

ALMINE RECH

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Arlene Shechet Creates Beauty Out of Chaos

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By Merrell Hambleton



The sculptor Arlene Shechet in her Kingston, N.Y., studio. Credit:Eva Deitch

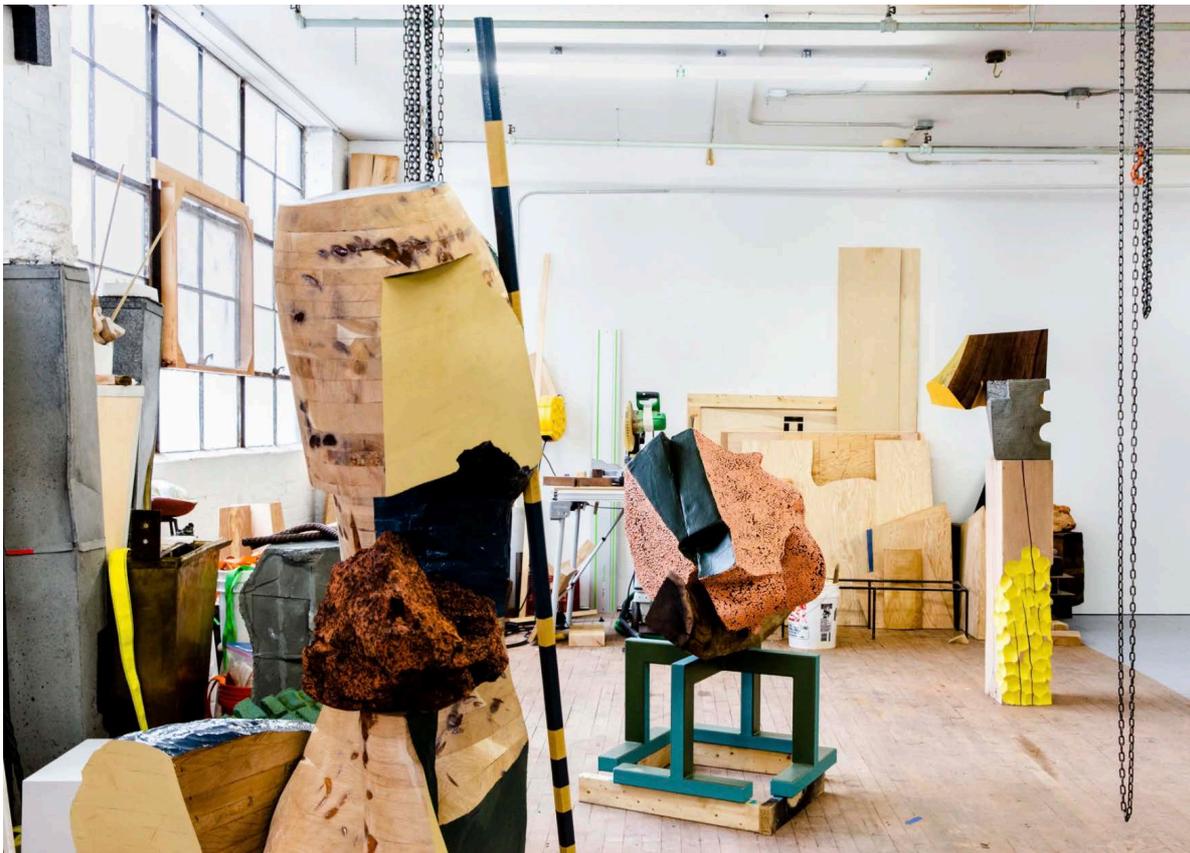
The artist's vibrant, writhing sculptures often seem poised on the brink of transformation, an illusion born from her lively, ever-evolving practice.

On a gray morning in February, the artist Arlene Shechet was in her Kingston, N.Y., studio, standing over her sculpture "Deep Dive" (2020). The squat, abstract piece, waist-high and hefty as a boulder, features two interlocking, acid-green ceramic forms that undulate like the hills of a lush volcanic island, perched on a curved steel-and-wood foot.

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It is one of 18 works that will appear in her show “Skirts,” which opens today at Pace Gallery in New York. Shechet carved the wood — a sturdy piece of walnut, stripped of bark and cut into a smooth half-cylinder — five years ago, and then left it in her yard. She rediscovered the log, which she described as “homely and gorgeous,” only recently, drying it in her wood kiln to rid it of bugs. On top of the wood, now encased in metal cladding that the artist referred to as its “steel suit,” the ceramic pieces form an awkward embrace. Though solid and fixed by an invisible, internal armature, the sculpture seemed not just ready to topple but caught in the act of toppling.

Motion, or the suggestion thereof, is central to Shechet’s work. In her sculptures, elements — some found, others formed by the artist’s hand — huddle together or appear to hover in space. Coils of clay seem to lurch and bulge, and ceramic glazes crawl and bubble as though still in the kiln. High-gloss paint, in saturated brights and deep jewel tones, glistens as if wet. She pines, she has said, for the aliveness of wet clay or paint — the thing still in process. “I want the work to look like it’s slipping and sliding and has life,” Shechet told me, articulating her career-long fascination with the natural entropy of her materials and capturing the energy of her process. “I don’t make drawings. I don’t figure it out before. I grab these things and put one next to the other,” she said. “That’s why my studio is crammed with stuff.”



Shechet’s studio space has grown to accommodate the increasing scale of her work. Here, three of the sculptures from “Skirts,” her latest show at Pace Gallery. Credit: Eva Deitch

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Her Kingston studio, where she works primarily in wood and steel (she has another space in Woodstock designated for clay), is a library of materials. Against a nearby wall of the long, low-slung industrial building, Shechet had piled wood in various stages of fabrication: hollow, car-tire-size slices of trunk with the bark still on, towering rough-hewn beams and thin sheets of plywood. In another corner, clay bricks, cylinders and tubes that resembled segments of a garden hose were stacked on a table. “I always keep wood, clay and steel nearby,” she said. “I’m just playing all the time and moving things around.”

Shechet’s studios have grown and multiplied with the scale of her pieces. While raising her two children and teaching at Parsons School of Design in the ’90s, she lived in TriBeCa and worked in the basement of her building, an arrangement that served her need to fit studio time in whenever she could. In 2002, she bought a house in Woodstock, which eventually became her full-time home, and added a studio there with a large, walk-in kiln. When asked why, two years ago, she started renting the 3,000-square-foot space in Kingston, she simply gestured at the sculptures all around her, staged in preparation for transport to New York. Each one was human scale or larger. “The Crown Jewel” (2020), a totemic stack of irregular wood and ceramic blocks, glazed deep blue with gashes of candy red, teetered over us, tall as a bear on its hind legs. Last month, she lifted “Rocks Rocker” (2020), a rippling hunk of ceramic that straddles a smooth, curved beam of wood like an ungainly jockey, onto its steel base using a small crane.



“Usually, my studio is just total chaos,” said the artist, who keeps a library of objects and materials on hand to allow for experimentation. Credit...Eva Deitch



“Humans like good surprises,” Shechet said of her sculpture “Grammar” (2020), which contains a hidden color wheel painted on the bottom of the piece. “It beckons and says ‘Look again — see what else you see.’” Credit...Eva Deitch

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Shechet has shown steadily over her 30-year career at blue-chip galleries like Jack Shainman, Sikkema Jenkins & Co. and now Pace, as well as prestigious museums like the Phillips and the Frick. In 2016, the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, exhibited a 20-year survey of her work. Yet as recently as 2013, the art critic Jerry Saltz referenced her “still-under-known” status. This may, in part, be attributed to the artist’s resistance to working in any one medium or mode. Known in the ’90s for slumped, Buddha-like figures made from plaster and paint skins, Shechet has since worked with equal focus in porcelain, papermaking, clay and metal. “Everybody wants to be able to tell a quick story, but I do not want to make something that fits into a few sentences. I don’t want it to have a punchline,” she said. “That makes the work harder to sell in the commercial world.” A restless need to investigate new media and methods carries over into her day-to-day practice; she works constantly and voraciously. “I have a lot of pent-up work energy,” she said, referring to the years when she was both a mother and a professor. “It’s a joy to be able to exercise it.”

Dressed on this day a bit like one of her sculptures — her electric orange puffer offsetting a dark blue striped duster coat and an earthy brown sweater — and seated in front of the studio’s industrial-scale heater on a metal chair covered with a makeshift cushion cut from slabs of thick purple foam, Shechet answered T’s Artist’s Questionnaire.



Shechet works with three part-time studio assistants, but doesn’t often host studio visits, preferring to stay in dialogue with her work. “Making these things is having a conversation, so it’s not like me alone making them.” she said. “At a certain point, I’m just listening.” Credit...Eva Deitch

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What is your day like? How much do you sleep, and what is your work schedule?

I like to get eight hours of sleep. I'm too cranky if I get less than seven. And I am incredibly disciplined with my work schedule. I start in the morning, and I end at night. I'm very good at just committing to the day.

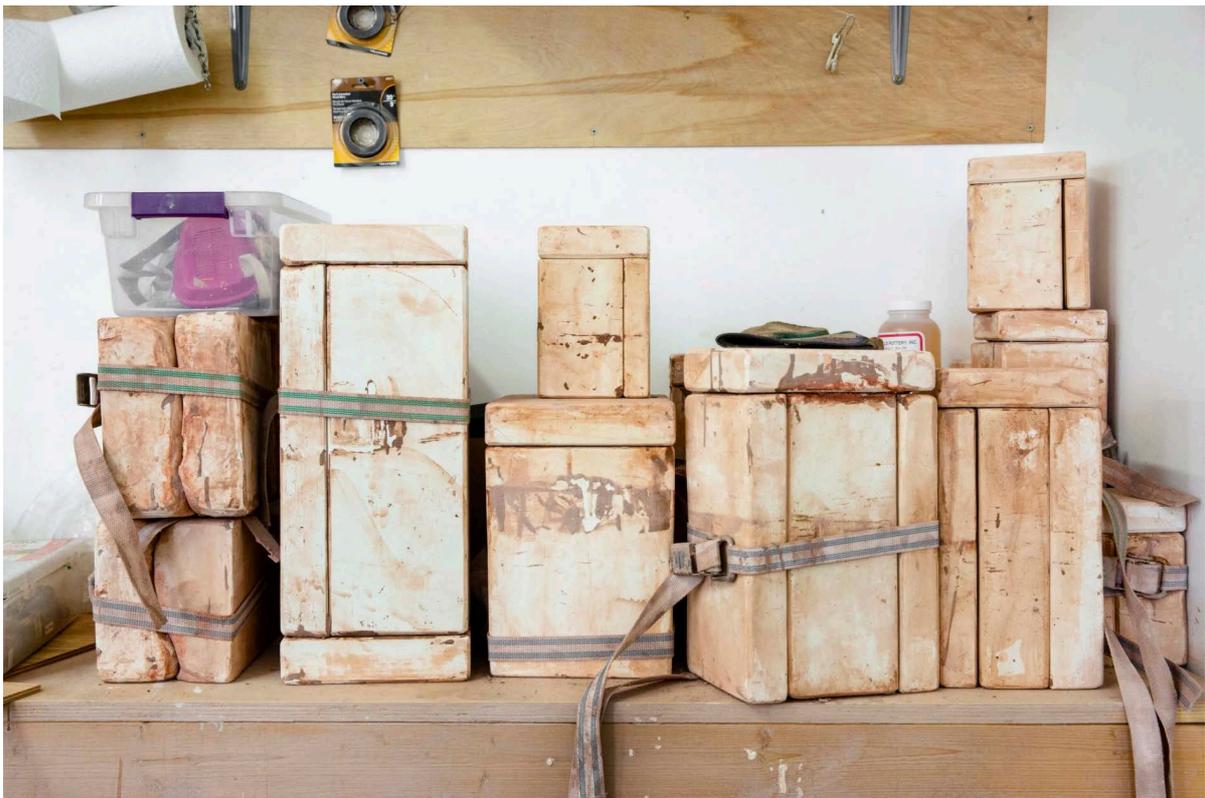
My schedule — it's anything I have to do to make the work. And I don't work for a show; I'm making stuff all of the time. I don't like being too goal oriented, and I don't believe in having a "body of work," either. I just believe in art, in showing a generous offering from the studio.

How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?

It's all the time. It doesn't start and stop. It's a river or a lake, and I swim in it.

What's the worst studio you ever had?

I once had a studio in an industrial space that required me to climb up nine flights of stairs. When I got out of graduate school at the Rhode Island School of Design, I didn't have a studio space for a couple of years, and I started making photographs and printing them on the diazo machine. So I think the room where they kept the diazo machine became like my studio. I feel like if you're driven, you can figure it out — and I'm definitely driven.



Molds for slip casting, arranged on a studio table. Credit: Eva Deitch

What's the first work you ever sold? For how much?

I was in a very funky neighborhood group show, and Kiki Smith came in and bought two pieces. Those were the first works I ever sold that made a big difference. I don't remember how much she paid — a couple thousand dollars maybe. This was going on 30 years ago. Later, she called me up and we've been friends ever since. Having another artist buy something is a kind of notable support. A few times a year, I try to do the same for other young artists. Or, forget young — just other artists. Of course, all artists trade. But there's something different about buying something by somebody whom you don't know and showing that kind of support.

When you start a new piece, where do you begin? What's the first step?

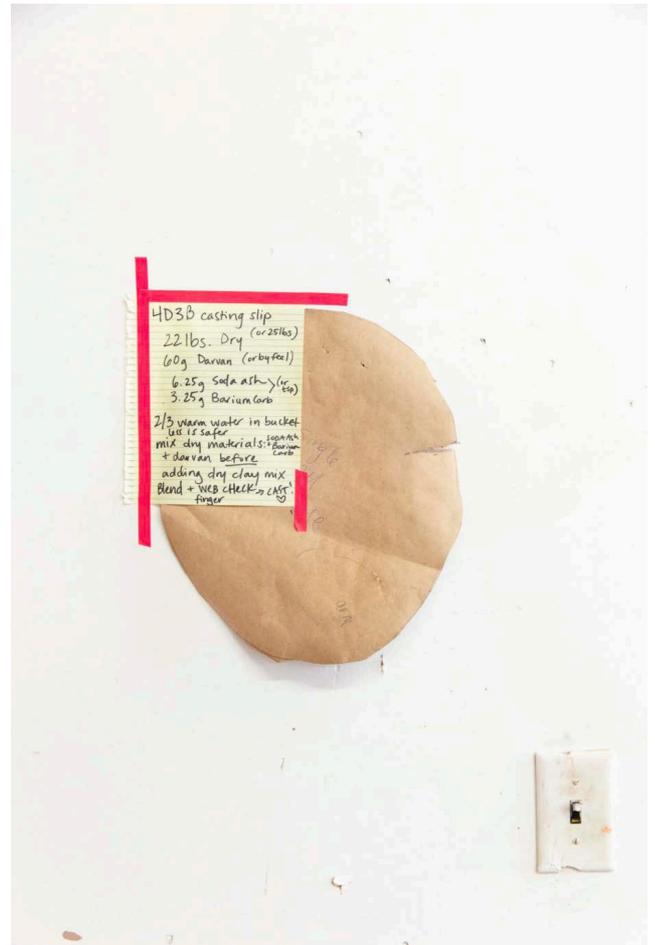
There's no formula. Absolutely no formula. A lot of times, I'm starting a piece and I don't know I'm starting a piece. I'm just playing all the time. I don't make a sketch. A drawing just doesn't live up to a three-dimensional experience. I would lose the energy of making the thing if I did all that. I like to keep the energy in the art. Any time I've ever had a preexisting idea and tried to make it, it's been a complete failure.

For one of my clay pieces, I will just start making an indeterminate shape. Then I'll make another shape on top of it. I start paying attention, and the piece starts talking to me. And if it doesn't start speaking to me, then I cut it up and make some bold move so that it starts talking. I try to wake the thing up.

There's a lot of faith and trust involved. It's like a religious experience. Faith and trust are essential to the making of work. You believe somehow that things will be productive, but you don't necessarily see or experience productivity on a daily basis. The faith comes from experience. Nobody can teach you faith. You just know — and you also know that there's a certain amount of failure. I definitely throw out at least a third of what I do. Most of the time, I don't regret that I made it because I know I had to make that one yucky thing in order to make the other thing.



Though Shechet's work often creates the illusion of elements thrown loosely together or connected only tenuously, she spends long hours figuring out how to make each piece solid and transportable. Credit: Eva Deitch



A formula for slip casting on Shechet's studio wall. Credit: Eva Deitch

How do you know when you're done?

The piece tells me. It's a conversation. The thing and I decide together.

How many assistants do you have?

I have three part-time assistants.

Have you assisted other artists before? If so, whom?

No. My last semester of graduate school, they offered me a teaching job, so I went directly from school to teaching. In many ways, I probably would have benefited from being an assistant. I was just on a different trajectory. I was on the academic trajectory.

What music do you play when you're making art?

My son is a musician, so he fills my sound system with amazing music, including his own. Sometimes, when he's working on a show and I'm in the studio, he comes in and he'll play live and I'll give him feedback, and he'll give me feedback.

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Shechet is closely involved at every stage of her work, from the sourcing of raw materials to the display of the finished product. "Another level of making will be installing," she said of her show at Pace Gallery. "Architecture is very much a part of these works." Credit: Eva Deitch



Taped to a plywood board in Shechet's studio are color swatches for her sculpture "Via the Moon" (2020). Credit...Eva Deitch

When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?

I think that's a tax-return question. I was always an artist.

Is there a meal you eat on repeat when you're working?

Leftovers.

Are you bingeing on any shows right now?

I don't binge. Maybe it's part of my discipline. But I really like the Elena Ferrante show.

What's the weirdest object in your studio?

When I had more time, I used to go to flea markets. I went to school in Providence, which has a crazy amount of antique stores. I have a handblown glass breast pump from the turn of the century.

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How often do you talk to other artists?

My assistants are artists. My son is an artist. But I don't have time for studio visits. As much as I'm working all the time, there's still not enough time. Once I have this show up, though, I'll be talking to artists a lot. People will be talking to me, and I'll want them to come see the show, and I want to have that conversation.

What do you do when you're procrastinating?

I garden.

What's the last thing that made you cry?

Our national politics and the hubris of climate change denial.

What do you usually wear when you work?

Many layers, because it's freezing in my studio. There are some pieces in here that used to be my kids'. A few years ago, I realized I was wearing all the clothes my kids grew out of that were still decent and that I was cloaking myself in my family skin. There's something sweet about it.

Do you exercise?

I stand 10 to 12 hours a day to make work. I'm also lifting things and hauling things around. There's a certain amount of exercise in that. I used to do a lot of yoga. When I'm upstate, I take walks, and when I'm in the city, I go up and down the subway stairs.

What are you reading?

I just began the Karl Ove Knausgaard book on Edvard Munch, and I am finishing "The Big Oyster," a history of New York couched in a history of oysters.

What is your favorite artwork by someone else?

I had the privilege of spending a lot of time at the Frick while I was preparing for a show there, before hours and after opening hours. That is a very special art-viewing experience. There is a small 16th-century bronze sculpture of a woman with cast silver nipples and little silver eyes. She's turning around and shouting, like she's running from something. It's so startling because the Frick is loaded with Fragonard — you know, romping women, pretty pictures — and this is decidedly not a pretty picture. I love things that are dark and dangerous and delightful.