

Wonderfully Weird

By MALIN WILSON-POWELL
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At first, it was the fungal qualities of Arlene Shechet's 3-D creatures — as reproduced on the announcement for her solo exhibition — that immediately captured my interest. To my delight, all of my expectations were not only satisfied but also surpassed by the impact of the artist's strange, funny and specific ceramic organisms in the installation itself. Her glazed clay vessels not only suggest the weird and wonderful kingdom of mushrooms, lichens and molds, they also bring to mind the fluctuating marine inhabitants of tide pools.

For her first showing in Santa Fe, the artist has titled this exhibition "The Thick of It." This moniker aptly connotes the abundance of both internal and external associations as well as innumerable art-related and biological references. Ten alien-looking life forms rest atop individual podiums of various materials and heights. The green, grody and perky "Rascal" firmly squats on a crosscut round of solid wood atop a steel stool-like structure with long, spindly legs. The precariously leaning "Once Water" appears to be rumbling within its skin and in need of its thickset solid wood base as a counterbalance to tumbling over.

With the exception of two potato-head shapes and a small wallpiece of extruded lazy loops, all of these symbionts of fungi, animals, and plants have battered central bodies with misshapen orifices and fleshy truncated spouts that look as if they had to regenerate multiple times. Everything about Shechet's protean forms conveys prolonged and precarious development. All of them seem to have grown their final shape by coping with constant hazards. There is an inherent resilience and vitality communicated through the hands-on discernment of the artist with a material that is wet, goopy, and squishy.

The marvel here is how each one of these gnarly and lumpy structures — built incrementally upon itself — has emerged with a thoroughly apposite and distinctive voice. In Christopher Alexander's ground-breaking book "A Pattern Language" (1977), he notes that to promote interesting conversations it is necessary to provide a variety of chairs with different "exposures." In a similar manner, Shechet's breathy, pneumatic objects in their individual supports (chairs) appear to have the capacity to vocalize across the gallery spaces by mewling, purring, glugging, itching, scratchy coughing, or growling. There is a provisional, time-dependent quality to their potential for action and they look ready to rearrange themselves, to pick up and move, or, perhaps, lean closer to share an intimate moment.

The two tallest configurations on view — “Borrowed from Ghosts” and “Slick Drip” — are mysterious and exemplary works that embrace the contradictions the artist cultivates. Referring to the bleached, dry surface on the ungainly-yet-majestic “Borrowed from Ghosts,” she recently remarked, “... I’ve been experimenting with layering a bunch of white glazes that misfire just enough to make a blanket of pimples that can also be read as puckered lace.” Regarding the thick ooze, like iridescent crude oil, that enrobes the rising figure in “Slick Drip” she has said, “sometimes I like to contradict the drooling, weird forms with lustrous satin skins.”

Shechet eschews methodical and technical facility for a meditative trial and error practice. This type of immersion arose from reaching out to her Buddhist teacher in a period of being distracted by life’s vicissitudes. She came to understand that, even though she couldn’t see any time in her busy life for meditation, she eventually understood “... how I could have this meditative time and awareness in the studio that I couldn’t find anywhere else.”

Visitors with an art background will recognize the fearless vitality in Shechet’s high wire act of making objects that come within a hair’s breadth of being utter messes. Her work is also an insouciant reinvention of modernist sculpture as well as a new branch in the lineage of hand-built clay vessels stretching back to prehistoric times. Looking at Shechet’s *joi de vivre*, some of the brilliant, game-changing forerunners that come to mind include George Ohr, Beatrice Wood, Ken Price, Adrian Saxe, and Andrew Lord.

Not just ebullient, the artist makes indisputably funny work, a very hard thing to do. Her two bulbous heads on short, stubby platforms of stacked kiln bricks are an obvious homage to Philip Guston’s late-career cartoony characters. Shechet’s candy-colored heads are glazed with what looks like a dusting of salt, as if they dried in the sun after being removed from the ocean. There is no doubt she appreciates how Guston’s clumsy, crude figures have not only weathered the initial mockery of important critics, they have triumphed and ultimately had the last laugh.

Additional inspirations acknowledged by the artist are Chinese scholars’ rocks, blue-and-white porcelain tableware, along with such diverse artists as Lee Bontecou, Judy Pfaff, Kiki Smith, Myron Stout, Richard Tuttle, Francesco Clemente and Luigi Ontani, the last two for their orientation to Eastern aesthetics.

Although Shechet has exhibited in both the U.S. and Europe, for almost 25 years she has relied on being out of fashion with the caveat that “being marginalized represents an opportunity. If you are doing exactly what’s in, you are on your way out.” Despite increasing accolades and more time in the limelight, Shechet is an artist with a surfeit of talent, who will hopefully continue to dazzle us for decades to come.