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## Review: Arlene Shechet Goes Public

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Dec 21, 2018 · by [Deborah Solomon](#)

I realize that mid-December in New York is a shivery time and not ideal for contemplating sailing or outdoor sculpture. But Arlene Shechet has made those subjects newly topical in her brilliant maritime-themed installation, [“Full Steam Ahead,”](#) an ensemble of six predominantly abstract sculptures arranged around and inside of a circular reflecting pool in Madison Square Park, at East 25<sup>th</sup> Street.

Shechet, a New York native, is one of our leading contemporary sculptors, and she is known for working in ceramics. “Full Steam Ahead,” her first-ever public installation, was commissioned by the Madison Square Park Conservancy. The title of the piece comes from Admiral David Farragut, a bronze statue of whom anchors the northern end of the park. “Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead,” he supposedly said, while leading a fleet of ships during the Civil War.

This is not to suggest that Shechet has created a work about military derring-do. To the contrary, no one is doing any sailing here. Actually, Shechet drained the water from the reflecting pool in the park and decided to leave it empty, while adding a few sculptural trimmings. She has said that the pool reminds her of her grandmother's recessed living room in an art deco building in the Bronx.

The domestic reference is relevant, because taken together, the sculptures can be read as a family gathered in a room, complete with a set of chairs and deco-ish touches. Varying widely in terms of materials and colors, they put you in mind of a set of siblings who end up having different lives and fates. The installation radiates a degree of intimate emotion that is rare in the realm of public sculpture, which is more likely to consist of hulking monoliths whose scale is designed to dwarf us.

Instead, Shechet brings us, among other things, a sculpture called "Forward," a chunky female nude hand-carved from cherry wood. Spread out on the granite steps in front of Admiral Farragut, the figure is both brazen and inviting, and you imagine her as the outgoing sister in the clan. Possessed of a mermaid's tail, and appearing as sturdy as a boat, she could be Admiral Farragut's girlfriend.

"Channel Liberty (with Fallen Arm)," by contrast, is a thin, spindly, metallic figure that evokes a woman who is always falling apart. Actually, one of her arms has come off and is lying helplessly on the ground. I love her long skirt, a cone-shaped assembly of steel slats complete with tasteful patches of Richard Serra-like rust. She expands the tradition of modern sculpture to include, of all things, a note of 19<sup>th</sup> century neurasthenia.

In another sculpture, this one smolderingly handsome, the tail end of a bird's oversize feather stands upright, its white porcelain surface gleaming against the rough-hewn wooden cube on which it rests. The feather shape can put you in mind of two stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments. The sculpture radiates a near Biblical sense of authority.

What is the relationship between these very different sculptures, which finally give off suggestions of separateness and loss? As an added bonus, you can contemplate the question while sitting on any of a dozen stools that are part of the installation. They're amusing objects, Victorian-style "skirted seats" made from resin. They come in deliberately clashing colors that follow the logic of Shechet's shapes in that they feel slightly off-color and off-kilter. So sit on the stools for as long as you like, thinking about Shechet's sculptures or the complicated year that is almost over, and go sailing not on rough seas but in the channels of your imagination.

*"Full Speed Ahead" will remain on view through April 28. Today, on December 21, from 5 to 6, there will be a winter solstice celebration at the sculpture site, complete with music, a flurry of lights, and hot chocolate. Admission is free.*