



Arlene Shechet

The story behind an artwork, in the artist's own words

WHO WOULD HAVE thought that having babies would make me obsess about death? But it did. With this new awareness, how could I work in the same old way?

I emptied my studio to start anew, but some heavy bags of plaster remained. Adding water to the plaster, I realized it was the perfect material to speak to my new state of mind. From powder to liquid to rock-hard mass, the plaster, which heats up as it dissolves in the water, was a great annotator of the passing of time. The plaster changed every second. I resolved to work without a typically required armature so that I could fumble around without knowing what would happen from moment to moment. I was very content working and playing within this formless vocabulary.

But one day the lump I was working on appeared to me as a Buddha, and I realized that it was an ideal model for the state of mind I was cultivating. Both the seriousness and the silliness of it were compelling and also comforting. I decided to use whatever time I had in a given day to make a finished piece. Working toward discovering a Buddha within a mess of liquid and lumpy plaster grounded me.

I began to add skins of paint. They were used as structure within the works but also surfaced as part of the exterior image. My first impulse during this messy business was to clean my hands to keep the paint surfaces clean, but then I realized that the evidence of my hand on the paint was like drawing on the sculpture.

These pieces, which include the one shown here, were my first forays into figuration, and I came to understand that icons function as reminders. Though I didn't show anyone what I was doing for more than a year, these time-based works began to populate my studio and offered me consolation, companionship, and new ideas about how and why I could be an artist. **MP**

A survey of Arlene Shechet's work opens June 10 at ICA Boston, and will be on view through September 7.

Inseparable Head, 1994.
Hydrocal, paint, steel,
concrete, 23 x 9 x 10 in.