

Art

September 8th, 2015

INCONVERSATION

ARLENE SHECHET with Phong Bui

One morning this August, *Rail* publisher Phong Bui paid a visit to Arlene Shechet's large survey of two decades of work, *All at Once*, curated by Jenelle Porter at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston (June 10 – September 7, 2015). The two met in her TriBeCa studio the following week to discuss Shechet's life, work, and more.

Phong Bui (Rail): On my long train ride to Boston to see your survey of two decades of work at the ICA, I was able to read all the texts in the catalogue that you sent me last July. I was struck by Jenelle's perceptive leading essay, "Monuments," especially the beginning where she discusses your work *My Balzac* (2010), which measures six feet high, and is made out of a pile of coiled clay which leans slightly off its vertical axis above a two-tiered pedestal composed of a round wood block atop a simple welded steel structure—a clear comparison to Rodin's *Monument to Balzac*, towering over nine feet high, cast in bronze, excluding the additional base. That work shares a similar lean to the right, slightly off its vertical axis. And in noticing the "hybrid comic clumsiness" in your work, I thought of its opposite, something that Leo Steinberg wrote on Rodin: "a modern consciousness cannot endure the heroics of a contemporary without automatic suspicion. Our commitment to irony is far too serious to enable us to suffer and judge an art of Rodin's demonstrative humorless pathos." That's not to demote humor beneath the other significant attributes of



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.
Photo: Taylor Dafoe.

the human condition. In your case, it seems fairly visible in your sense of touch. This is a quality which you identify as an element of Philip Guston's late work, whom you regard as a "fairy godfather." When did you discover that sense of humor, and how did you come to recognize and embrace it?

Arlene Shechet: The expression of humor wasn't so much in my DNA early on, but I always appreciated it. I never thought I was funny in any way. I think that in order to be funny, you can't be too shy because you have to be taking risks. Something you think is funny is going to fail to be funny for somebody else. And failure invariably generates humor. On many levels, as you know, the studio is sort of a laboratory, for every artist. It's where you take risks. If you're not taking risks, you're not making any art. And taking risks invites failure. Accept failure as part of the whole process and you'll either cry or laugh with failure.

Rail: Sometimes both.

Shechet: A lot of times both. I feel that my experience in the studio has really taught me an entire vocabulary of physical comedy, and that physical comedy is related to intellectual humor. My son, Will, and I used to watch the Marx Brothers when he was growing up, and I used to watch Laurel and Hardy, Lucille Ball. I learned that in order to accept ugliness and stupidity you have to be secure in your intellectual capacity to see how dumb you are at times. And the idea of "dumbness" isn't really dumb after all, it's just openness: accepting and embracing a whole spectrum of what is and what can be, and that's life. In the studio, during the process, sometimes things are so hideous that you want to cry. But it's at the point of ugliness and at the point of things being horrible that you're willing to take more risks. And risk-taking produces humor, pathos, vulnerability. Those are the things that I'm interested in as an artist. Anyway, one of my reasons for using humor was that I wanted to mirror the human experience in some way without feeling beaten by it. I named that piece *My Balzac* in a rare moment of direct reference, because in that particular posture—the big cape, the feet leaning to one side—I felt that Rodin was capturing how the hero was protecting himself from his vulnerability, but it's a false protection and there is a tenderness that shines through.

Rail: Some think Balzac is masturbating under the cape. [*Laughter.*]

Shechet: Yeah, maybe there's a sexual conversation in that posture.

Rail: In *So and So and So and So and On and On* (2010), the two pink, fat, Buddha-like heads reminded me of this Philip Guston painting entitled, *Friend – To M. F.* (1978). The initials M. F. stand for Morton Feldman, who was once Guston's close friend and a great champion of his so-called "Abstract Impressionist" paintings, but once Guston turned to painting figuratively, especially after the infamous show at Marlborough in 1970, Feldman broke up the friendship. Essentially, Guston portrayed Feldman smoking a cigar in profile as if he were turning away from their friendship. Was there, in the

whole decade of the '80s when you were trying to find your identity as an artist, a core of supporting friends and fellow artists besides your husband, Mark Epstein?

Shechet: Well, I was teaching then, first at RISD from 1978 until 1985, then at Parsons for a good ten years. I was trying to figure out how to be an academic then, to teach myself everything that I wanted to learn in art history. I spent all of my time in the school's slide library, preparing weekly lectures for my students. It was as though I was trying to complete my education in art history by sharing it. So by the time I got to New York, for instance, Kiki Smith, Tip [Carroll Dunham], and Laurie [Simmons] were some of the first artists I had dialogues with. But, the bottom line was, when we moved to New York in 1983 I was really preoccupied with making my life and having a family, while, at least for the first two years, still teaching and commuting to RISD. I was not in the scene. But Bess Cutler who had been in Boston, had seen some of my work, moved to New York and offered me a show in 1984. So I did get interested, at that point, in the art community in SoHo, but I didn't really even understand what a big deal it was to have a gallery show. At that point I was loving teaching. I thought then that the idea of not being dependent on selling work would allow me to do whatever the hell I wanted and I already could sniff out that people were worried too much about their personal success. I really felt that nurturing students was an important job. I loved the searching minds of the students and some I'm still in contact with. I would say that my community centered around the students and my family. There were very few women who were able to claw their way to the top and even fewer who were having families. The only person living in TriBeCa whom I felt real encouragement from was Elizabeth Murray who, as I've mentioned before, had a life and was a committed artist. I could say, "That's what I want to be." I first heard her speak at RISD. She spoke about the coffee cup on the table and comics and all the things we already knew about her work, but she offered one small line in her talk, saying something like, "I paint at home and my life is a little chaotic because I have children." Just that little line caught me as so irregular. Most male artists who came and gave talks on their work would say things like, "This oil painting measures 42 x 30-something inches," and so on, which was incredibly boring and self-aggrandizing, as if everyone needed to know every little detail of their masterpieces. Elizabeth gave her description in broader strokes. I could relate to Laurie [Simmons] as well because we both got pregnant around the same time, and we were just down the street from each other.

Rail: Otherwise, the scene was pretty much male-dominated, Neo- and Geo-Expressionist artists!

Shechet: Right. There were no women in that scene, and nobody called anybody out for it either. Well, the Guerrilla Girls were starting at that time but things felt a bit impenetrable.

Rail: And Louise Bourgeois just had her first retrospective at the MoMA in 1982.

Shechet: Louise Bourgeois was the other beacon. I had the opportunity to meet her a couple of times. She was a heroine but until later in life she had been in the shadow of her husband.

Rail: She was called Mrs. Goldwater until her husband Robert Goldwater (the famed art historian known for his indispensable contribution on the relationship between primitivism and modern art) died in 1973.

Shechet: Of course! She had a checkered history. I came to know one of her sons, Jean-Louis, and was aware of her whole struggle. She was a model because she bared her entire life story very proudly inside and outside of her work and was incredibly demanding of herself and those around her. And she was a sculptor—a woman sculptor. How many women sculptors were there?

Rail: They were few and far between.

Shechet: Exactly. I loved her work for the kind of aggressive tenderness it embraced. Nothing is about a single story. There are a lot of contradictions contained within a physical vocabulary of many different materials. The works are assertive and vulnerable at the same time. Maybe also Robert Gober is one of the few who manages to express these two co-existing conditions. But that whole line of thinking, feeling, and making things as one enterprise is hard to come by.

Rail: Bob has an unusual predisposition in that, even though he's a gay man, he can intimate with a hermaphroditic synthesis. Which naturally leads me to the next point: in Jenelle's essay, she also mentioned that you saw a show of Forrest Bess's paintings in which you discovered a link to tantric drawings, among other things!

Shechet: Yes. It was a show at Hirschl & Adler Modern in 1988. I fell in love with the stuff immediately. They existed in a weird space between painting and sculpture. And no one really talked about him wanting to be a hermaphrodite. It was mentioned in the catalogue but at that point his life story didn't overshadow his work. My story as a woman, a mother, etc., often comes up and I thought about writing more on motherhood, which I once did for *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* magazine (edited by Susan Bee and Mira Schor), but in the end I felt people should get together in public forums to have these discussions. Life is complicated. Bess was suffering to find himself. Those symbols, or “non-representational” images, represented precisely what he meant them to. His work was both beautiful and profound, and pointed me towards tenderness and aggression, which are two things in which I'm deeply interested.

Rail: Robert Thurman, who wrote an essay for the catalogue, appeared in an excellent documentary, *Forrest Bess: Key to the Riddle* (1999), where he said that Bess was a yogi in a former life and that his



Arlene Shechet, *No Noise*, 2013. Glazed ceramic, painted wood base, 17 × 16 × 13 inches (ceramic), 67.75 × 17 × 14 inches (overall). Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

desire to unify the male/female components within himself was one way to eventually turn his body into the material for a work of art.

Shechet: Leave it to Bob to have a unique take on things. That's why I wanted folks who aren't just the regularly accepted voices to speak up in my catalogue.

Rail: True. Your conversation with Janine Antoni was outrageously generous and open. You discussed everything from giving birth, everything about sex, breathing, holes, menopause, to what it's like to be a woman artist. I thought it could deepen anyone's appreciation of your work if he or she reads it, especially within the context of this survey and the catalogue. I also wonder whether you've read Mark's writings and found that you share some similar aspirations, particularly in the only book of his that I have read, *Open to Desire: Embracing a Lust for Life—Insights from Buddhism and Psychotherapy* (2005). Mark is known for his work in integrating Buddhism and Freudian psychotherapy.

Shechet: East and West. Absolutely. Mark has always thought that Buddhism could be interpreted as a philosophy of life, or could be thought of as a psychology as much as a religion, as the West conceives of it. We spent huge amounts of time at Sotheby's and Christie's looking at Asian art that would come up for auction. And we always asked one of the experts, "Can you tell us about this piece?" In two minutes we could have the whole story of Buddha and his teaching. Mark especially began to realize that these stories were all contained in the art. So we shared a mutual appreciation of the relationship between literature and object. In fact, we went to Indonesia for our honeymoon, where we visited Prambanan and Borobudur. It was amazing because what I saw coincided with my interests in college, such as architecture, miniatures, and tantric drawings and paintings, and so on. We also went to some textile museums where things were getting eaten by bugs—beautiful spiders, etc.—literally, right before my eyes. Again, when we went to Borobudur in Java, for example, we could just walk around. And as we walked around and upwards, we were being taught through the medium of sculpture, the history of the Buddhist life in great detail, and in a way that was so visually provocative. When we got to the top, there were smaller stupas, and we looked out at the Prambanan (which is a Hindu temple compound right next door). So there they were, Hinduism and Buddhism, within yards of one another.

Rail: I like what our friend Peter Lamborn Wilson, even though he was writing about papermaking and porcelain, thought of your work: that it had a Hermetico-Buddhist aura. Which is just as good as having a Freudian-Buddhist aura. The only difference between them is that one is about transmuting base matter into "not being there"; the other is about "self-analysis" before "not being there."

Shechet: Whatever it is, it's not there!

Rail: Yeah, the whole notion is ultimately about compassion, which in Buddhism, is referred to as "the Middle Way," a non-judgemental state of being in between things.

Shechet: Exactly.

Rail: Like how early on, you recognized that one of your blob-like forms looked as though it could be both Buddha and a pile of shit. It was almost a comment on the various Buddhas in Asia: laughing Buddhas, fat and thin Buddhas, drunken Buddhas, fierce-looking angry Buddhas, and countless others.

Shechet: First of all, what I really came to understand was that the radically non-judgmental Buddhist idea was an essential insight for how to behave in the studio. So it's not that I was committed to being a practicing Buddhist or promoting its philosophy. Rather, I was using it as a record of my experience. And, basically, aligning the practice of being an artist in the studio—how I was committing myself to being in the studio—in a more free-floating, open way that also maintained the tension that is required to see what is going on, and have a call-and-response experience with the work as artists do in their studios. The image of the Buddha was really the signifier of the experience of being in the studio one day, and then walking into the street and seeing a pile of shit the next day—which made me realize how much I desire a life that makes sense, in and out of the studio all the time, all at once.

Rail: So the studio is not an escape?

Shechet: That's right. The studio has to contain everything. Giacometti wrote about making work to understand his life—to “make sense of his pain” at different times, to understand himself. I remember when I first showed the Buddha sculptures some people said, “You're crazy to deal with old iconography that has so much history and rules,” “You're breaching the rules,” or “You're stepping outside of your boundaries.” And I'd respond, “In Asia people are making new Buddhas every day, so this is my version of that.” In fact, Bob Thurman once told me, “If you make a Buddha, it is a Buddha.”

Rail: You should have told those folks, “Hey, you don't understand, I was born a Buddha last night.”
[*Laughter.*]

Shechet: Buddhism speaks to artists partly because, as a philosophy, it mirrors much of their life experience, which is not abstract at all, it's very tangible.



Arlene Shechet, *Now Playing*, 2015. Glazed ceramic, hardwood, paint, metal, 36 × 28 × 20 inches. (ceramic), 29 × 16 × 18.625 inches (base), 65 × 28 × 20 inches (overall). Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

Rail: Let me ask you a technical question: When you first began to work with plaster as your preferred medium, were you aware and open to your own rapport with those who have worked in this similar material, say Giacometti, especially some of his painted plaster pieces of the late '40s, like *Nose*, or *City Square*, and *Four Figurines on a Base*, or William Tucker's deep and perpetual homage to Rodin, or Claes Oldenburg's painted plaster of everyday objects?

Shechet: Yes, I was aware of all those artists, partly because of my weekly lecture on art history when I was teaching, as I mentioned earlier. I was especially interested in Claes Oldenburg. I remember showing my students his series of guns and the *Mouse Museum*, which is completely brilliant as an enclosed structure to display multiples, many versions of the same thing, or nearly 400 found objects. I love that idea of the *Mouse Museum* taking cartoons and popular culture to the realm of art, allowing viewers to understand that Pop Art did not just pop up, it grew. Oldenburg's early painted plaster pieces were inspiring because I had always done painting and was very interested in color and still believe in color as a vibration, and harmony. I really can't imagine not having color in my life as a way of communicating. Although, I don't think that you have to have painted color to have color.

Rail: Like white for Bob Ryman is a color.

Shechet: Exactly! Not to mention the fact that in some of his more painterly works, every brushstroke can be seen as a low relief. You can walk from one end to the other, from close up to far away, and each time it looks different. In sculpture, this experience is magnified!

Rail: While reading Debra Bricker Balken's essay "Pedestals," in which she compares your seated Buddha with Beuys's *Fat Chair*, I thought of Beuys's investment in alchemy and Hermeticism, especially in the context of transformation as a way to heal wounds of the body, whether external wounds inflicted by others or internal wounds of complicity or denial. There is the "hybrid comic clumsiness" that is shown in the work but there is also vulnerability. It's clear that you want both to coexist. I was wondering, when did you start integrating the pedestals more with the forms above?

Shechet: I began that twenty years ago with the Buddhas. I used found chairs and tables and footstools



Arlene Shechet, *Is and Is Not*, 2011. Glazed ceramic and kiln brick, 42 × 14 × 12 inches. Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

to place them on, mostly things I found in the street. In that time I saw them as the Western funky version of the lotus the Buddha sits upon. Because the pedestal was such a discarded and demeaned idea in contemporary art, I was always attracted to its possibilities. In the more recent pieces, devising the pedestal component happens in different ways. During the physical process of building the clay pieces, I walk around the works as I am making and imagining them. I work on the sculptures for six months at least, sometimes a year, sometimes longer. Then there's the glazing process and so on. I let them grow as I watch them out of the corner of my eye, in a combined active and passive gestation. I think that is part of my approach to the pedestal: I know it's a pedestal but I also feel that it's not a pedestal, that it's the essential architecture of the work.

Rail: So that's why it's so often made of various materials, whether it's welded steel, metal, concrete, kiln brick, wood, stone, Plexiglas, and so on.

Shechet: Exactly! There are a million possible approaches that depend on each piece and on each case, whether it's about symmetry vs. asymmetry, regularity vs. irregularity, stability vs. instability, etc. Each pedestal is pretty hard-won in the same way each sculpture itself is.

Rail: Let's focus on the installation: as I walked in the first room, my immediate response to the pedestal for all the Buddhas and the various vessel pieces was Frank Lloyd Wright's *Falling Water* gone wrong.

Shechet: [*Laughs.*] It's sort of at an angle to the door, and off-center to the room.

Rail: The whole thing looks as though it was made in a last-minute decision.

Shechet: [*Laughs.*] Yeah, the whole *thing* was built in real space. Even though my assistant Chelsea and I did some computer modeling of it, we weren't sure how it would make sense in the space until we tried different options. We had twelve people carrying around enormous planks—"let's try this here, let's try that here"—until we reached some kind of irregular balance. I, in fact, brought more works than I thought we needed so that there could be some choices made during the installation process. Jenelle and I agreed, "Let's *do* something that's fun. Let's *do* something that's exciting and that's new with this twenty-year-old work." Why do the show if it doesn't involve invention?

Rail: Jenelle did imply that you're an installation artist who happens to make objects. Now I assume the eye-level height of the pedestal for the whole piece *Building* was built site-specifically in this instance?

Shechet: Yes. The original installation at the Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington in Seattle was twenty-five feet, which was too big. Because of the nature of those galleries it was installed against the wall. For this show, I wanted the pedestal high and confrontational to the viewer walking

into the second room. It provided a great opportunity to reimagine the work and have visitors walk around the installation and see it from multiple views before they discover the other pieces in the room.

Rail: I thought of Morandi who painted a still life of bottles on a table raised to near-direct eye-level, making the whole painting monumental.

Shechet: The inspiration for *Building* came from walking across the Brooklyn Bridge in different elevations and seeing the New York skyline from those perspectives. I often saw the skyline as stupas which I translated into iterations of the vase. For me, making the pedestal high like that gave off a sense of being removed and distant, yet at the same time very intimate. On the morning of 9/11 I was walking across the Brooklyn Bridge and saw the first plane hit the first tower. That practice of walking across the bridge was something I did everyday for ten years as I dropped the kids off at school and walked back. The whole neighborhood of TriBeCa was covered in ash. I felt a deep trauma from that experience: I was separated from my kids, the Brooklyn Bridge was closed. It wasn't just the ash floating about TriBeCa, we lived with the smell of things burning for at least six months. I felt like I was living in a crematorium. There were also lampposts that were covered in black-and-white posters. And suddenly the newspaper became central to my life. In TriBeCa you weren't reading the newspaper to get extra news, but to find out what was happening in your life. I have to say that when I created *Building* I wasn't thinking about all that. It just came out of me. But then as soon as I saw it I recognized that influence. Originally, the idea was simple: I wanted to make a piece with black and white and gray that used the vase form as kind of architecture.

Rail: The installation of that room presents an amazing contrast: *Building* is on a high pedestal with all the pieces positioned closer to one another than at the Henry Art Gallery, making the experience somewhat cluttered and claustrophobic. Their opaque forms intensify the transparency of the crystal pieces, such as *Thin Air* (2005) and *Deep Breath* (2004), for example, which are installed low.

Shechet: I was conscious of the contrast, partly because I also wanted that room to have its own character, and its own ambiance. The whole room, and the furniture in it, was painted a vaporous pale gray color Tom Eccles shared with me.



Arlene Shechet, *My Balzac*, 2010. Glazed ceramic, wood, and steel, 72 × 13 × 21 inches. Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

Rail: What caused your transition from working with plaster to clay?

Shechet: It goes back to the Buddhist way of being in the studio, which means being alert and alive. I just don't fall into a place where I'm so comfortable that I start making what I already know too well. So switching materials is actually a strategy for promoting aliveness in the studio. Keeping my hands off of different materials is more of a struggle than trying things out. So switching from one material to the next seems very natural to me. Materials and methods are completely interrelated and glide into one another. I should also mention that I prefer to think of clay as a three-dimensional drawing material. And I've learned a lot about its potential, as well as its limitations. Over the years I've gotten better at it.

Rail: You're lucky. Anyway, as I walked into the third and the last room, which also includes a small space for the paper works, I thought of the late ceramic sculptures of Miro and Fontana, as well as endless explorations of surrealist biomorphism. You seem to reference them without nostalgia or owing them any debts. One feels there's a complete embrace of the bodies of all things—humans, animals, vegetables, landscapes, architecture, and so on—which are drenched with your reconciliation of multiplicity, fragmentation, and change.

Shechet: In Hindu iconography, Shiva has hundreds of arms, each of which has a different yet similar function of giving and receiving, of being open, of taking in and giving-out—it's a kind of, it's the same thing as breathing. Yet disruptions and tensions are also central to the works. A disruption of the natural flow is what makes something interesting to me. Without the tension and the disruption, there would be no life. That's how we live. We live and we make peace with disruption, and we grow as humans through disruption. It goes back to what we talked about at the beginning: failure—failure is falling and falling is how you learn to stand, walk. One of the functions of art is that it disturbs the peace in the most productive possible way.



Arlene Shechet, *From Seeing Summer*, 2012. Solid hard wood, glazed ceramic, 57 × 17 × 16 inches. Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

Rail: We can refer to it as disturbed equilibrium. At any rate, the last piece in the show, *Now Playing* (2015)—the way the form was stacking up in such a precarious and improvisational way, immediately reminded me of your son Will [Epstein] a brilliant musician at High Water and a member of *Bladerunner Trio* (who was invited by Raymond Foye, the Guest Critic of our December 2014/January 2015 issue, and gave an amazing performance at the last Rail Curatorial Project, “Spaced

Out: Migration to the Interior” at Red Bull Studios in 2014), playing the saxophone.

Shechet: That’s great. Will and I relate to one another around improvisation because it is absolutely at the core of what we each do. I once had a show called *The Sound Of It* (at Jack Shainman Gallery in 2010), which was about seeing, knowing, as well as breathing and hearing because I believe art can do much more than appeal to the mind and the eye. In a way that sculpture *Now Playing* not only looks like Will when he’s playing, but maybe also resembles a saxophone or most of all, maybe it also looks like his music! That morphing of associations and meanings. I want the sculptures to keep on changing even when they’re standing still.

Rail: All at once.

Shechet: That’s the title of the show, *All at Once*. In fact I was speaking with Levi [David Levi Strauss], who has a lovely essay in my book, and he said that he always thought of his writing as a sculptural process. That resonated in part because I always feel that I’m building the title of my works, which are as important to me as the pedestals: just another thing to hold the work. In Levi’s essay he caught my approach to language very well. It’s not real to compartmentalize all these activities. When you’re in it—creating—the margins of everything are blurred and beautiful.

Anyway, as I told Levi the title of this twenty-year show, we were having a meal, but immediately Levi began seeing the words as two pyramid bases or sets of sawhorse legs, A & A, each followed by two parallel lines (I I) and a cross (T), and then the circle, and the punch and pounce of “once.” *All at Once!* What a moment.

CONTRIBUTOR

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