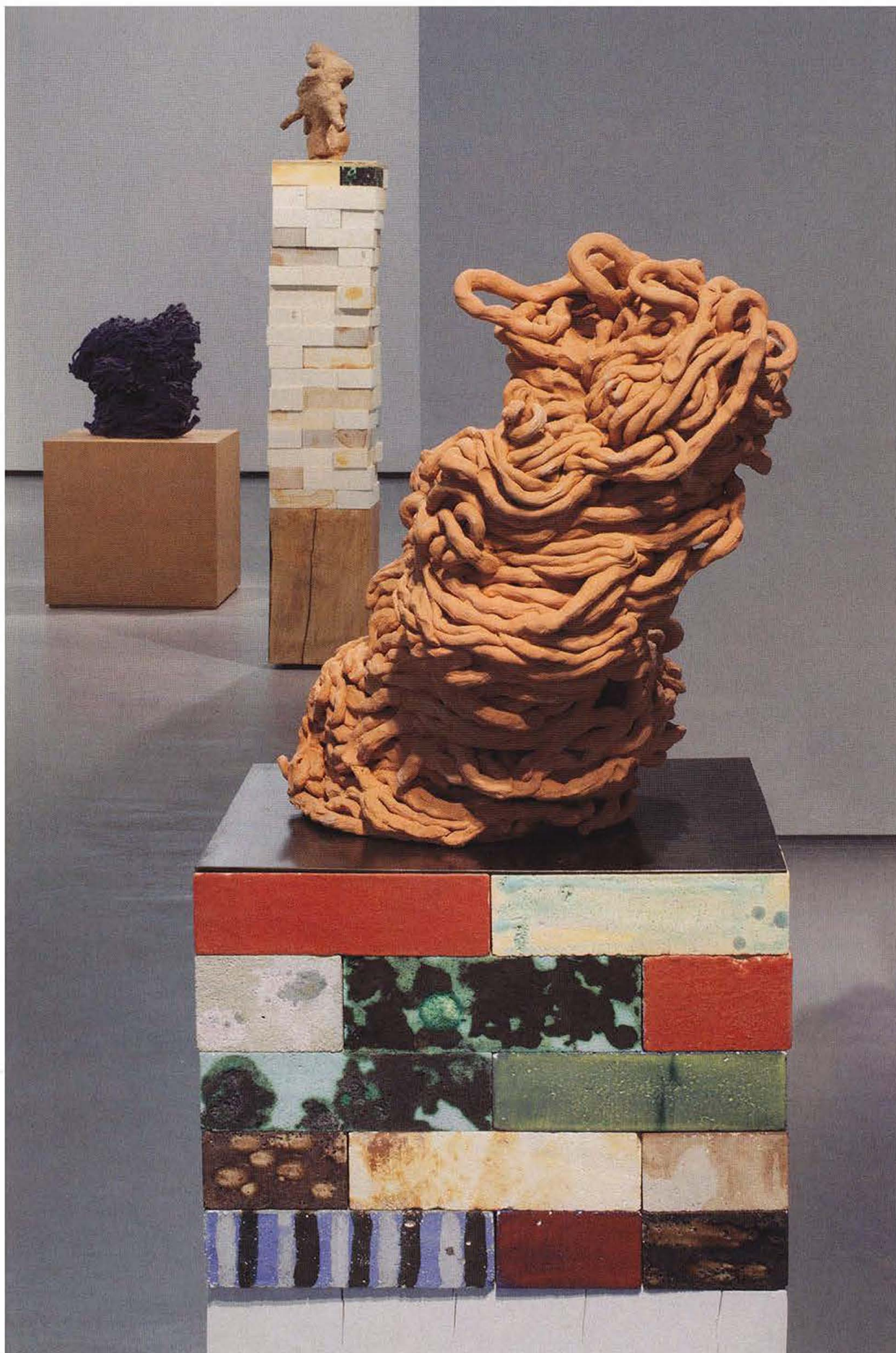
With the help of an assistant, Shechet constantly tests glazes. Though she ostensibly concentrated in ceramics in grad school at RISD in the late '70s, she insists it was a gambit to get her own studio; her formal ceramics training is minimal, a fact that she states as a point of pride. She will test any and all glazes in sometimes bizarre combinations, no matter how incorrect from the standpoint of proper technique. Shelves and tables hold bottlelike shapes carefully labeled, their multicolored surfaces bubbled and pocked with sometimes nasty effects. In firing and glazing a large piece, Shechet will "shop" for just the right combination from among her tests—the one that, to her mind, suits the shape—and follow the formula on its label. In addition, the studio presents an obstacle course of raw timber, plywood boxes, concrete cylinders, metal-legged stools of many heights and stacks of bricks normally deployed in kiln construction (she does not use them for that): these are the materials she will transform into the bases on which the ceramics will rest. It is a constant mix-and-match, as the artist chooses from among hundreds of fabricated, found and fired components. Her process yields an amazing diversity of finished objects.

Shechet has arguably transmitted some of her restless energy and constant motion to the sculptures themselves. For all the talk of Buddhism that clings to them in critical writing (despite the artist's protests), Shechet's works are anything but serene. Indeed, like European Baroque and Rococo sculptors, she is drawn to spirals and vortices, imparting to her works an often wild drama. To experience her sculptures properly, one must walk around them more than once, for odd gravities and complex surfaces impart multiple identities. (More on circumambulation shortly.) Though entirely abstract shapes, they inhabit their spaces like so many individual characters, complete with idiosyncratic personality traits and far-flung familial resemblances. From one side, *Everything Seems to be Something Else* (2007-08) suggests a figure stretching luxuriously backward, from another a rising coil of smoke. At one moment the gilded *Elvis* resembles a cartoonish profile with a pompadour, at the next a magic lamp emanating a genie. From afar *Was Still* (2011) is a head slightly bent in a mood, close-up a planet with drizzled blue oceans. The metamorphic surface of *Even and Perhaps Especially* (2007) suggests Rodin, while the wavy, fingerlike forms protruding from its sides and the overall "pose" recall bronze statues of the dancing

Right, view
of Shechet's
exhibition "The
Sound of It,"
2010, showing
(foreground)
Sleepless Color.

Opposite, *Raga*,
1999, Hydrocal
and acrylic paint
skins, 23 by
12 by 12 inches.
Photo John
Berens.

Work this spread,
courtesy Jack
Shainman Gallery,
New York.





Left, *So and So and So and So and On and On*, 2010, glazed and fired ceramic and glazed kiln bricks, each piece approx. 50 inches tall. Courtesy Jack Shainman.

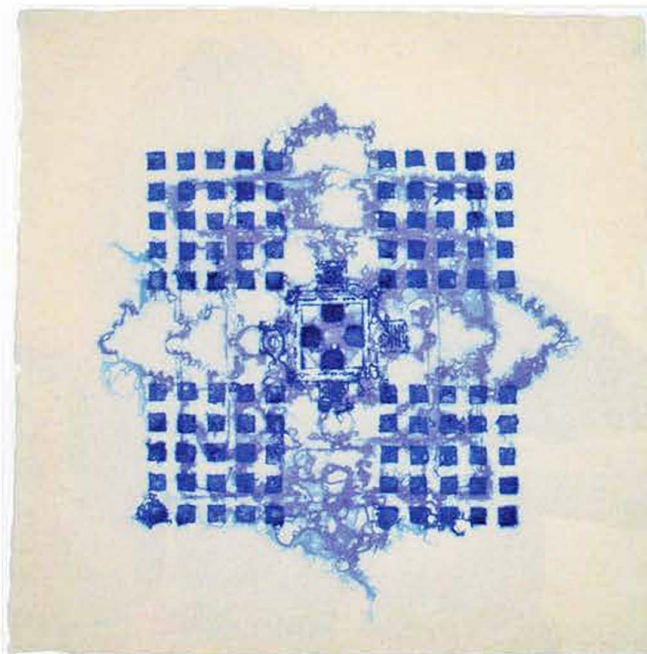
Opposite, *Deep Blooze Series: (Squeeze)*, 2004, stenciled linen pulp on translucent abaca base sheet with pigment, 18 inches square. Courtesy Dieu Donn , New York.

Shiva Nataraja from India's Chola period. Greeting visitors to the Shainman show last year was *Sleepless Color* (2010), a pileup of coils resembling a small dog seated on the pedestal in a forward tilt. And here Shechet pulled a switcheroo: the ceramic piece was unglazed, a baked terra-cotta, while the pedestal, a stack of kiln bricks, bore the glazes, a panoply of color and pattern.

STILL, THERE IS A REASON WHY the Buddhist label has stuck to Shechet. For many years, her compass was decidedly pointing East. From 1993 to '99, paint-skin Buddhas proliferated, placed on low stools or chairs. These semiabstract figures are fairly static, as a seated, cross-legged Buddha must perhaps be; Shechet's playfulness lay in scale, surface texture and coloration. The tall *Madras Buddha* (1997), for example, is outfitted with a garish plaid skin, while others bear polka dots or gestural passages. At the same time, Shechet became fascinated with the stupa motif. Initially designed to contain the Buddha's relics, temple stupas evolved into symbolic, phallic or breastlike forms circumambulated by pilgrims. "The stupa is not only a symbol of the body of the Buddha," wrote the Delhi and Berlin dealer and artist Peter Nagy in a 1999 essay on Shechet, "but also a concrete manifestation of Mount Meru (the mythological mountain at the center of the universe); a reliquary which verges on architecture; a cosmological diagram in three dimensions."⁴ Arriving at the Dieu Donné workshop in New York in 1997 on one of that institution's Lab Grants (she has returned some 20 times), Shechet produced flat pulp-paper pieces in blue and white to resemble architectural blueprints, adapting and overlapping plans of actual stupa shrines to create mandala-like images.

Intrigued with the bleed from blue to white in these 2-D paper pieces, Shechet also noted the works' resemblance to blue-and-white porcelain from various times and places. "I started to look at porcelains from China, Flow Blue from England, Delftware, Willowware, a vocabulary of things both Eastern and Western that I had always dismissed as boring. The idea of the bleed, and impregnation, all that was happening with the paper had a huge history in ceramics."⁵ She decided to mold the blue-and-white pulp-paper pieces as vessels—a challenging process in which she cast the wet pulp over Hydrocal forms, fashioning paper vases (her "Once Removed" series) that she displayed atop the solid forms she used to create them. ("I had earlier come to believe the vase is a domestic form of sacred architecture," she said.⁶) In 2002, she returned to clay for the first time in many years. Over the course of 12 months, she worked with students at the University of Washington in Seattle to create an installation of stacked and joined cast porcelain stupalike forms for "Building," a 2003 exhibition at the Henry Art Gallery.⁷

She also experimented at Seattle's Pilchuck Glass School. During a residency with glassblowers, she created objects that she then had the horrified craftsmen slice up into stackable components. Intrigued with the flowing and streaking of colors in the molten state, and pushing the notion of fragility and breakage, Shechet went on to fashion, at workshops in Boston and Seattle, a series of cast crystal ropes for installations at the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art in Snug Harbor, Staten Island (a 2003 group show about the Buddhist spirit in art) and at



IN HER PULP-PAPER PIECES IN BLUE AND WHITE, SHECHET ADAPTED AND OVERLAPPED PLANS OF STUPA SHRINES, CREATING MANDALA-LIKE IMAGES.

Shoshana Wayne Gallery in L.A. in 2004 (a solo, titled "Out of the Blue"). The ropes, "tied" into loose knots or "fraying" at ends that look as if they have snapped, were installed at both sites to look as though they were threading in and out of the walls. While predominantly a pale blue, the ropes viewed close up betray their liquid origins, evident in streaks of darker and lighter hues, from deep blue to white. Treating solid walls as permeable, the artist made them a metaphor for the changeability of the material world. (The glass ropes will be installed again this month at the Visual Art Center of New Jersey, in Summit.)

SHECHET IS ALWAYS READY to cite a variety of influences, depending on when you talk to her. The October day I visited her studio, for example, she surprised me by confessing a great passion for the work of the Polish-born American sculptor Elie Nadelman and mentioned a recent studio visit by Carroll Dunham. I happened to be staring at her newest works, which combine a cartoonish demeanor with painterly effects, so Dunham's interest made perfect sense. Shechet speaks knowledgeably about Buddhas—about the ideal proportions of the seated figure, which do not vary much across cultures, but also about the otherwise enormous differences in details. When I first met the artist, some five years ago, we discovered a shared love for a bronze Hellenistic figurine from the third century B.C. at the Metropoli-



SHECHET HAS OFTEN SAID THAT FAILURE IS A CONSTANT THREAT IN HER CERAMICS, A QUALITY SHE CULTIVATES.

tan Museum: a veiled dancer whose small size belies the complexity of her spinning torsion, effected almost miraculously through the lines of thick drapery folds.

At the Shainman exhibition, Shechet exhibited a pair of large, globular forms resembling pinkish heads (she says "heads, bubbles, rocks, moons") on stacks of kiln bricks glazed in black and white, titled *So and So and So and So and On and On* (2010). The association with Philip Guston was inevitable—in the color pink, the iconography of heads and bricks, and the painterly facture of the surface. Indeed, as she has told me, Guston's studio is not far from where she lives in Woodstock, and she is acutely conscious of his influence—felt not only in the iconography and form, but in her work's deep vulnerability and humanity. And in its humor. "It's comic

pathos," she wrote me. "Things are funny when they are near failure . . . top-heavy . . . nearly falling." She has often said that failure is a constant threat in her ceramics, a quality she cultivates, treading a fine line. Sometimes her pieces, pushed to the limits of balance, topple over and break once fired. But they can also fail in more subtle ways, by winding up, in the artist's eyes, too beautiful or too finely crafted. Recently, in an e-mail, she cited a quote from de Kooning that she was using in a lecture on her work: "Beauty makes me feel petulant, I prefer the grotesque. It's more joyous."

In her most recent sculpture from 2011, presently on view at James Kelly in Santa Fe, Shechet is indulging her most joyously grotesque streak. *That Time* is a grayish headlike shape planted on a cracked wooden trunk, with mute patches of green somehow becoming, in the mind's eye, facial features, and an absurd "hat" of pink coils. You have to laugh at this ungainly figure, all gussied up. *Is and Is Not*, topping a stack of unglazed white kiln bricks (complete with their lot number—23), is a squarish, undulating shape with a horrid little mouth; blue glaze gathers in its folded surface like sweat on a flabby body. From the top emanate two hoselike spouts, so that the object looks as though it's wearing some kind of fools-cap—an Ubu-like character, exposed and ridiculous. With an awkwardness so skilled it becomes elegant, Shechet demonstrates a mastery over everything that can go wrong in ceramics, harnessing wrongness to endless expressive possibility. ○

¹ Interview with Jane Dickson, "Arlene Shechet," on *Bomb Magazine's* website, posted September 2010.

² Unless otherwise cited, Shechet quotes are from conversations and e-mails with the author in fall 2011. ³ In Ian Berry, *Arlene Shechet: Blow by Blow*, exh. cat., Saratoga Springs, N.Y., Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, 2009, p. 15. ⁴ In the brochure for "Arlene Shechet: Mirror Mirror," Elizabeth Harris Gallery, New York, Apr. 22-May 22, 1999, n.p. ⁵ Shechet, in Berry, p. 7. ⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Apart from graduate school, Shechet made ceramics briefly in her Manhattan apartment in the '80s, convincing her landlords to allow her to install a small kiln in the basement of the building. The small, rounded, wall-mounted pieces she created were inspired, she says, by the birth of her daughter in 1987. There was then a long hiatus until the University of Washington project in 2002; only in 2005 did she begin to make ceramics herself again.

Arlene Shechet will mount a survey of her work in paper at Dieu Donn , New York, Mar. 8-Apr. 20, 2012. She will also show at Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Los Angeles, in summer 2012, and at Nature Morte, Berlin, Sept. 12-Nov. 12, 2012.