

Living in the Present

Arlene Shechet at
Meissen Porcelain
and Sikkema Jenkins

Article by Jan Garden Castro

Parallel Play. 2012. Stencilled and painted pulp on cast cotton base sheets. 40 x 30 in. (101.6 x 76.2 cm.)

ARLENE SHECHET'S CERAMIC ART HAS EXPLODED THE boundaries of ceramic media – sometimes literally turning the use of materials inside out. Her art fuses time, malleable material elements, hues and outer and inner properties, including humour, mischief and the full range of human emotions. Work produced during her six-month residency at Meissen Porcelain Manufactory will be shown at the Rhode Island School of Design on December 2013 through June 2014. In the meantime, Shechet had four solo shows in 2012: *Parallel Play*, combining handmade paper and ceramics at Dieu Donné, New York; *Breaking the Mold*, at Nature Morte, Berlin; *.SUM* at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Overland Park, Kansas; and *That Time* at the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), Richmond. "In addition to being about time, it is about things, breathing and the hollowness of the clay," the artist related.

2013 has begun with work in group shows at the Sikkema Jenkins and Dodge galleries in New York, at Rhona Hoffman in Chicago and at the Kunstsaele, Berlin. In addition to all of this, Shechet has three upcoming solo shows in 2013: *That Time*

travelling from VCU to the Weatherspoon Art Museum, Greensboro, North Carolina in June, followed by shows beginning in October at Sikkema, New York and in December at the Rhode Island School of Design. This review will focus on the present work at Sikkema Jenkins & Co and the Meissen residency leading to the RISD exhibition.

I caught up with the artist in February before she jetted off to be on a panel at the Nasher Sculpture Centre and then headed back to Meissen to finish work for her RISD show. Shechet worked with clay, plaster and other materials before focusing in more depth on ceramics about seven years ago using 'ordinary' regular medium-fire brown clay, which she still uses. Now, she is again introducing other materials, as in her paper + ceramic work for Dieu Donné. She also uses wood, bronze, plaster, concrete and other materials for the lower part of her sculpture; she does not call this a base or pedestal but considers it to be another part of the sculpture. For example, in her show at Sikkema Jenkins & Co, *Blue Out*, an all-blue ceramic piece has a concrete bottom and *From Seeing Summer*, a pink to green work, has a wood bottom.

These two works show two facets of her style: surprising forms and glazes. Each form is slowly built over time using her hands and simple tools. All parts are hollow, including the curling top of *Summer*. *Blue*



Above left: **Blue Out.** 2012. Glazed ceramic and concrete. 43 x 17 x 18 in. (109.2 x 43.2 x 45.7 cm.)

Above centre: **See Sigh.** 2007. Glazed ceramic, cast concrete, solid hardwood and steel Hydrocal plaster.

44.5 x 15 x 15 in. (113 x 38.1 x 38.1 cm.)

Above right: **From Seeing Summer.** 2012. Glazed ceramic, solid hardwood. 57 x 17 x 16 in. (144.8 x 43.2 x 40.6 cm.)

Below: **Mountain Buddha.** 1994. Hydrocal and acrylic paint skins.

12 x 20 x 12 in. (30.5 x 50.8 x 30.5 cm.)

Out, in a range of blue hues, variously reminds me of the *Venus of Willendorf* or some bulbous growth with holes in its upper and lower body. It seems to intermix comic to sad and timeless to specific themes in the same work. *From Seeing Summer* is a large, headlike or globelike form with a mix of green, pink,



white and yellow hues and a tubular top layer (that suggests an Easter bonnet, intestines, a nest. . . many possibilities). Even though the viewer may 'see' metaphors or allusions suggested by the title, the abstract forms themselves are curious and unique. The artist related that this had more than a dozen glazes in five firings. The glazes evolve through a process of rigorous testing and experimentation with every kind of glaze, oxide, or metal, first using a small test kiln and then using a much larger kiln, both electric. Shechet does not fire to cone but to within three degrees; she calculates the temperature and length of time for each firing through experimentation. Two works upstairs have ceramic heads and bottoms made from lightweight fire bricks more often found on the insides of kilns. I asked Shechet why she is attracted to clay and how she chooses other materials; the artist responded:

"I wanted to make work using my body that would have immediacy and be a direct link from me to the material, body to body. Working in the studio, the sculpture becomes another body. It is an intimate and immediate experience because it does not require an armature to stand up, so one can go with the flow, which is my way of working. Plus the colour and form become one during the firing. In the (gallery) show at Sikkema, one base is wood and one is concrete, so there is not a single solution. I have also used plaster and bronze as bases. The bricks I use are the lightweight firebricks that one uses to build a kiln. The conceptual conceit is that I am turning the





Left: *So and So and So and So and On and On*. 2010. Glazed and fired ceramic and glazed kiln bricks. 51.5 x 45 x 35 in. (130.8 x 114.3 x 88.9 cm.)

Above: *Reclining Incline*. 2009–2010. Glazed and fired ceramic with painted hardwood. 37.5 x 15.75 x 21 in. (95.3 x 40 x 53.3 cm.)

Below: *Mould of the Mould with Gold Hand-Holds*.

whole thing inside out – using the parts of the kiln, exposing them and making them part of the finished piece. I am glazing and firing them.”

When I asked her to tell me about her residency at Meissen Porcelain, Shechet related: “I have done a number of projects there, and I am going back on Monday. It has been demanding and interesting. I have never worked with porcelain before and they haven’t had the experience of working with many people to make new things, so it was quite rigorous – like being in a fabulous bake shop. I found great inspiration with the way they make things and I love being in the factory – the industrial architecture and forms. I am using forms that I cast from their moulds – an assemblage sculpture and I received access to the mould department to make my own moulds. I did freehand working with the wet slip – it is like wet plaster or liquid yogurt – sensuous material. I did slip drawing which I applied to various forms. Though they have tremendous technical know-how, we also broke through and created new ways of making things. I was both reverential and subversive in what I was doing – turning the entire thing inside out and still respecting the Meissen tradition. Some of that work has been shown in Berlin and more will be in a solo show at RISD opening 5 December.”

Mountain Buddha, 1994, is one of a series in plaster that led to the artist’s present experiments with clay. It directly suggests Buddhist notions of impermanence. Today, Buddhist philosophical ideas inform Shechet’s studio practice. The artist told *Ceramics*:

“The basic practice in the studio is the link between the earlier work and how I make the work today – choosing material that has change and immediacy built into it. Clay is a time-based material. There is the right time to do every action. If you pay attention to how the thing is transforming through its exposure to the air, you can make the form by being at one with the experience of making it.

“When I was making the Buddhas, they showed their Buddhist iconography and origins, but I was making those pieces using plaster without an armature, so it was about paying attention. In that way, I like working with material that is always changing. I can’t will it to do things.”

ENDNOTES

All quotes from conversation with Arlene Shechet on 5 February 2013.

Jan Garden Castro (www.jancastro.com) is author of *The Art & Life of Georgia O’Keeffe*, *Sonia Delaunay: La Moderne* and other books. She is Contributing Editor for *Sculpture Magazine* and has a monthly online blog “In the Studio” at Sculpture.org.

Shechet is the recipient of many awards and grants, including the 2011 American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Art and Purchase Prize; her work is in many public collections, including the Brooklyn Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the US Embassies in China and Nepal, The Whitney Museum of American Art and the Walker Art Center.



