

Art in America: 'The Alchemist: Arlene Shechet Converts «White Gold» Into Artworks', by Brienne Walsh, 27th January 2014



Arlene Shechet, Hex Vase 50039, 2013, glazed Meissen porcelain, 7 1/2 by 5 (diam.) inches.

For Arlene Shechet, art isn't simply about making objects. «I don't want to just produce versions of my own art,» she told A.i.A. during a recent interview. «The most important thing for me is what my life is like in the studio. That's why I always say 'yes' to opportunities-to keep my practice alive.» The New York-based sculptor's exhibition of porcelain works, «Meissen Recast,» now on view at the RISD Museum at the Rhode Island School of Design, in Providence (through July 6), consists of over 70 glazed porcelain sculptures she made as a result of one such opportunity, during an artist residency from 2012-2013 at the Meissen porcelain factory in a town of the same name near Dresden, Germany.

At RISD, her often abstract sculptures are displayed alongside the museum's collection of historic Meissen pieces, which include dinner sets, vessels and the brand's famous «Monkey Orchestra,» a series of figurines of monkeys playing musical instruments. «Meissen Recast» is thus not only a solo exhibition of Shechet's work, but also an installation piece that allows Meissen's classic pieces to interact with She-

chet's more experimental work. Shechet procured the invitation to Meissen, a factory that's been in operation since 1710, through Peter Nagy, the founder of Nature Morte, a gallery with locations in New Delhi and Berlin. He wanted to have a show of Shechet's work, said the artist, but it was too expensive to ship her sculptures from New York; instead, he asked if she'd come work on the exhibition at Meissen, closer to his Berlin gallery. (Some of the resulting pieces she created were shown at an exhibition there in 2012.) «When I was younger, I always told my parents I wanted to work in either a factory or on a farm,» she said. «As soon as I got to Meissen, the memory of that desire flooded back in.»

As an artist-in-residence, Shechet had full access to the factory's many resources-clay, glazes, 24-karat gold used for gilding and even the molds used to create Meissen's historic dinnerware and lively figurines. What she was attracted to most, however, wasn't the beautiful porcelain objects, so valuable in the 19th century that they were called «white gold.» Instead, she was drawn to the heavy, earth-colored molds used to produce them. «I was so interested in the aesthetic and functional contrast of delicate, small objects made out of shiny material, and then the really heavy industrial objects» used to make them, she explained. The installation at RISD, at first glance, looks something like a display of objects uncovered at the archaeological site of an ancient art school where free expression was encouraged-no two objects look quite alike, although they're all made out of similar materials. Works like Pale Blue Pillow (2013), for example, feature blocks of leftover porcelain which were melted down and shaped into blocks with wafflelike holes on the side to save for future use. In Shechet's work these have indentations that are filled in with swaths of colored glazing and 24-karat gold. Scallop Bowl (2013) is a porcelain version of the mold used to cast Meissen's iconic «Fluted Bowl,» a form produced by the factory since its founding. By invoking the mold itself in addition to the final product, Shechet's work privileges the industrial process.

Classic sets like the «Monkey Orchestra» are displayed in cases opposite works like Monuments (2012), a set of 10 white porcelain vases created by Shechet that are interrupted by enigmatic, brightly glazed intrusions that look like slugs, or tiny birds. In contrast to «Monkey Orchestra,» which is a straightforward figurative work, the set looks like a still life constructed of objects inhabited by alien, amorphous forms. All of the contrasts are purposeful. «I'm an installation person who makes objects,» Shechet said.

More important to Shechet than experimenting with processes, however, is paying homage to the factory employees she worked alongside during her residency at Meissen, many of whom train as apprentices and then stay with the factory for 40 or 50 years, she said. With her insistence on trying things that had never been done before, such as displaying the original mold, or experimenting with applying layers of glaze to create tie-dye effects, she broke with a well established tradition. Meissen workers are trained to create the same works that the brand has been making for three centuries; Shechet took their materials and created new forms. As a result, she was an exotic bird to them. She said, however, that her celebrating the mold, not just the finished product, really endeared the factory workers to her practice. «It's the worker who makes the mold, and in every mold there is the cast object,» she said. «I was really honoring the factory in this exhibition.»