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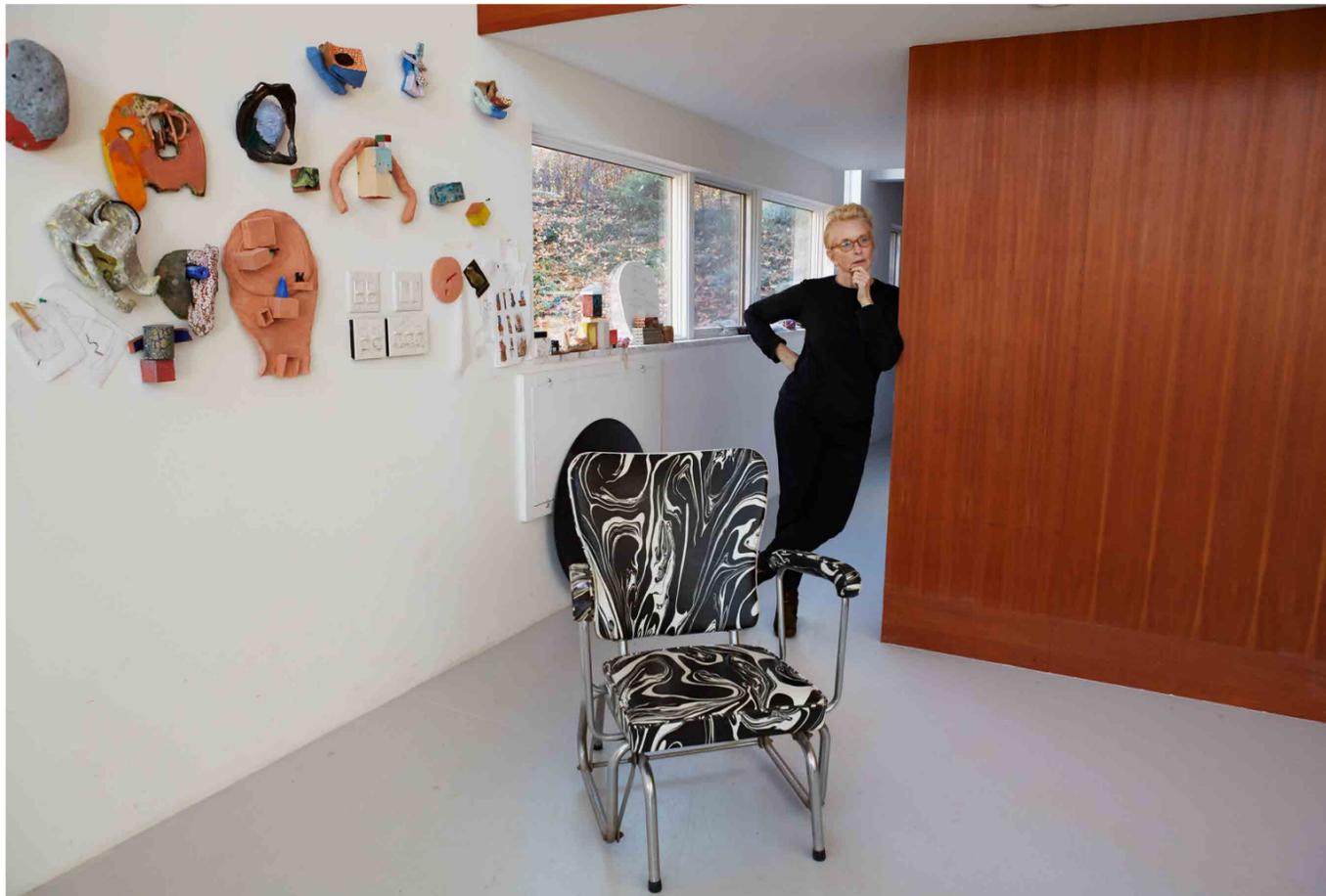


Arlene Shechet



“I never really felt the empty nest—there’s sexism in that image, as what it envisions is that the woman is sitting still. I think we’re always reinventing our lives. For my kids it might have been shocking though, because both my husband and I went into serious work mode. Ever since they’ve been saying, ‘Oh my god, this is what you were holding back!’”

Interview by Laura Hoffman Photos by Kate Orne



On the wall: Miscellaneous studio stuff. The black & white swivel pattern rocking chair she found in Vermont, "It had a special lure."



Top: A selection of her glaze tests. Bottom: Miscellaneous studio stuff.

"Instead of making a decision I just follow my instincts. That way I don't have this goal hanging around my neck."

Laura Hoffmann: Arlene, how do you divide your time between city and country?

Arlene Shechet: It's organized so that I have a good deal of work time upstate, which is where I make most of my sculptures. In the city, I work on exhibitions, models, any two-dimensional objects, and all of my office stuff. And I always want to have some time to see art and some time to take walks. My schedule is fairly regimented, because my desk assistant is on duty at the end of the week, and my studio assistant, who helps move things upstate, at the beginning of the week. The first year I had my primary studio upstate I had to work hard to figure it out! Having two studios, how to break it up? I quickly came to the realization that it doesn't make any sense at all to be making the same kind of work in both places, because then you're always in the process of leaving something. Now I feel that the space in between, the space I've created by going away for a few days and coming back has helped my work, that it's enforced objectivity. For an artist having new eyes, having fresh eyes, having that sense of engagement but removal is so hard to achieve. The separation has really worked for me to create that opportunity.

LH: With that regimented schedule you probably have to sacrifice some of your social life?

AS: My social life has taken a huge hit. That is the main thing. But when I return to the city on Wednesday nights, and the day is done upstate — you know, how upstate, especially in the winter, you're ready to crawl into bed with a book or a movie... everything is just getting awake in the city. I feel I have the best of both worlds. I've had a beautiful morning, and I have a reawakening at night. It's funny; I feel it's the only moment where I actually gain time, like another day has happened! [Laughs] Having dinner with a friend at 9 PM in the city is perfectly normal, when that would be impossible upstate.

LH: And one is so receptive to all the glamour after a few days away. [Laughs]

AS: Oh yes, everyone looks amazing. You get on the subway, and everywhere is gorgeous humanity!

LH: Tell me about your house in Woodstock. Did you build it yourself?

AS: It's from 1964, very odd in Woodstock, a

flat-roof modernist house, very simple. I'd been looking for a house with a sloppy barn and lots of little rooms — everything I don't have in my loft in the city. We ended up with a modernist house where I couldn't put a sloppy barn because it would have ruined it, and it's sort of like a loft. It's the same basic construct we have in the city! [Laughs]

LH: You built your upstate studio in 2008. That really changed your work, didn't it?

AS: Having the bigger studio enabled me to breathe in a creative way, to breathe in terms of making things, and reassessing. I had a small kiln in the city. Everything broke, it was really, really difficult. That was part of the impetus to build a studio upstate. Of course now eight years later I feel like I need to have yet another studio. No matter how big you build it, your studio is never quite big enough. I built it especially not having a garage door on it, so I wouldn't make gigantic things. I try to stop myself from going down that dangerous road. Years ago I used to make big things. They just become a noose around your neck.

LH: Does your house or the landscape around it have

any special significance for you?

AS: There's one window in my studio where I'm always looking. Last winter an owl went and sat on top of a squirrel, picked it up and flew away — amazing things can be seen out that window. In the house the views are bigger and I allow myself to look out more.

The acidic soil in the Catskills encourages moss. I have a large wooded area out back; I call it my Japanese landscape. There are huge boulders; the property was once a bluestone quarry. If you want to have a garden you have to bring in soil. But these rocks and stones I love. I can grow any kind of moss, and it proliferates and covers things in blankets of crazy vibrant and muted greens and yellows and greys. That's informed my work so much.

LH: Oh, that makes sense! The glazing on your ceramic pieces does look mossy!

AS: Lots of people fight the moss. They want to have grass. Moss is magical. Native Americans used it for diapers, and women used it for their menstruation because it's so absorbent. I learned how to make buttermilk soup and spray it around. You can get it to grow wherever you want it to grow. I have no deer fencing so that controls what I can grow, and moss is a constant delight. And thyme. Where it could be lawn I just grow wild thyme. When you walk on it, it smells good. In New York City your sensory experiences are more internal, you're trying to protect yourself. In the Hudson Valley I feel like I can let that go. I can have a full sensory experience with my surroundings. People ask whether I'm lonely upstate, and no, I don't feel like that. Once you open yourself up to all the sounds, smells, and visual information, it's so rich!

LH: I agree. I have this idea that the rich communion you have with nature is replaced in the city by the communion you have with other people. In the city you need people more because they're the only "nature" around.

AS: I have a natural hermetic tendency. I think most artists do: You have to spend so much time by yourself. But you're totally right about the people culture. I think that's why people in the city get into the material culture too: It matters so much more — what colors you're wearing, the fashion — I love fashion, the stores, it's all so delightful in the way that nature does it. And I have another theory, which is that art is the nature of the city, or art museums. Wandering through the Metropolitan Museum on a Friday or Saturday night, in that vast landscape, you become contemplative. It's very peaceful. You can have encounters there that are a bit like nature encounters.

LH: Yes, it puts you into a certain state...

AS: Open, free-floating.

LH: Was there a particular artwork or art movement that drew you in when you were young? How did you decide to go to art school?

AS: I don't think I ever decided. One foot followed the other. It was instinctual. My mother was what they would call a Sunday painter. She had a studio in the basement of our house. She could have been a really good artist, but she didn't exercise her ambition. She was a product of '40s, '50s sexism. I feel I'm trying to make that right, for her.

LH: One's parents' unrealized dreams might be among the most powerful drives in one's life. Whatever you didn't get to do, your children will take on.

AS: You really think so? So if I end up realizing my dream, what do my kids do?

LH: They could use some direction! [Laughs] There might be things you didn't realize. I'm busy realizing my mother's dream and turning my daughter into a political activist. [Laughs]

AS: I'm doing that a little bit also, because I was very interested in being a political activist. I never thought I'd be an artist. I was actually sort of good at school. It was confusing; I could have done different things. Art history was an endless fascination. I grew up in New York, and when I was young my mother and I would go to museums together. I remember this moment when we were standing in front of a Robert Motherwell painting, three big black blotches on a big white canvas, and I was loving it, as an environment. My mother was shocked, "What are you seeing?" I didn't care what I was seeing, I was just seeing it. She was a much more rational, concrete person. That experience tuned me on to the possibility that you could exist on a level that's not concrete. The other planes of existence for the mind and the body were where I wanted to go, the more ethereal, more unexplainable, more mysterious, stranger worlds which were far from the concrete bourgeois world I was brought up in. So I thought I could be an art historian, or I could be a political activist — I could speak out. I believed in art as a tool, not the most direct tool. I had a professor, who saw me struggling, and he said, "Just do what you do, and do it well, and you will find your platform through that." That gave me permission. I graduated from college and actually tried to just focus on the political, but I was immediately frustrated. So at night I would go to the studio, and gradually everything else fell away, the studio became more and more central. So again, it was no plan. It just happened.

LH: Maybe on some level one could see you as an activist for clay! [Laughs] Even porcelain...

AS: No please! Now I work in wood. I don't really want to be identified with a material, honestly. I had a 20-year survey at the ICA in Boston a couple of years ago, and that allowed me to look at the trajectory of all of my work. I moved through every single material. There was even lots of stuff I explored that wasn't in the show. I've just always been curious about materials and what they could do. One material isn't that different from the next. So when people ask, "How did you learn that?" It's not really like you learn from

scratch. You're just picking up and moving your knowledge from one thing to the next, adding on little bits of knowledge.

LH: Weren't you drawn to clay in part because it was looked down upon? You have been showing porcelain in a new light at the Frick.

AS: It's not so much about being contrarian. It's more about finding space, the edges of what's acceptable. If you're going mainstream, it feels a bit claustrophobic trying to invent something. Clay was devalued, and very little had been explored. I could look at it in a fresh way, I could look at it really almost as if no one had thought about it before. "Oh, you have to make things hollow!" I also love working with my body, and it is a serious physical engagement, body to body. It becomes a reflection of the body. There's also my aesthetic. I've always been attracted to things that are a little bit wrong or clumsy, or abject, along with them having humor. Clay as a material can sort of have a vulgarity to it, and working with clay can offer a lot of abject moments. [Laughs] So it's the properties of clay that drew me in. For example, I've worked a lot with glass, and glass is always gorgeous, and its gorgeousness makes it more difficult. Then, too, I'm working upstate, where the immediate environment is earth. I could dig up clay in my backyard and start working. It is that, ground-up rock and water and earth, that pretty much defines the whole Hudson Valley. So it's of that place.

Porcelain I'd never worked with before I went to Germany and worked at the Meissen factory, and I'll probably never work with it again. Meissen porcelain is of Germany. Being in the belly of the beast, where they know it, and it's so perfect, and they're so into it, it was that insane immersion that allowed me to do it. In the same way as working at the Frick is like being in the belly of the beast, the most amazing small house museum, built with treasures from all around the world, including incredibly rare amazing exotic porcelains that I got to install and rethink. If I can get to these places that are the purest expression of what they are about, and I can think about that, and learn from that, I'm very privileged.

Laura Hoffmann is a contributor to *ArtForum*

Upcoming shows:

National Gallery, Washington, D.C. *Bodies of Work*, a group show, from the collection, opens May, 2017.

Chicago solo gallery exhibition at Corbett vs. Dempsey (with catalogue) opens April 27, 2017

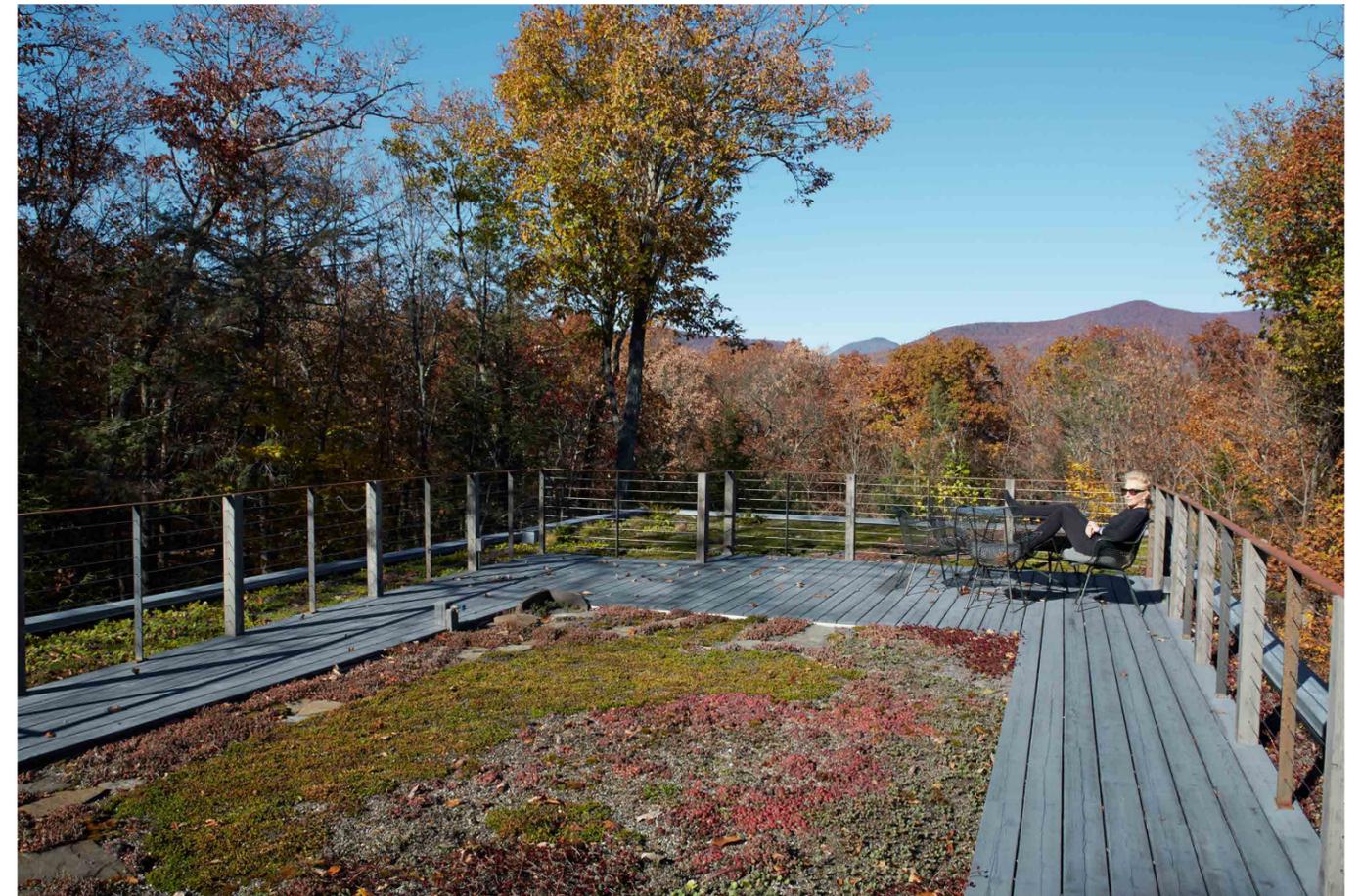
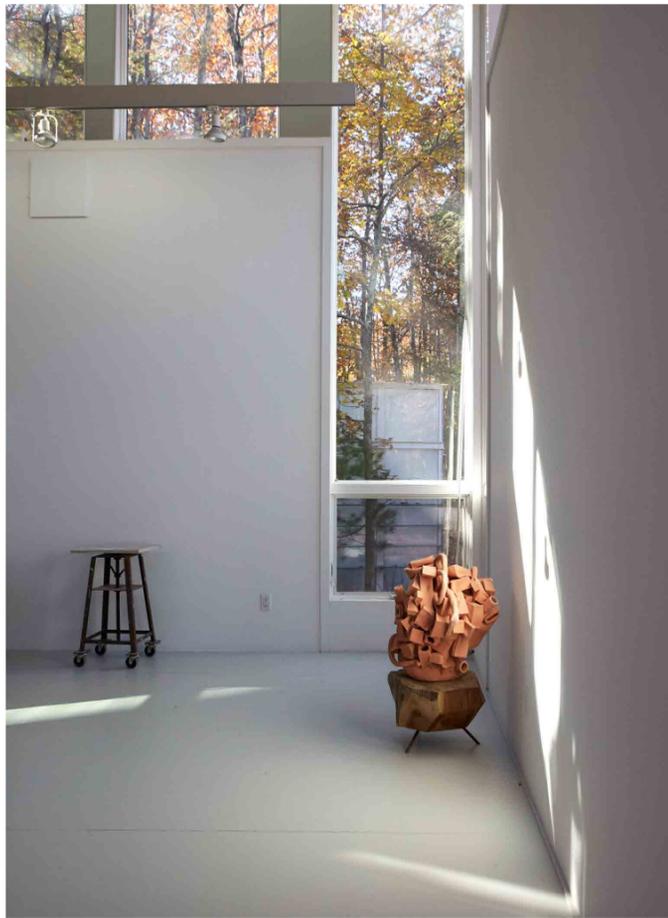
Commission for permanent collection of Jewish Museum of NYC, which will be completed and on exhibition beginning September, 2017.

Wexner Museum, Columbus Ohio *Grisaille* opens May 20, 2017

Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit *99 Cents* group show May 18 to August 30, 2017



Top: Adjacent to her vivid living room sits *Once Removed*, '98. Most assume this series to be porcelain but its made with blue and white forms of Abaca paper. Her flat roof California modernist home was designed by James Myers in '64. The studio in the background was designed by Deborah Gans.



Top left to right: A work in progress. *Equal Time* '16 (Ph: Phoebe d'Heurle). Bottom: *Deep Down & Widespread* '16 (Ph: Phoebe d'Heurle). Log segments drying in the kiln.

Top: Studio with work in progress. Bottom: Arlene relaxing in the sun on her green roofed studio which overlooks the Catskill mountains.