

## Arlene Shechet "In the Meantime" at Corbett vs. Dempsey

by Bruce Thorn



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"In the Meantime" is Arlene Shechet's first solo exhibition in Chicago. Corbett vs. Dempsey presents ten sculptures made primarily with glazed ceramics, wood, concrete and steel. Shechet works with a fondness for process and material qualities; things do not disguise themselves, there are no pretensions: clay forms behave as clay forms, glazes look like glazes, wood looks like wood and steel doesn't pretend to be anything but steel. But on a different level, the artist works at making sure that the forms offered are indefinable, unknowable open questions and mysteries. Shechet's formal and poetic inspirations come from interests in architecture, nature and Buddhism. There's something that feels very human about her work and that is the sense of imperfection, precariousness and of things being off kilter, or perhaps ready to collapse from their own weight or fall over and break, possibly even hurt somebody.



*Above and Beyond*, 2015, Glazed ceramic, painted steel, concrete and hardwood 36.5 x13.5 x 13.5,"  
Photo courtesy Corbett vs. Dempsey

Shechet is in her mid-sixties and from New York. She divides her time between NYC and a second studio upstate. Her resume includes events going back to the mid-eighties, but the art world's gatekeepers have been slow to open up. "I was always making work in the studio while teaching and having babies, but I didn't have time for studio visits and self-promotion during those years," says Shechet. A breakthrough show at Elizabeth Harris Gallery in 2007 started a flow of well-deserved exhibition opportunities.

One of the most notable games going on in this show involves balance and vertigo. There's something humorous and sly about filling an art gallery with beautiful objects that look as if they might topple over if you bump into them. The notion of contrast is also important to Shechet: contrasts of materials, forms, colors and textures; organic forms meet up with architecture; cubes meet spherical forms; hardwood comingles with steel. Shechet mentions interests in the notion of parallel universes and contrasts like funny vs. serious, ugly vs. beautiful, life vs. death, or east vs. west.

There's subtlety and grace but no heroism or hubris when Shechet offers anthropomorphism. *Night Vision* suggests an abstract head and shoulders, nodding off or tilted to the side. While we often try to hide our blemishes, weaknesses and mistakes (social media is full of false representations of youth, glamour, strength and good looks) there is a feeling of naked honesty as Shechet offers metaphors for the human condition that suggest that one might as well appreciate some imperfections.

Shechet works concurrently on 3–4 pieces and gives each enough time and space to allow the work to suggest unplanned outcomes. One thing leads to another in a process that begins with a loose game plan or parameters that the artist makes up and changes. Shechet does not avoid the age-old sculptural dilemma imposed by the need for a pedestal; she confronts this issue and solves it by incorporating architectural supports into the more organic forms of the ceramic parts. Instead of just plunking the sculptures down onto a pedestal, she intends to join the two physically and formally as an inseparable part of each work. The plinth incorporated into *Reverb* is a walnut log painted blue, out of which grows some kind of fabulous ceramic moss or sea world hybrid spouting protrusions and orifices.

There is certainly a lot of ambiguity in art these days, as if our cultures no longer care to focus or even attempt



*Reverb*, 2017, Glazed ceramic and painted hardwood 80.5 x 22 x 19." Photo courtesy Corbett vs. Dempsey

to make sense out of anything at all. Shechet is different; she keeps chaos at bay while knowing that her subject is the poetry of unknowable and unspeakable places and languages. The titles of the pieces are also non-specific and open to interpretation. Maybe conceptually Shechet is part cubist; every change of perspective changes things, and the works do beg to be viewed from all angles. If there are mysteries in this work, they never get solved. What sets Shechet apart from the herds of ambiguous abstractionists is that she creates believable and cohesive forms and, over the time that it takes to create them, invests these with a glimpse into unknowingness. It seems extremely kind these days for any artist to forgo one-liner irony, banality and ego.

Shechet is very painterly and thoughtful in her applications of glaze upon layers of glaze, opulently thrilling fluxes that at times almost resemble millefiore, if millefiore were textured; she's a confident colorist. What's interesting is that these artworks don't read like polychromed sculptures; they seem more natural, as if the forms have exotic skin color growing from within, like it's something in their DNA.

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*Equal Time*, 2017, Glazed ceramic, painted hardwood, steel, 53 x 35 x 23", Photo courtesy Corbett vs. Dempsey