

Arlene
Shechet



Body-To-Body Experience

Opposite: *Is and Is Not* (detail), 2011. Glazed ceramic and kiln bricks, 42 x 14 x 12 in. Above: *Because of the Wind*, 2010. Glazed ceramic, steel, and glazed kiln bricks, 60.75 x 14 x 14 in.

Arlene Shechet seems to be having a moment. "All At Once," a 20-year survey of her work at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, received critical acclaim last year. "Slip" (2013), a solo show at Sikkema Jenkins in New York, also caused a stir. And her works have recently been acquired by several major museums, including the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Princeton University Art Museum, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Tellingly, exhibitions are now planned for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis (2016), the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC (2016), and the Jewish Museum in New York (2017). So why has it taken until now for Shechet to become a marquee name?



Left: *Who and Who and How and More*, 2012. Glazed ceramic, painted hardwood, and kiln bricks, 57.5 x 26 x 36 in. Right: *So and So and So and So and On and On*, 2010. Glazed ceramic and glazed kiln bricks, 51.5 x 43.5 x 33 in.

The answer may lie in her signature material—ceramic—and a longstanding institutional queasiness about how best to classify fired clay. A ceramic object can be catalogued as a contemporary sculpture or a hoary riff on a vessel, destined for a decorative arts collection. But beyond problems of categorization, Shechet’s lack of recognition follows a time-worn pattern. Many acclaimed female sculptors have a history of belated discovery, with professional ascension only following a major museum appearance that enlightened viewers about a resolute creative path. Louise Nevelson achieved recognition through inclusion in “Sixteen Americans,” a 1959 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. For Louise Bourgeois, fame came with a 1982 survey at MoMA. Ruth Asawa was recognized when a fleet of her crocheted mobiles were hung in a long-term installation inside the tower at San Francisco’s de Young

Museum in 2005. If this is a chronic condition for women sculptors, it is unsurprising that the spotlight now shifts to Shechet, who has worked determinedly for years.

There is also a nuanced undercurrent in the literature about Shechet’s early work—and it swirls around motherhood.¹ Rather than push that subject into private annals or sidestep the conversation, Shechet has candidly discussed motherhood as a central, even alchemical, part of her practice. This is a courageous position in an art world that can harbor hostility to women artists with children. Shechet’s study of Buddhism also receives credit for its significance in her burgeoning years, but raising a son and daughter figures in a transformative way in her sculptural trajectory.

One mark of a sculptor’s prowess is the ability to control materials, which often corresponds to an identification with a signature medium. Shechet turned to clay because she felt “challenged by a material

that transforms radically and even changes with exposure to air and water” and because it enabled her balancing act as an artist, professor, and parent. She calls clay “the most basic of materials,” and especially in the last decade, she has pushed the medium from commonplace into corporeality.² Today, although she is most closely identified with her innovations in ceramic, which she commands with formal power, humor, and irony, she hopes to eclipse a narrow identification: “I am a sculptor. I don’t think I am defined by my material. I don’t think it describes that much.” Indeed, she has worked with a range of other materials since the early 1990s—experimenting with Hydrocal cement, acrylic paint, paper, and crystal.

Her mastery of multiple materials, particularly ceramic, was evidenced by her recent exhibitions and a *New York Times* recognition of her work as “some of the most imaginative American sculpture of



Above: *So and So and So and So and On and On* (detail), 2010. Right: *Out and Out*, 2013. Glazed ceramic, glazed kiln bricks, and wood, 72 x 27 x 16 in.

the past 20 years and some of the most radically personal.”³

Treating clay as a vanguard material isn’t new. In the mid- and late-20th century, Robert Arneson, Viola Frey, Ken Price, and Peter Voulkos (all working in California during their formative years) brought ceramic into the sculptor’s studio. Voulkos may align most closely with Shechet. The muscularity and unrefined surfaces of his large-scale works tied him to Abstract Expressionism and identified him as a radical experimenter. Shechet’s work maintains that rough-hewn character and human scale, veering away from preciousness. *Is and Is Not* (2011) has the flabby flesh of an old man, outlets and spouts embedded in its folds. *Who and Who and How and More* (2012) summons two figures in conversation. Shechet is steeped in art history, yet her pieces that conjure the body aren’t influenced by the idealized, classical figures of the Renaissance, the dynamic forms of the Baroque, or the assertive geometry of Cubism and its offshoots. Instead, her misshapen forms allude to a Gothic grotesquerie of distorted gargoyles and fantastic beasts that hover between animal and human. “I don’t believe that anything is grotesque,” she says. “It is personal what one person finds grotesque and what another finds grotesque.”

There is tenderness and caring in looking at things that are difficult. This is more

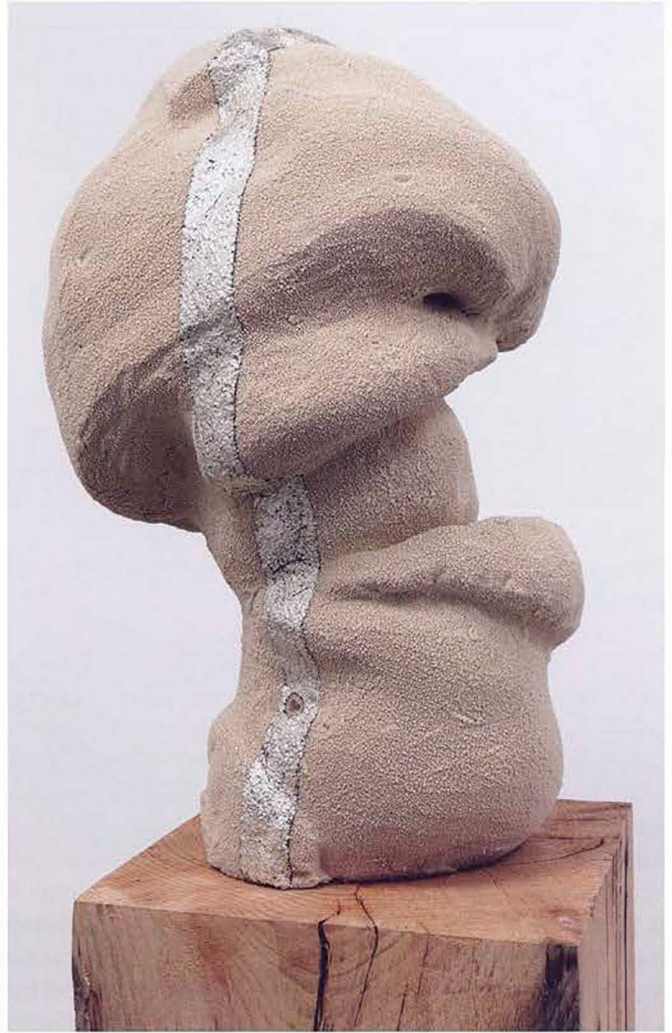
interesting and compassionate than looking away.” Her current work focuses on a rigorous investigation into the possibilities of ceramic sculpture. “I work on the larger ceramic pieces for at least six months,” Shechet says. “People think clay is all about immediacy and fun, which is why there’s a profusion of little lumpy things out there,” she continues. Figurative allusion in abstract sculpture is what distinguishes much of her recent work, and yet the term “abstract” makes her chafe: “I don’t believe in abstraction. I don’t want things to be completely representational and literal at any point. I am interested in hybrid language and the line in between where it’s not possible to say simply what the thing is.” If Shechet doesn’t respond to tag lines, her humanistic content is unmistakable, as form peeks out from non-representational objects.

Her sculptures exude figuration through association. There are human heads and limbs, leaning torsos and outstretched legs, beseeching mouths, yawning orifices and lunging frames. In *So and So and So and So and On and On* (2010), two bulbous pinkish forms sit atop piles of black- and white-glazed kiln brick. And while there are no direct human features—no eyes, ears, or noses—the paired shapes play off one another in dialogue. One of the forms is tall; the other is globoid. Heads are evoked not only through shapes, but also

through glazes that recall flesh tones. The title, *So and So and So and So and On and On*, seems to capture two friends chatting, passing the day with endless pleasantries.

Color is central to Shechet’s work. “I always like to be somewhere in between painting and sculpture, hence working with materials that involve color as part of the material,” she says. “The color isn’t really on the surface. It gets applied to the surface, but the act of firing makes it one with the structure.”

In *Out and Out* (2013), the independent forms of *So and So and So and So and On and On* merge into an interlocking pair, dependent on each other. Reminiscent of Rodin’s *The Kiss*, Shechet’s work brings a contemporary treatment to a physical connection so profound it is symbiotic. Using glazed ceramic and glazed kiln brick, she shapes a work in which figures are strapped together with ribbons of sand-colored clay.



Left: *Sleepless Color*, 2009–10. Fired ceramic, glazed kiln bricks, and painted hardwood, 60.38 x 19 x 18.13 in. Right: *Naked*, 2013. Glazed ceramic, lacquered gold, and wood, 65 x 13.5 x 11.75 in.

Shechet adds the slightest nod to fleshy forms: one of the slumped columns has gently swelling breasts and a belly button in its central core; the other has a small knobby protrusion, suggestive of a phallus.

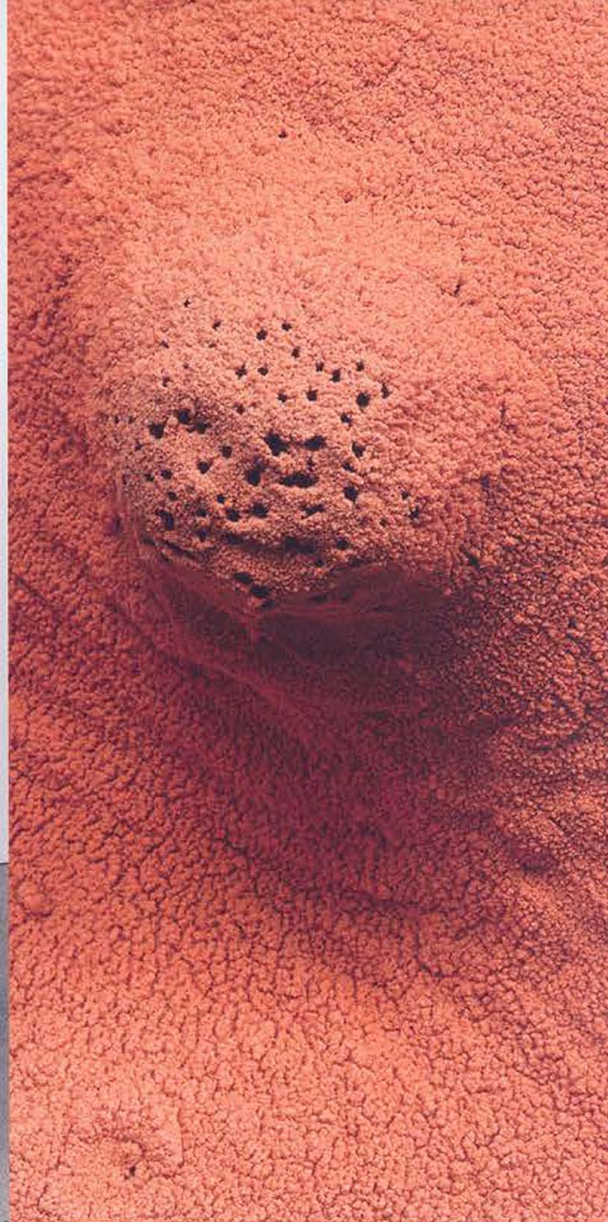
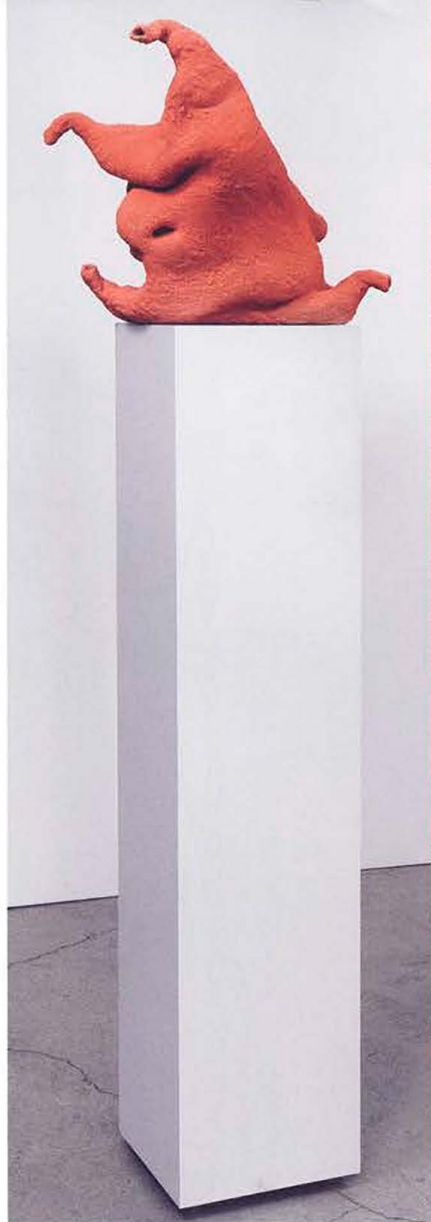
If both of these sculptures summon the interaction of a couple, a number of her works from the last decade consider a singularity. In *Good Ghost* (2007), a gray elephantine form sits atop a steel and concrete stool. But the sculpture bears more resemblance to elongated human limbs than to a loping pachyderm. There is a balletic element as form stretches into space. *Up for Air* (2007) uses the same coloration, while a squat central shape bursts with the embrace of outstretched arms. Other objects demonstrate suppleness through

layered compositions built out of clay coils. *My Balzac* (2010) places granite-colored glazed ceramic atop a wood base on a steel frame pedestal. Though the title makes an amusing reference to Rodin's outsize *Monument* (1891–97), Shechet brings scale to an intimate gaze, enabling the viewer to look eye-to-eye at the complicated levels of ceramic build-up. *Because of the Wind* (2010) and *Sleepless Color* (2009–10) are like *Balzac*, teetering with listing profiles that energize the fired material.

Close viewing of Shechet's sculpture is rewarded with idiosyncrasies. There are small holes and odd protuberances; folds collapse into one another in a suspended state of sinkhole. Color can evoke flesh, as in *Naked* (2013); the flat gray of a fortified

bunker, as in *The Possibility of Ghosts* (2013); or an array of underwater coral, as in *Built to Last* (2014). *No Noise* (2013) maintains the rich warmth of adobe structures in New Mexico, but hoisted high on a white pedestal, this sculpture of choreographed limbs, sexual orifices, and mutating surfaces exemplifies fluid motion, particularly when circumnavigated. It may also refer to poses of the Buddha, a subject that has long influenced Shechet.

Though these sculptures evoke the body through an elemental vocabulary, they also reveal the tremendous physical challenge of creation — most clearly evidenced when the work walks the tightrope between figurative complexity and palpable mastery. Shechet's sculptures then realize a



Left: *Built to Last*, 2014. Glazed ceramic and painted steel, 73.5 x 21 x 18 in. Right and detail: *No Noise*, 2013. Glazed ceramic and painted wood, 67.75 x 17 x 14 in.

power of materiality. She is aware of how her body impacts the body of her work. The physicality of creating with clay is key to her creative process: "Clay is so malleable, and the body can work on it with no tools, so it is very much a body-to-body experience." As she explains, "Clay hardens with time and air. I love the idea of air and time being an integral part of the language of these sculptures. If you are moving into that space where you're paying attention, you can hit it so the clay gets just structural enough to be able to move higher or outwards to create imbalance within structural balance."

Shechet is looking to juxtapose her work with objects from historic collections: "As an artist, I'm very much a product of art history, and it is part of my job to pay

homage openly to things that are inspirations." "All At Once," at the ICA Boston, foreshadowed this interest with a group of porcelain works that she created during a residency at the Meissen factory in 2012. (These riffs on historic Meissen ware, which use leftovers and discards and raise questions of labor and exchange, were shown at the RISD Museum of Art in 2012, where they were installed in conjunction with the museum's Meissen collection.) Looking

forward, outdoor work is tantalizing, offering new possibilities of scale and materials. These new endeavors should ensure her reputation beyond the label of "ceramic artist." As she stresses, "I never use the term 'ceramicist,' I use the term 'sculptor.'"

Brooke Kamin Rapaport, a Contributing Editor for Sculpture, is the Martin Friedman Senior Curator at the Madison Square Park Conservancy, New York.

Notes

¹ See, for instance, Jenelle Porter, *Arlene Shechet: All at Once* (Munich, London, New York: Institute of Contemporary Art Boston and DelMonico Books Prestel, 2015), p. 13. Porter writes of the artist's early work, "For Shechet, the demands of motherhood (Shechet and Epstein's children were born in 1986 and 1990), teaching, and the studio added up to a fundamental problem of time—not having enough of it." And Faye Hirsch, "Buckle and Flow," *Art in America*, January 2012, p. 58. "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."

² Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Shechet are from an interview with the author on September 11, 2015.

³ Holland Cotter, "Arlene Shechet Has a First Museum Retrospective in Boston," *The New York Times*, July 17, 2015.