

Porcelain Finds Its Outside Voice



In a studio in Kingston, N.Y., Arlene Shechet prepared “Forward,” part of an installation of sculptures in many materials on view Tuesday in Madison Square Park. ©Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

KINGSTON, N.Y. — Splinters were flying onto the floor recently as the artist Arlene Shechet wielded a tool with a whirring blade called an angle grinder. She was carving a massive block of wood that was slowly turning into a sculpture of a woman for her art installation “Full Steam Ahead,” in Manhattan’s Madison Square Park.

Working in a rented studio, Ms. Shechet had no safety gear on. “It’s fun!” she yelled over the noise.

She hadn’t done a large-scale figure in wood before this 10-foot long piece, “Forward.”

“This is really big for a first go,” Ms. Shechet acknowledged. And “Full Steam Ahead” is her first major public project, too. “I try to be a little bit of an amateur to keep my life exciting,” the veteran artist added.

Ms. Shechet is known for her bold, colorful and inventive ceramics, as seen in a 2016 show at the Frick Collection in which she mixed the renowned Royal Meissen porcelain, from the 18th century, with her own exuberant work. But she has reached a paradoxical inflection point that mature artists get to, if they’re lucky: Precisely because she knows what she’s doing, she’s comfortable pushing into unknown territory.



A model in clay for “Forward.” ©Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

“Full Steam Ahead,” on view from Tuesday to April 28 in the northern section of Madison Square Park, includes a dozen sculptures in a variety of materials. It adds new seating in the form of stools and makes subtler changes too, swapping out some of the back slats on nearby park benches with a cast resin.

Ms. Shechet, 69, compared the installation to both a cabinet of curiosities and a secret garden. “I want that 18th-century notion of delight and discovery,” she said.

The installation breaks from the old model of public art projects. It’s not a single massive sculpture but a suite of human-scaled elements that can be touched, and it’s off-center from the park’s central green, where most artists would choose to work. (Ms. Shechet’s friend Martin Puryear picked the big lawn for his 40-foot-tall sculpture, “Big Bling,” in 2016.) And it is the rare project with a ceramic piece — “Low Hanging Cloud (Lion)” — that weighs more than a ton. Porcelain, her material of choice, is not often seen in such venues.

Ms. Shechet, who has a larger main studio in the Catskills and a place in Tribeca, challenges the idea that ceramics are necessarily delicate. “It’s toilet bowl porcelain,” she said, laughing. People don’t use it, she said, because it’s heavy, expensive and complicated to fabricate.

“The decorative arts is such a disparaged category, I think, because it’s thought of as female,” said Ms. Shechet (pronounced Shek’it). Scroll forms that reappear throughout the work refer to teacup handles. “But this work is all heavy and monumental,” she said. “It makes the female big and tough and something you have to pay attention to.”

Brooke Kamin Rapaport, the senior curator for Mad. Sq. Art, the park’s exhibition arm, said that Ms. Shechet fits the “post-bronze” age of public art, noting that Mr. Puryear’s piece used chain-link fence and plywood.

“Artists are choosing their material and adapting it for the outdoors,” Ms. Rapaport said. “It’s bringing excitement to the public art field. Porcelain is considered fragile, precious and private, but Arlene’s is durable, accessible and public.”



Ms. Shechet’s installation, called “Full Steam Ahead,” includes “Tilted Channel.”
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Scroll forms made of powder-coated steel recall tea cup handles.
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In the area of the park she chose, Ms. Shechet faces off with some old-fashioned male monumentalism. The title “Full Steam Ahead” refers to the Admiral Farragut Monument, a bronze sculpture of the U.S. naval figure who uttered some version of those words (usually cited as “full speed ahead”) after “Damn the torpedoes” during the Civil War.

A collaboration by Augustus Saint-Gaudens on an exedra designed by architect Stanford White, the statue, cast in 1880, stands above reliefs of two female figures representing Loyalty and Courage.

As a counterpoint, Ms. Shechet will place what she called her “buxom” “Forward” figure on the steps leading up to the 19th-century archetypes. Her piece can be used as seating, too.

That sort of tweaking of traditions comes naturally to Ms. Shechet. The standard pedestals used to display artworks interfere with the sightline between the viewer and her sculpture. So she makes her own. In “So and So and So and So and So and On and On” (2010), for example, dazzling glazed ceramic and glazed kiln bricks are the pedestals — as thought-provoking as the head-like figures atop them.

The painter Nicole Eisenman, who has recently been working in sculpture, said that she goes to the “generous” Ms. Shechet for advice.

“She’s a trailblazer,” Ms. Eisenman said. “Arlene has such a sense of all the balances — between grotesque and funny, what’s found and what’s made, the pedestal and the sculpture itself.”

Normally, the naval hero Farragut presides over a pool of water, but the first thing Ms. Shechet did was put him in dry dock.

“I said, ‘Can I empty the pool and take the water out?’” Ms. Shechet said, recalling her talks with the park. “They hemmed and hawed, and finally we negotiated it.”

Stepping down into the empty pool space to view some of the works reminded her of walking into the sunken living room of her grandparents' Art Deco apartment on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx, said Ms. Shechet, a Queens native herself.

Some of her figures are slightly mysterious. In her studio, she stood by "Tilted Channel," a two-armed shape made from powder-coated cast iron, while a reporter guessed what it was: a slingshot? Ms. Shechet said it represented a sprue, a tool for casting molten material like porcelain. ("I want people to say, 'What is that?'"") Another sprue was meant to evoke the Statue of Liberty.

Ms. Shechet chuckled while recounting Mr. Puryear's reaction to her plan for the park. "He said, 'This could go wrong, and so could this.' And I said, 'Well, that's because I'm stupid enough to do things without really knowing what I'm doing.'"

And with that, Ms. Shechet smiled and went back to the grind.



"Pool Garden" is a plate, an earlier work that served as inspiration for the project.
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