

Meissen Recast

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PROVIDENCE, RI — In the first U.S. exhibition of her one-of-a-kind Meissen sculptures, Arlene Shechet presents works she produced during a recent artist residency at the world-renowned German porcelain manufacturer. It is the utilitarian factory casts behind fine porcelain production, rather than the ornate ceramic confections, that inform Shechet's "Meissen" series. Her range of sculpture brings to the fore the seams, plate impressions, indentations, inventory numbers, and other evidence of the industrial process that an 18th-century Meissen craftsman would have sought to erase. Almost every sculpture on view in the Museum's Upper Farago Gallery is derived from one or more of 47 historic Meissen mold patterns, reconceived in unanticipated combinations of forms and scale. Shechet's complete reinstallation of the Museum's historic Meissen collection of figurines and tableware in the Porcelain Gallery completes the two-part show—connecting the past and present, fine arts and decorative arts.

"The Museum is excited to present this compelling new work by RISD alumna Arlene Shechet," says John W. Smith, director of the RISD Museum. "Meissen Recast extends the Museum's long and groundbreaking tradition of encouraging artists to use the collection—dating from Andy Warhol's *Raid the Icebox* (1970) to Spencer Finch's *Painting Air* exhibition (2012). By moving some of RISD's Meissen figures—including the famous *Monkey Band*—from their normal location in the Porcelain Gallery to the contemporary Upper Farago Gallery and, conversely, inserting her own porcelain sculptures into the cases of the more traditional, wood-paneled room, she heightens our awareness and appreciation for the refined historical pieces and her own more organic, intuitive approach."

Adjunct RISD Museum curator and exhibition organizer Judith Tannenbaum adds, "Arlene Shechet has become well known for ceramic sculpture that reveals the nature of her materials and working process. By casting fine porcelain in the Meissen factory's forms designed for plaster, she makes fine porcelain objects out of industrial molds. The surprise is that by looking behind the scenes of this luxury production, which once represented a high-water mark in culture, she has created a body of work that is virtuosic in entirely contemporary terms."

During her 2012-2013 residency at the Meissen Manufactory, Shechet gained access to all areas of the renowned production facility—working alongside Meissen artisans, learning their techniques, using their tools, and observing the company's internal traditions. "If there is a common thread in these works, it is my desire to leave a remnant of the memory of the factory. So if a screw is there, I might have cast it along with a fingerprint—I find these inadvertent traces to be beautiful and also thrilling, because they show the original thought that went into the porcelain making and, perhaps, even something of the worker," the artist explains.

Shechet's ability to meld complicated elements into rigorous and beautiful works is seen in *Monuments* (2012), an arrangement of 10 vessel/pedestal combine objects. The perfection of the fine white porcelain sheen and the traditional shapes of cup, beaker, vase, and bowl lend the work the silent dignity of a Morandi still-life, disturbed only by subtle implausibilities in scale, the enigmatic, brightly glazed extrusions of slices of a drapery mold, and the upset of a drinking cup.

In another work, the artist has cast fine white porcelain into a scalloped bowl mold, the exterior of which is decorated with a realistic—yet jarringly magnified—floral pattern of Delftware blue. The interior is generously lined with 24-karat gold, a material Meissen uses sparingly; contrarily, Shechet repeatedly applies gold and platinum throughout her Meissen series to emphasize such “imperfections” as grip indentions, drips of slip or plaster, and inventory numbers.

“By highlighting the most functional elements of the chunky plaster molds with choice glazes or manipulated rococo patterns, I’ve aimed to invert the traditional hierarchy of artist, artisan, and lowly factory worker,” says Shechet. “I’ve taken industrial parts and transformed them into luxury objects.”

This process seems to offer the artist endless opportunities for invention. A large-scale swan-patterned baroque vase is encrusted with layers of torn and stretched floral tracery; a figurine of a playing bear is left matte and unfinished, except where glazed in incongruous colors and shapes; a pair of blue and white floral-patterned containers are cast so that evidence remains of the leather straps that held the two-part molds together for firing; and large-scale bricks of extruded porcelain are left undecorated, except where blemishes are gilt or painted, to be set into the corners of the gallery like Minimalist sculptures.

The exhibition design of Arlene Shechet: Meissen Recast also reflects the artist’s desire to upset cultural hierarchy. A number of tall vase-shaped objects are installed on the floor, with other works placed atop a deconstructed wooden table. Some of the Plexiglas vitrines are underneath, rather than on top of, pedestal bases. “Expect to see drawers coming out of the wall, like magic, and some of the Museum’s finest Meissen pieces displayed from all sides like abstract sculpture,” Shechet says.