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Crafting Autonomy: A Reevaluation of the Pedestal in the Sculpture of Arlene Shechet, Nicole Cherubini, and Francesca DiMattio

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CRAFTING AUTONOMY: A REEVALUATION OF THE PEDESTAL
IN THE SCULPTURE OF ARLENE SHECHET, NICOLE
CHERUBINI, AND FRANCESCA DIMATTIO

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Art and Art History

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Sara Morris

May 2017

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ART AND ART HISTORY

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2017

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ABSTRACT

CRAFTING AUTONOMY: A REEVALUATION OF THE PEDESTAL IN THE SCULPTURE OF ARLENE SHECHET, NICOLE CHERUBINI, AND FRANCESCA DIMATTIO

by Sara Morris

New York-based contemporary artists Arlene Shechet, Nicole Cherubini, and Francesca DiMattio have each developed a sculptural style that integrates the pedestal within their sculptures. Primarily made from clay, unconventional craft materials, and commonplace objects, these sculptures formally and conceptually blur the lines between craft and fine art, décor and sculpture, as well as private and institutional space. With a renewed interest in craft and feminism, these artists test the material hierarchies that have historically determined the categorization of art inside institutional spaces. This study investigates how these sculptures gain autonomy when exhibited inside museums in light of contemporary theories on craft, feminism, and autonomy. Furthermore, this thesis illustrates how these artists' choice of materials and unconventional techniques symbolize their struggles as women artists, ultimately contributing to a growing body of research on contemporary craft and feminist art that challenges institutional hierarchies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Preparation for this thesis began in 2009 as an undergraduate student at San José State University and is the result of the support of many individuals. Like most undergraduate art history students, I was drawn in by the past and charmed by my Northern Renaissance and American art history courses. I was lucky to take courses with Dr. Anne Simonson and Dr. Christy Junkerman, whose emphasis on research and writing contributed to my passion for art history and appreciation for scholarship. With each passing semester, my interests steadily crept closer to the present. Courses like *Issues in Contemporary Art* taught by Dr. Dore Bowen and studio ceramics courses instructed by professors Stan Walsh and Monica Van den Dool opened my eyes to the field of contemporary sculpture.

More recently, sincere thanks are due to Dr. Dore Bowen, my Thesis Committee Chair, whose significant efforts have provided insight into theories regarding contemporary art and craft. My project has benefitted greatly from the guidance of Dr. Beverly Grindstaff, who I would also like to thank for her invaluable feedback. I would like to acknowledge the help of Professor Patricia Albers for her advice and interest in this project. Thank you to the Center for Craft, Creativity, and Design and the Windgate Foundation for funding my museum internship, allowing me to work at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston in 2015. At the MFAH, I am deeply indebted to curators Cindi Strauss and Anna Walker for their unwavering support during and since my internship. Finally, special thanks are due to my family, my steady partner Yasha Bol, and my peers

at SJSU, art historians and artists alike, who have offered constructive criticism, friendship, and love throughout my time at SJSU.

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Introduction

The history of craft is long and undeniably gendered. The result of skilled labor and tradition, craft production is best known for producing quality decorative arts. Time and time again, art historians have defended craft production as a viable means of artistic expression despite critiques that it lacks concept compared to fine art. Remarkably, there are contemporary artists who, unencumbered by traditional craft techniques, deliberately use craft materials such as clay, wood, and glass over traditional sculptural materials like stone, marble, steel, or bronze. Today, sculpture in clay can be found in many contemporary art collections, and with each museum exhibition, the difference between contemporary craft and art is increasingly difficult to spot. Contemporary sculptors are appropriating objects and craft materials to create pedestals, bases, support structures, and elaborate displays, which are integral elements of the sculpture as a whole. New York-based artists Arlene Shechet, Nicole Cherubini, and Francesca DiMattio inhabit this space; their mixed-media sculptures unapologetically take from craft and art history, creating hybrid refugees that critique gender and art institutions not only through material signifiers, but also within the conceptual nature of their pedestals and displays.

I began to research Shechet, Cherubini, and DiMattio in 2015, during a summer-long curatorial internship at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in the Decorative Arts, Craft, and Design Department. At this time, each artist had found some success in the art world, which was marked by favorable reviews and invitations to show their work in group and solo exhibitions. Until then, these artists had just published or had yet to publish books or catalogs solely about their work. Upon my arrival in Houston, I was

already passionate about the work of Shechet and Cherubini; however, once she learned about my research interests, curator Cindi Strauss introduced me to the work of DiMattio.¹

Early on, my research interests focused on current exhibitions, in how and why new methods of display are popular among contemporary female artists and why their work is beginning to enter spaces foremost inhabited by fine art. My fascination with the form and symbolism behind contemporary pedestals, bases, and displays, specifically those that resemble furniture and interior spaces, developed from a noticeable gap in scholarship. Despite Shechet's, Cherubini's, and DiMattio's recent success in the art world, scholars have yet to theoretically account for their conceptually complex, yet materially common pedestals or the fact that many of the artists popularizing this approach to sculpture are women. The tendency of essays and articles in exhibition catalogs, journals, magazines, and blogs to bypass the pedestal and get right to an analysis of the clay, thus reestablishing its craftiness, is regrettable because the two are inseparable.

Almost paralleling the dates of my internship, the first exhibition to survey Shechet's career, *Arlene Shechet: All at Once*, opened in June 2015 at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. Upon returning to San Jose, I acquired the catalog *Arlene Shechet: All at Once*. It was not until 2016 that I procured the book *Francesca DiMattio*

1. At the time of my internship at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, curator Cindi Strauss was working on her essay "Pattern Recognition: Francesca DiMattio and the Lure of Historical Porcelain" for the book produced by the Blaffer Art Museum, University of Houston, *Francesca DiMattio* (Houston: Blaffer Art Museum, University of Houston, 2015). In 2014, DiMattio had exhibited her work at the Blaffer Art Museum.

and months until I was graciously gifted the catalog *Nicole Cherubini: The Love Tapes, a Retrospective* (2016) by the book's organizer, Kristen Dodge. With the exception of Shechet, who has had five catalogs published about her work to date, scholarly sources regarding these artists were mainly published in catalogs from group exhibitions highlighting ceramics, art journals, and the artists' websites. Even in today's art climate where all materials are beginning to enter contemporary art museums, the success of these artists is an achievement since some scholars and art institutions classify sculpture made primarily out of clay to be ceramics and decorative, rather than sculpture.

Recently published interviews expose the ways in which Shechet, Cherubini, and DiMattio react to ideas about gender, the experience of motherhood, and the impact that living and working in New York City has had on their work. In this thesis, I will argue that the pedestal, a once-invisible and supplemental device in modern art, symbolizes the confluence of these ideas not just through the artists' choice of materials, but also through the methods in which the pedestal inhabits space. Working in this way allows these artists to muddy the divisions between craft and art, between décor and sculpture, and between private and institutional space.

To understand the trajectory of Shechet, Cherubini, and DiMattio, it is necessary to discuss the distinction between art and craft, feminist art history, and a corner of the New York City art world post-9/11, specifically efforts made by institutions to promote feminism. This argument hinges on observations made by sociologists, specifically Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of *autonomy* in the essay "The Intellectual Field: A World Apart" and curator Jean Fisher's thoughts on *syncretic art* in the essay "The Syncretic Turn:

Cross-Cultural Practices in the Age of Multiculturalism.” Together these arguments will shed light on the new art territories that Shechet, Cherubini, and DiMattio manipulate to gain freedom as women artists.²

Finally, it is my aim to undertake careful biographical, formal, and theoretical analyses of the careers and sculpture of Shechet, Cherubini, and DiMattio to offer a focused study that goes beyond the clay—to the pedestals, support structures, and displays that challenge the institutions of art in which they are featured. Leaving behind craft’s quest for legitimacy in the art world, this investigation will focus on the contemporary journey of the woman sculptor and her struggle for success in the art world.

2. Pierre Bourdieu, “The Intellectual Field: A World Apart,” in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 13-20.

Literature Review

The formal qualities that define contemporary sculpture today span from objects to installation art, encompassing a seemingly infinite spectrum of concepts and theories including, but not limited to, gender, consumerism, appropriation, craft, and institutional critique. As Jennifer R. Gross discerningly noted in the introduction to the *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin, State of the Art: Contemporary Sculpture*, “The sculptor’s eye on aesthetic discourse has become multifaceted, giving the practice of diversity of a fly’s-eye compounded view of the possibility of aesthetic and theoretical discourse.”³ More than ever, artists have control over how their work is exhibited and experienced inside a gallery or museum. Today, contemporary sculpture comprised of mass-produced objects and low-cost materials traditionally associated with craft—like fabric, lumber, plaster, rope, glue, and clay—are regularly exhibited and collected by world-class art institutions.

Distinguishing Art from Craft

As a result of the Industrial Revolution and the proliferation of the machine-made commodity in England and North America, concerned artists, critics, and historians have discussed the value and legitimacy of craft compared to fine art for over a century.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century influential writers of the Arts and Crafts

Movement, such as John Ruskin, William Morris, and Bernard Leach, have emphasized

3. Jennifer R. Gross, “Introduction: The Field of Sculpture,” *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin, State of the Art: Contemporary Sculpture* (2009): 30, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40682625>. Gross currently holds the position of deputy director and chief curator at the de Cordova Sculpture Park and Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts.

an ideal that can only be obtained through local, handmade work.⁴ But what does the blending of art and craft mean for the status of contemporary sculpture that utilizes craft materials and technique? Has craft truly become a process—a supplement—rather than an object in the twenty-first century? Former director of the Museum of Arts and Design, editor of *The Craft Reader* (2010), and author of the books *Thinking Through Craft* (2007) and *The Invention of Craft* (2013), Glenn Adamson, has extensively written about the distinction between craft and fine art. The ideas presented in *Thinking Through Craft* have become increasingly important in the field of contemporary art and craft because of the recent trend in contemporary sculpture to employ craft materials.⁵ Here, Adamson presents the history of craft as parallel to the history of modern art. In the first chapter titled “Supplemental,” Adamson describes the characteristics that qualify an autonomous work of art and craft, as well as the power structures that determine art’s institutional and economic success.⁶

In their influential book *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, feminist art historians Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock evaluate power structures, art historical methodologies, and language to prove how the field of art history has traditionally

4. John Ruskin, “The Nature of Gothic,” from *The Stones of Venice*, Vol. II (1851-1853), excerpted. William Morris, “The Revival of Handicraft,” originally published in the *Fortnightly Review* (November 1888), excerpted. Bernard Leach, “Towards a Standard,” in *A Potter’s Book* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940).

5. Glenn Adamson, “Supplemental,” in *Thinking Through Craft* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 9-37.

6. Ibid.

disenfranchised women.⁷ In this book, the authors trace the stereotype that women's art is "biologically determined" or "an extension of their domestic and refining role in society" in the nineteenth century.⁸ Writers like Ruskin propagated female stereotypes that assumed women's art could only evoke "femininity" and the domestic. Nonetheless, in the nineteenth century, many American women pursued professional careers as artists despite existing gender separatisms that undervalued their artwork because women were believed to not possess the same genius and raw talent as men. Parker and Pollock also claim that the separation between craft and art in the nineteenth century was formed out of society's association of craft with the home—a predominantly feminine domain.⁹ With patriarchal authorities in the art world and inside the home determining the rules, it is no surprise that many women looked to art pottery to satisfy their creative and professional desires.

For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century and tucked within California's temperate landscape, the Arequipa Pottery specialized in producing vessels by women amateurs. Hand-thrown or slip-cast, each pot was made by a woman for women looking to beautify their homes and subsequently the quality of their lives. The Arequipa Pottery was just one of many potteries in the United States that supplied devotees of the Arts and Crafts Movement with delightful and sustainable wares;

7. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

8. Ibid., 9.

9. Ibid., 51.

however, like the untamed wilderness of California, the women of Arequipa had a refreshingly undeveloped style.

With values borrowed from England's Arts and Crafts Movement, American art pottery promised to offer beautiful alternatives to cheap mass-produced products. The movement's insistence on regional handmade pottery was born from its concern for people's welfare and quality of life, especially those living in cities where poorly designed goods flooded the market. Women established potteries in the American Midwest, the East Coast, the South, and eventually the West during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Initially, art potteries started in Cincinnati, Ohio, where women such as Maria Longworth Nichols, founder of Rookwood Pottery, and Mary Louise McLaughlin sought to elevate the quality of American wares. Furthermore, in Syracuse, New York, Adelaide Alsop Robineau bought a monthly journal and renamed it *Keramic Studio* before founding her own craft school in 1912.¹⁰

Similar to English art potteries, American art pottery's tasks were divided between men and women. Generally, men would find, dig, and work clay, as well as fire, load, and unload kilns. Women were allowed to decorate pottery or work in showrooms, which were considered respectable and appropriate professions for "the fairer sex."¹¹ Although women have been credited for starting the American Art Pottery Movement, men largely determined their artistic roles. This disparity is largely due to the fact that in

10. Cooper-Hewitt Museum, *American Art Pottery* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987), 136.

11. Barbara A. Perry, *American Art Pottery from the Collection of Everson Museum of Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 1997), 17.

the beginnings of the movement, female entrepreneurs hired trained professionals to help set up studios. These professionals were typically male ceramicists from England who instilled Victorian morals consistent with the subjugation of women promoted by writers like Ruskin.

The American Art Pottery Movement lasted from 1870 to 1920, but despite its short run, the legacy of American art potteries, like Arequipa, lives on. Today, eager collectors seek out Arequipa pottery to add to their collections. These sloppy, but unique wares contrast against the precise pots from potteries like Rookwood, Newcomb, Fulper, and many more. Perhaps their appeal comes from their oozing glazes that fade into the unknown and experimental—they represent perfection in the imperfect. Or maybe the women that worked at Arequipa are in fact predecessors to many contemporary women artists who currently use clay and glaze in unconventional and often crude ways. Nevertheless, the unknown women who worked at Arequipa represent the beginning of an aesthetic that uses traditional craft media to reflect the conditions of women and the patriarchal structures that dictate their lives.

Contemporary artists employ a technique recently termed “sloppy craft,” a sculptural approach to material aimed at purposefully deemphasizing or “deskilling” visible workmanship by executing a work of art in a relatively rough and unpolished manner. In the book *Sloppy Craft: Postdisciplinarity and the Crafts* (2015), editors Elaine Cheasley Paterson and Susan Surette present a collection of essays by leading scholars in

the field of contemporary craft.¹² In Part One of the book, “Explorations of Postdisciplinarity Through Sloppy Craft,” essays critically examine the implications of cross-disciplinary practices in the twenty-first century and explore some of the possible consequences for craft in the future.¹³ With a similar aim, the exhibition catalog *Crafting a Continuum: Rethinking Contemporary Craft* (2013) that accompanied an exhibition of contemporary craft from Arizona State University’s Art Museum surveys artworks made from clay, wood, metal, glass, and textile.¹⁴ Keeping in mind the expanding field of contemporary sculpture, as well as the artists’ current reengagement with the studio, the essay “Craft-in-Residence: The Open Studio Network” by scholar and curator Jenni Sorkin discusses the important role of residencies in the careers of craft-based artists and how they expand the field through interdisciplinary practices.¹⁵

12. Elaine C. Paterson and Susan Surette, *Sloppy Craft: Postdisciplinarity and the Crafts*, ed. Elaine Cheasley Paterson and Susan Surette (London/New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

13. Elaine C. Paterson and Susan Surette, “Introduction,” in *Sloppy Craft: Postdisciplinarity and the Crafts*, ed. Elaine Cheasley Paterson and Susan Surette (London/New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 1-25. Similar to Adamson’s deconstruction of the supplemental in art, the introduction of this book by Paterson and Surette discusses the recent use of the term craft: “craft has been deployed as a verb—a series of actions or performances—rather than a noun—an object made of wood, clay fiber, metal, glass, paper, etc.” This quote exemplifies how the words *craft* and *supplement* are beginning to bridge the gap between the arts in the twenty-first century.

14. Arizona State University Art Museum, *Crafting a Continuum: Rethinking Contemporary Craft* (Santa Barbara: Perpetua Press, 2013).

15. Jenni Sorkin, “Craft in Residence: The Open Studio Network,” in *Crafting a Continuum: Rethinking Contemporary Craft*, ed. Peter Held and Heather Sealy Lineberry (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 25. Here Sorkin states, “Artist-in-residence programs have fostered the deliberate spontaneity of craft-trained artists who have expanded craft practices to include a vast array of new technologies, including design, fabrication, and mixed-media practices imported from sculpture, installation, performance, and video.”

The article “The New Ceramic Presence” (1961) by former writer, critic, and *Craft Horizons* editor Rose Slivka is perhaps the most discussed piece of writing on ceramics in the craft world.¹⁶ In this article, Slivka acknowledges the abstract expressionist trend in American ceramics, led by Peter Voulkos (1924-2002), and explains how abstract sculpture challenged old perceptions tied to the medium. She compares painting to ceramic sculpture and attests that the two have become similar, both in mode of creation and concept. Slivka’s argument has lasting power because she was one of the first to convincingly equate ceramics with accepted forms of modern art.¹⁷

In her latest book, *Live Form: Women, Ceramics, and Community* (2016), Sorkin bridges the gap between modern and contemporary craft history through in-depth research and analysis of three women ceramists and teachers: Marguerite Wildenhain, Mary Caroline Richards, and Susan Peterson.¹⁸ Before Voulkos found success by breaking the rules, the pedagogical influence of these foundational women spread across post-war America by way of craft schools, therapy, and television. Curators and craft

16. Rose Slivka, “The New Ceramic Presence,” *Craft Horizons* 21/4 (July/August 1961). In this important article, Slivka declares, “The potter manipulates the clay itself as if it were paint—he slashes, drips, scrubs down, or builds up for expressive forms and textures. Or around the basic hollow core he creates a continuum of surface planes on which to paint. In so doing, he creates a sculptural entity whose forms he then obliterates with the painting. This, in turn, sets up new tensions between forms and paint. It is a reversal of the three-dimensional form painted in two. Now the two-dimensional is expressed in three—on a multiplaned, sculpted ‘canvas.’”

17. Slivka’s article led to important ceramic exhibitions such as *Dirt on Delight: Impulses That Form Clay* (2009) and *The Ceramic Presence in Modern Art: Selections from the Linda Leonard Schlenger Collection and the Yale University Art Gallery* (2015), which both attempted to further contextualize ceramics.

18. Jenni Sorkin, *Live Form: Women, Ceramics, and Community*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

historians have taken note of the abundance of artists using clay in contemporary art; however, in their eagerness to present the new, they have overlooked female predecessors outside of the pre-established ceramic or feminist cannon. At long last, Sorkin's guide through the mid-twentieth century works to give credit where credit is due—to proto-feminist women.

One of the most important feminist artists of the latter half of the twentieth century, Judy Chicago not only wrote about her own life and work, but has also been the subject of many publications and exhibitions. Chicago's infamous artwork *The Dinner Party* (1979) is a massive handcrafted installation made from thirty-nine ceramic place settings that commemorate important women from history. Editor of *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, feminist scholar, and curator Amelia Jones has contributed to the feminist discourse by evaluating the work of Chicago in her article "1970/2007: The Return of Feminist Art."¹⁹ Here, Jones claims that feminism's reemergence in the United States is tied to the movement's activist nature and reconstructionist attitude aimed at upsetting hierarchical agendas. But most importantly, Jones acknowledges the importance of the 2007 opening of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum and its purchase of *The Dinner Party* in 2002. Chicago's judicious incorporation of craft materials in *The Dinner Party* contributed to poor reviews from modern art critics. In the essay "The 'Sexual Politics' of *The Dinner Party*: A Critical

19. Amelia Jones, *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2010). Quote taken from Amelia Jones, "1970/2007: The Return of Feminist Art," *X-Tra* 10, no. 4 (2008), <http://x-traonline.org/article/19702007-the-return-of-feminist-art/>.

Context,”²⁰ Jones examines positive and negative reviews of *The Dinner Party*’s debut not only to pay tribute to this important feminist installation, but also to illuminate how critics’ unfavorable reviews reveal obsolete standards of art established by patriarchal art hierarchies.²¹

With the division of craft and art in mind, let us remember how second-wave feminist artists and historians have identified this hierarchical division between craft and art as grounds for gender stereotyping. Parker and Pollock argue that the high status of art versus the low status of craft is directly connected to the latter’s associations with women’s work.²² In the 1970s, women artists began to embrace women’s work and hobby-craft, such as textile and ceramic art, as a way to call attention to art missing from the art historical canon. During this time, the home, feminine stereotypes, and the societal pressures of being a mother and having a career influenced many women artists.

The Reemergence of Feminism and Clay in New York

20. Amelia Jones, “The ‘Sexual Politics’ of *The Dinner Party*: A Critical Context,” in *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

21. Ibid., p. 409-410: *The Dinner Party* “has been negatively evaluated by modernist critics...as epitomizing a loss of ‘artistic standards.’ Feminist commentators have criticized it as exemplary of 1970s feminism’s supposed naiveté, essentialism, and failure to establish collaborative alternatives to the unified (and masculinist) authorial structures of modernist art production.”

22. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, “Crafty Women and the Hierarchy of the Arts” in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 58. In defense of women’s art, Parker and Pollock state, “While women can justifiably take pride in these areas, asserting their value in the face of male prejudice does not displace the hierarchy of values in art history. By simply celebrating a separate heritage we risk losing sight of one of the most important aspects of the history of women and art, the intersection in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of the development of an ideology of femininity, that is, a social definition of women and their role, with the emergence of a clearly defined separation of art and craft.”

In 1971, feminist art historian Linda Nochlin called for a reevaluation of art institutions in her essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”²³ In this important call to action, Nochlin claims that the true question lies not in the “why” but in the “how.” She reasons it is miraculous there have been women artists at all, considering the numerous examples of historical discrimination against women inherent in education and art institutions.²⁴ Nochlin’s essay also prompted new questions for feminist art historians and artists. For example, does rediscovering a few women artists and placing them in the patriarchal historical canon do enough to educate and change society’s perception of women artists? Furthermore, should women artists create their own systems and visual vocabulary that are separate from men’s?

In the last decade, feminist curators and historians have observed, and in some cases contributed to, the art world’s reinvestment in feminist art through numerous exhibitions, symposia, and publications, but perhaps no one has considered or written about these phenomena more than Jones. When Jones asked Connie Butler, curator of *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (2007), and Maura Reilly, curator of *Global Feminisms* (2007), about the current trend among museums to exhibit feminist art, Butler attributed the institutional recognition of feminism at the start of the twenty-first century to the students of 1970s feminists—to third-generation feminist artists and curators who

23. Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2010), 263-267.

24. Ibid.

have finally reached stations of power inside art institutions.²⁵ Unable to support themselves by their artwork alone, many second-wave feminist artists earned a living as teachers, thus instilling an appreciation for feminist art for generations to come. Whether or not it was the intention of second-wave feminists to wait out the widespread institutional sexism of museum staff, it does seem that change has finally begun to come from inside art institutions. In the United States, this changing of the guard seems to be occurring nowhere more so than in New York.

In the essay “1970/2007: The Return of Feminist Art,” Jones tactfully pinpoints America’s feminist revival to 2002 with the Brooklyn Museum’s founding of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, which was the first permanent international space devoted to feminist art.²⁶ The center opened to the public in 2007, catching the attention of the art world with the permanent installation of *The Dinner Party* and its premiere exhibition *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art*, curated by Reilly and Nochlin.²⁷

Comprised of contemporary sculpture, painting, print, photography, video, and textile art from six continents, *Global Feminisms* sought to present many different forms

25. Ibid., 33.

26. Amelia Jones, “1970/2007: The Return of Feminist Art,” *X-Tra* 10, no. 4 (2008), <http://x-traonline.org/article/19702007-the-return-of-feminist-art/>. Connie Butler, Amelia Jones, and Maura Reilly, “Feminist Curating and the ‘Return’ of Feminist Art,” in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Amelia Jones, 31-43 (New York: Routledge, 2010), 33. Other exhibitions that took place in 2002 are *Personal and Political: The Woman’s Art Movement, 1969-1975* and *Gloria: Another Look at Feminist Art in the 1970s*.

27. Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin, *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art* (New York: Merrell Publishers Limited, 2007).

of feminism, as well as recognize commonalities between them.²⁸ *Global Feminisms* received a great deal of good press, but more importantly, the exhibition incited strong opinions from feminists and critics alike pertaining to the identification, selection, and exhibition of contemporary feminist art. Pollock claimed that the large selection of works in *Global Feminisms* failed to define feminism in the twenty-first century, and critic Carol Armstrong considered the show to be a distressing collection of “bad art.”²⁹ Furthermore, the selection of artworks in *Global Feminisms* was criticized for not featuring enough diversity in the content of the work. In regard to this assessment, Armstrong acutely observed, “It seems that art by women that is aesthetically compelling, formally challenging, and materially sustained, and art by women that does not illustrate negative stereotypes, victimhood, and pornographic misogyny cannot be understood as feminist art.”³⁰

For Jones, the Brooklyn Museum’s reinvestment with feminism was a move in the right direction; however, she remains skeptical of art institutions’ ability to present contemporary feminist art accurately. She contends that most museum efforts in the twenty-first century promote fundamentally anti-feminist art where women objectify themselves for commercial and financial profit.³¹ And indeed, the collection of artworks

28. Ibid., 11.

29. Carol Armstrong, “Global Feminisms’ Brooklyn Museum, New York, ‘WACK!’ Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles,” *Artforum* XLV, no. 9 (May 2007): 360.

30. Ibid., 361.

31. Amelia Jones, “1970/2007: The Return of Feminist Art,” *X-Tra* 10, no. 4 (2008): 2, <http://x-traonline.org/article/19702007-the-return-of-feminist-art/>. Jones states that, “The art institution’s renewed interest in exhibiting feminist art...is aimed at nothing more than making

that represent violence and pain through representations of the female body in *Global Feminisms*, such as Ghada Amer's *Trini* (2005) and Sigalit Landau's video *Barbed Hula* (2000), validates Pollock's, Armstrong's, and Jones's unfavorable observations.

In 2007, just days before the opening of *Global Feminisms*, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, exhibited the first international survey of feminist art from 1965 to 1980 with *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*.³² Curated by Butler, *WACK!* exhibited artworks in many types of media from over twenty countries. Butler's eclectic selection of art aimed to expand the feminist canon by presenting a wide range of known and unknown works. Unlike *Global Feminisms*' emphasis on the female body, *WACK!* visually minimized the figure by incorporating many examples of abstract painting and sculpture. Critic Helena Reckitt noted, "With its lack of figuration or easily legible narratives, this strong abstract work sketches feminist aesthetics in potentially suggestive ways."³³ It seems that the outcome of *Global Feminisms* was more problematic among feminists than *WACK!* because of the Brooklyn Museum's promotion of figurative and derivatively violent contemporary feminist art. However, a comparison between the two exhibitions poses new questions, such as where does this leave the plentitude of contemporary art by women, which do not fit the visually brutal or seductive stereotypes of feminist art?

money out of bodies (and bodies-of-work) of women... The market, then, is a key motivator behind the spate of exhibitions and magazine issues highlighting feminist art."

32. Among the museums *WACK!* traveled to was the PS.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York in 2008.

33. Helena Reckitt, "Unusual Suspects: *Global Feminisms* and *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*," *n.paradoxa: International Feminist Art Journal*, vol. 18 (July 2006): 36.

The New Museum's inaugural exhibition *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century* was another influential exhibition that set a new precedent for the selection and exhibition of contemporary sculpture. Curators Richard Flood, Massimiliano Gioni, and Laura Hoptman explored the purposely manageable, yet conceptually convoluted trend in contemporary sculpture to appropriate, mix, and remediate unconventional art materials. In the politically charged essay for the exhibition catalog Flood declares, "Our time demands the anti-masterpiece. Things that are cobbled together, pushed and prodded into a state of suspended animation feel right. Stubby, brutish forms that know something of the world in which they are made tell the contemporary story."³⁴ Collectively, these sculptures demonstrated a feeling of uncertainty, instability, and a shared yet cynical penchant for cheap thrills.

Unmonumental has proved to be an important exhibition for new sculpture not only for its ability to redefine sculpture in the twenty-first century, but also because over one-third of the exhibiting artists were women. Sculptures by artists Alexandra Bircken and Rebecca Warren spoke to society's fragmented condition in the early twenty-first century by using materials traditionally associated with the home and studio space. Contrary to the overwhelming amount of evocative images presented in *Global Feminisms*, the selection of feminist sculpture in *Unmonumental* abstracted representations of violence, allowing for a piece of the work to "feel right."

34. Richard Flood, "Not About Mel Gibson," in *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2007), 12.

When taken to the extreme, the semblance of the *amateur* in the fine art world works to undo traditional hierarchies of art foremost implemented by male-dominated institutions.³⁵ We can trace this trend to the 1970s when second-wave feminist artists such as Chicago and Hannah Wilke employed craft's visual language, gendered history, and association with the domestic realm inside powerful art institutions to underscore the systematic marginalization of women's art. In *Unmonumental*, the haphazardly sewn, pinned, or tied structures *I Want Kids* (2005), *Rabble Rouser* (2005), and *Wonka* (2007) by Lara Schnitger recall the work of second-wave feminists. Their distinctively amateur construction emphasizes the materials' associations with craft and alludes to a woman on the brink of collapse, perhaps without the time or financial stability to perfect her techniques or raise a family. Although *Unmonumental* was criticized for its selection of primarily Western artists, the exhibition received praise for its presentation of new sculpture that pushes the boundaries of art.

Taking place in New York during 2007, these important exhibitions coupled with the prospect of a new president surely had a profound impact on local artists. For the purposes of this thesis, we will consider 2007 as the beginning a new era for New York-based contemporary artists Arlene Shechet, Nicole Cherubini, and Francesca DiMattio. Although there is no evidence to suggest these artists went to *Global Feminisms* or *Unmonumental*, Cherubini chose *WACK!* as her third source of inspiration in the November 2008 issue of *Artforum*, poetically stating that the exhibition "made me realize

35. Glenn Adamson, "Amateur," in *Thinking Through Craft* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 139-163. Adamson first published this book in 2007. Already aware of the exploitation of the *amateur* in contemporary art, he historically connects the role of the amateur to craft before tracing feminism's strategy for using craft as a means of institutional critique.

that the most progressive ideas have already been articulated, and that artists are still searching for people to listen.”³⁶

These exhibitions demonstrate how the practice of feminist art history is beginning to change. Most recently, the exhibition *Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947-2016* curated by Sorkin at the Hauser Wirth & Schimmel Gallery in Los Angeles presented a vast selection of known and unknown sculpture by women, further deemphasizing the figure and female violence in the context of feminist art. Despite the fact that contemporary women artists do not face the same struggles as the proto-feminists of the ‘50s, ‘60s, and the feminists of the ‘70s (since many deserving women have been added to art history textbooks, had solo exhibitions, and hold prominent positions in the art field), the work of Shechet, Cherubini, and DiMattio still exhibit some of the anxieties and struggles typical of feminist art. The return to feminism in the twenty-first century could be the consequence of women, and perhaps even men, struggling to balance parenthood, their art, and a career—a new generation of artists waiting to be seen and heard.

36. Nicole Cherubini, “Top Ten,” *Artforum*, November (2008): 181-182, <http://www.tracywilliamslltd.com/Website%20Material/Press%20articles/Cherubini/topten.pdf>.

Chapter 1

Crafting Autonomy

The pedestals integrated within Arlene Shechet's, Nicole Cherubini's, and Francesca DiMittio's contemporary sculptures are not dismissively white or orthogonal devices one might expect to see in a museum or gallery. They are not inconspicuous. They take up space. They also stand in need of our contemplation. These observations are amplified once artworks leave the artists' studios and enter a museum or gallery space—prominent art institutions that are not only responsible for recognizing and displaying contemporary art, but also for contextualizing it. Throughout the twentieth century, ceramic sculpture entered a museum's Decorative Arts collection rather than its collection of Modern Art because all ceramic art was predominantly classified as craft. In the field of contemporary sculpture, material hierarchies have finally broken down, which is especially evident at new art museums. Contemporary demarcations in museums are increasingly difficult to define; however, this current of change partially results from museums acquiring more and more unconventional artworks by artists whose race or gender previously disqualified their artwork, such as minority groups, non-Western peoples, and women.

Decades before second-wave feminists waged their war on art and the institution, writer, philosopher, and proto-feminist Simone de Beauvoir articulated issues regarding

gender inequality in her book *The Second Sex* (1949).³⁷ Here, Beauvoir argues that historically patriarchal law determined what it means to be a woman and what constitutes femininity. Beauvoir concludes her introduction by posing questions of how women—the *Other*—may begin to address institutional structures dominated by men.³⁸ One of the questions Beauvoir proposes focuses on how women are to gain freedom within a corrupt system.³⁹ Men have determined the modern structures inside museums and promoted a vocabulary that traditionally prizes masculine efforts and systematically disadvantages women artists.

Formally, Shechet's, Cherubini's, and DiMattio's bases offer disparities in shape, color, and construction, which are similarly brought together by clashes that create points of visual interest. Writers have briefly grouped these artists for their similarities in composition and unpolished ceramic aesthetic, but they have yet to make the connection between all three of these artists in writing. Fortunately, a few scholars and writers have begun to contextualized one artist with another. In the essay "Remix/Reframe: Francesca

37. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949), translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Knopf, 2010), 4, 16-17.

38. Ibid., 4, 16-17: Beauvoir summarizes the obstacles women face when seeking freedom by working within the systematic power structures: "Every individual concerned with justifying his existence experiences his existence as an indefinite need to transcend himself. But what singularity defines the situation of woman is that being, like all humans, an autonomous freedom, she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other: an attempt is made to freeze her as an object and doom her to immanence, since her transcendence will be forever transcended by another essential and sovereign consciousness...How, in the feminine condition, can a human being accomplish herself? What paths are open to her? Which ones lead to dead ends? How can she find independence within dependence? What circumstances limit women's freedom and can she overcome them?"

39. Ibid., p. 17.

DiMattio's Mash-Ups," Jenni Sorkin suggests Shechet as a "recent antecedent for DiMattio."⁴⁰ Furthermore, Cindi Strauss made a similar comparison in the essay "Pattern Recognition: Francesca DiMattio and the Lure of Historical Porcelain."⁴¹ In 2009, Jenelle Porter and Ingrid Schaffner discussed and exhibited Shechet and Cherubini's sculptures together for the exhibition *Dirt on Delight: Impulses That Form Clay*. In the essay "Sloppy Seconds: The Strange Return of Clay," included in *Dirt on Delight's* exhibition catalog, Glenn Adamson generally contextualized Cherubini's sculpture with artworks by Peter Voulkos:

If Voulkos and Company protested too much, Cherubini and her peers protest not at all. Some have called Voulkos an Expressionist; what is happening now is the exact opposite of Expressionism. In our post-post-modern moment there can be no certainties, no towering egos untroubled by nuance. While Voulkos...staged an assault on the logic of [his] medium, today's artists seem to be turning to materiality with a mixture of relief and joy, perhaps even solace. ...Nonetheless, there is something oddly absent-minded about this generation's embrace of clay. As a historian, I find it hard to look at these artists without thinking of their precursors; I also find their lack of discursive engagement with earlier clay sculpture to be remarkable.⁴²

Adamson implies that Cherubini and "her peers" are the antithesis of the 1950s generation of macho ceramicists because of their disregard for ceramic history. By singling out Cherubini and artists like her, Adamson perpetuates the female stereotype of

40. Jenni Sorkin, "Remix/Reframe: Francesca DiMattio's Mash-Ups," in *Francesca DiMattio*, (Houston: Blaffer Art Museum, University of Houston, 2015), 26.

41. Cindi Strauss, "Pattern Recognition: Francesca DiMattio and the Lure of Historical Porcelain," in *Francesca DiMattio*, (Houston: Blaffer Art Museum, University of Houston, 2015), 34.

42. Glenn Adamson, "Sloppy Seconds: The Strange Return of Clay," in *Dirt on Delight: Impulses That Form Clay*, ed. Ingrid Schaffner and Jenelle Porter, (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 2009), 79.

the ignorant and childlike woman.⁴³ Perhaps, Adamson, like other scholars and critics who generally compare women artists' approaches to clay to that of a predominately male cannon, considers this act a favor.

According to Adamson, if today's artists are absent-mindedly embracing materials with "relief and joy," surely interviews with these women artists would reveal their *trivial* motives.⁴⁴ In fact, interviews with Shechet, Cherubini, and DiMattio demonstrate the opposite. Their understanding of feminist and ceramic art history surpasses modern achievements made by the previous generation of mid-century male artists. In their own ways, Shechet, Cherubini, and DiMattio have each expressed their interest in feminist art history and decorative art. Moreover, they have all intertwined their processes with metaphors for womanhood in the twenty-first century. For example, following the opening of *Arlene Shechet: All at Once*, Shechet gave an artist talk with Catherine Morris, current curator of the Sackler Collection at the Brooklyn Museum.⁴⁵ Shechet has always been vocal about the obstacles she has had to overcome to find success as a woman in the field, but suddenly the institution gave her work a new context—a feminist one. Though Morris and Shechet did not use the word "feminism" during their talk, the topics of their conversation do intersect with feminist art history, New York, and what it means to be a contemporary woman sculptor. In interviews, Cherubini and DiMattio are also asked about their struggles to make art, living in New

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. Arlene Shechet, "Arlene Shechet in Conversation with Catherine Morris at the Brooklyn Museum, 2015," *Artforum*, https://artforum.com/video/id=55682&mode=large&page_id=1.

York, and motherhood. Cherubini stated that “there are huge amounts of fear. I’ve been thinking a lot about that lately. Why put my work out there? Why is art important? For me it’s justified in being a mother. That’s where it all came from.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, DiMattio has declared that “it is really important to me that all my work begin with references to the feminine, but I hope to handle the feminine in a tough and aggressive way that makes you rethink your associations.”⁴⁷ Thus, what Adamson sees as evidence of happiness and peace, we can begin to see as a series of choices influenced by uneasiness and strife.

Fortunately, some feminist art historians from the 1970s, such as Linda Nochlin, Rozika Parker, and Griselda Pollock, expand on Beauvoir’s critiques by examining the systematic disadvantages of women inherent in hierarchical institutions.⁴⁸ Writer and curator Jean Fisher specializes in contemporary and postcolonial art. Her thoughts on *syncretic art* in the essay “The Syncretic Turn: Cross-Cultural Practices in the Age of Multiculturalism” offers a unique perspective into the hidden systems inside institutions that exhibit non-European art.⁴⁹

For our purposes, Fisher’s ideas concerning the status of high/low art and artists can be applied to Shechet, Cherubini, and DiMattio’s recent success as female sculptors.

46. Sarah Braman, “Nicole Cherubini,” *Bomb*, 129 Fall (2014): 139.

47. Francesca DiMattio and Anne Thompson, “A Conversation Between Anne Thompson and Francesca DiMattio,” in *Francesca DiMattio* (Houston: Blaffer Art Museum, University of Houston, 2015), 41.

48. For a useful discussion see Literature Review.

49. Jean Fisher, “The Syncretic Turn: Cross-Cultural Practices in the Age of Multiculturalism,” in *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, 1996, ed. by Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, 329-337 (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

If Beauvoir considers woman to be the *Other* and Fisher views the *Other* as non-Western, which has historically been left out of the art world's narrow scope of high art, it seems appropriate to similarly apply these thoughts on the syncretic to eager female sculptors who are beginning to enter museum collections. Syncretic art blends different aesthetic styles and techniques from diverse cultures, but Fisher also proposes a type of syncretic curating/collecting cultivated by Western art museums that seek to expand their encyclopedic collections through incorporating syncretic artworks by non-European artists. The aim of these outsider artists is for their work to enter museum collections to gain autonomy, whereas the goal of the museum is to import and integrate the *Other* to increase its power and presence in the art field. Fisher states, "The galleries and museums have responded to the demand to end cultural marginality simply by exhibiting more non-European artists, although on a selective and representative basis provided that they demonstrate appropriate signs of cultural difference."⁵⁰

For these reasons, the intent of the artist and museum need to be called into question to determine what Shechet, Cherubini, and DiMattio have compromised in their art to grant it recognition in the art world. Perhaps for the museum, these women artists fill the woman-shaped gap in their contemporary collections. Their work seemingly understood in terms of their gender—their ability to fearlessly experiment with medium. Shechet's, Cherubini's, and DiMattio's unique pedestals and immediate approach to material seem to define rather than inhabit the gallery space. The reflexive tendency of their sculptures to refer back to themselves and consequently the history of clay/craft is

50. Ibid., 330.

embedded in the fact that the pedestals are made from everyday furniture commonly found inside studios and homes; for example, new sculptures refer to the process of making through Shechet's use of kiln firebricks as a base, like *Beyond Itself (Stripes)* (2011). Once these sculptures enter a gallery space, the juxtaposition of high/low, masculine/feminine, and the processes of making/viewing each material begin to work against the institutional *autonomy* granted by the museum.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's thoughts on autonomy and social space can be applied here to further elucidate the ways in which these three women artists capitalize on and exercise their perspective as women inside institutional spaces. Bourdieu proposes a method of analysis that requires full knowledge of the field at hand, which he emphasizes through outlining the many complex systems inherent within that field. For example, the art world is comprised of many structures and relationships, such as the artist, critic, curator, collector, museum, etc. Bourdieu argues that the autonomous artist or artwork is a myth because it belongs to a bigger system where the powerful give invisible manifestations of worth to the few. Once a prominent gallery represents an artist and artworks begin to enter museums' collections, the status of the work and artist is automatically elevated. Thus, artists' prices go up because their work is in-demand. Furthermore, Bourdieu contends that modern art is never autonomous because in the avant-garde's pursuit of the new and defiance of historical structure, the movement realizes tradition by arguing against it. Yet this penchant for the new, the conceptual, and

the autonomous work of art still exists today in contemporary sculpture.⁵¹ Although, what if artworks do not seek to be cut off from the world, but appear to enhance everyday realities from inside the museum? If the institution is an autonomous supplement, do artworks that appropriate familiar domestic objects and deny the traditional white/invisible pedestal begin to dissolve or work against this definition of autonomy? Furthermore, how do these sculptures use the gallery space and take advantage of this given autonomy?

To understand how Shechet, Cherubini, and DiMattio comment on institutional space, a contemporary account of the differences between craft and fine art must be given. In Adamson's discussion of the "supplemental" in his book, *Thinking Through Craft* he analyzes craft using Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*.⁵² The term "supplemental" generally refers to that which is unnecessary, an addition or nonessential feature. However, Adamson draws a connection between Adorno's views on craft and Jacques Derrida's inverted definition of "supplement" as that which is necessary.⁵³ Building on Derrida's definition, Adamson argues craft is a necessary tool or process that allows the artist to create an autonomous work of fine art but is not art in and of itself. In this light, crafting is a supplemental process that emphasizes skill and mastery rather than concept or an artwork's ability to transcend medium. Moreover, the supplement can also be thought of as an artifice or framing device, like a pedestal or gallery space that

51. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Intellectual Field: A World Apart," in *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, 1990, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 13-20.

52. Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, (2007).

53. Ibid., 11.

completes the artwork by cutting it off from the rest of the world and endowing it with a false sense of institutional autonomy.

In this way, Shechet, Cherubini, and DiMattio have succeeded in creating an autonomous artwork by transcending the preconceived limits of their medium. Not only do they experiment with clay, but also their pedestals are integral parts of the sculpture itself. Once again we can consider Fisher's thoughts on the syncretic in relation to Bourdieu's understanding of the power structures inside the field of contemporary art. Some curators eagerly adopt non-Western artworks to serve their own ambitions, and recognize sculpture by the *Other* because they have taken up the acceptable expressionistic practices formally invented by well-known Western artists, even if the artist has developed the aesthetic for different reasons, or in Bourdieu's words, "one gives oneself the means of grasping particularity in generality, and generality in particularity."⁵⁴

Shechet's, Cherubini's, and DiMattio's sculptures dissolve the autonomy of the gallery space by highlighting the supplemental with everyday objects, especially within their pedestals. They appropriate objects belonging to the home or studio that reference their lives as artists and mothers in New York. Curators find their mashing and mixing acceptable because they seek to broaden their collections and increase their authority in the field, but simultaneously they sacrifice some of their power by allowing Shechet's, Cherubini's, and Dimattio's reflexive sculptures to work against it. These contemporary

54. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Intellectual Field: A World Apart," in *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, 1990, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 14.

artworks blend preconceived museum categories, exhibiting a contemporary female attitude and point of view that breaks down traditional hierarchies.

Feasibly, these artists could feel uneasy in environments (i.e. galleries, museums, etc.) that do not exhibit an assortment of syncretic art. In this case, artists feel the need to inject these sterilized spaces with elements of the real world where different objects are commonly presented together. Perhaps charting the natural currents of change inside museums and contemporary art collections can be traced to the “struggles” of the artist.⁵⁵ Bourdieu points to “the struggles” of a professional in the field as catalysts of change because they most accurately encapsulate the unspoken rules of the system and each participant’s play for power.⁵⁶ Using the feminist and sociologist lenses provided by Beauvoir, Fisher, and Bourdieu, we can read the abstract gestures and appropriation of household materials within Shechet’s, Cherubini’s, and DiMattio’s pedestals as methods to gain autonomy within their role as artist and mother. We will see how their choice of materials and unconventional techniques resolve some of the struggle.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid., 17.

Chapter 2

Arlene Shechet

The handmade paper print *Survey, 2000* by New York-based artist Arlene Shechet entered the Contemporary Art Collection at the Brooklyn Museum in 2001, one year before the museum founded the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art in 2002. Originally from Queens, Shechet attended New York University in the late 1960s before completing her Masters of Fine Art at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in 1978.⁵⁷ In the early 1980s, Shechet married, had two children, and accepted a position teaching sculpture at Parsons School of Design in Manhattan. Throughout the '80s and early '90s, Shechet received numerous grants and continued to pursue her art while raising her children and simultaneously teaching at Parsons.

In the biographical essay "Monuments," curator Jenelle Porter explains how Shechet was materially drawn to plaster because it was "affordable, available, and resilient."⁵⁸ Splitting her time between teaching, making art, and raising her children, Shechet describes this time of her life as overwhelming: "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."⁵⁹ It was not until Shechet began working with

57. Jenelle Porter, "Monuments," in *Arlene Shechet: All at Once* (New York: DelMonico Books and Prestel, 2015), 12.

58. Ibid., 13.

59. Hilarie M. Sheets, "As the Art World Swoons over Playful Ceramics, Arlene Shechet Hits Her Stride," *Artsy*, June 9, 2015, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-as-the-art-world-swoons-over-playful-ceramics-arlene-shechet-hits-her-stride>.

plaster—a wet, quick drying, and malleable material—that she was able to achieve immediate results in the studio. The plaster experiments produced loosely sculpted and painted abstract mounds in the shape of seated Buddhas atop commonplace furniture, like stools, chairs, and tables. Surprisingly, Porter does not question Shechet’s bases in the same investigative way she discusses her plaster elements. Instead, she explains the bases as rescued domestic objects influenced by Buddhist art. Conceivably, if Shechet took advantage of plaster to save time and money, surely the convenience of appropriating mass-produced secondhand furniture also contributed to her ability to mitigate the struggle to produce work.⁶⁰

At the time of the exhibitions *Global Feminisms*, *WACK!*, and *Unmonumental* in 2007-2008, Shechet began to sculpt in clay primarily. Her sculptures no longer took the form of the Buddha, but appeared as loosely pinched and pulled monotone abstractions. Typically glazed a dark matte or metallic, they resemble abnormal internal organs or fantastical storm clouds. Intuitively built atop uncommon pedestals, these sculptures are reminiscent of artwork by Annabeth Rosen and Rebecca Warren. Appearing to hold their breath, like healthy and sometimes diseased patients, they sit on top of specially made metal stools. Each work occupies a space and height of its own, and when exhibited together, they rhythmically direct movement with pulses of color, inflated bulges, and oscillating vantage points. To properly experience her sculptures, one must view them from all angles and circumnavigate to discover the power and restraint instilled in each work.

60. Jenelle Porter, “Monuments,” in *Arlene Shechet: All at Once* (New York: DelMonico Books and Prestel, 2015), 14.

The many exhibition titles Shechet has been a part of since her appropriation of clay is telling of her visceral aesthetic, such as *Dirt on Delight: Impulses That Form Clay* (2009), *Feelers* (2009), and *Free From Order: A Delight of Inconsistencies* (2011). Shechet's immediate and "amateur" approach to clay, rather than a refined skill-based style, has prompted curators to compare her work to renowned ceramic sculptor Peter Voulkos. Voulkos's nonfunctional sculptures are made from deconstructed wheel-thrown vessels that are further made useless by their large size and weight. Agreeably, in many ways Shechet brazenly carries on the spirit of artists like Voulkos because of her disregard for the rules. However, Shechet's artwork cannot be wholly understood without acknowledging the contributions of female ceramicists from earlier in the twentieth century.

Since it is the nature of new art to constantly question itself, history and pedagogical lineages of artists becomes essential to understanding their work. If Voulkos sought to push the boundaries of pottery to reach the status of sculpture in post-war America, it would seem that he challenged the instruction of his predecessors. In her book *Live Form: Women, Ceramics, and Community*, Jenni Sorkin makes a compelling argument against directly comparing contemporary ceramic sculpture by women to that of canonized male artists without acknowledging the achievements of women ceramicists of the 1950s.⁶¹

61. Jenni Sorkin, *Live Form: Women, Ceramics, and Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

Sorkin's first case study explores the influence Pond Farm had on the ceramic community during the mid-twentieth century. Pond Farm was a studio and residency program conceived by the Bauhaus-trained refugee Marguerite Wildenhain just north of San Francisco in Guerneville, California. Wildenhain emphasized the process of a pot's creation rather than placing value on a finished work. Sorkin understands Wildenhain's pottery as "'live' in that the actions of the artist are permanently registered within the very form of the vessel itself."⁶² Although Voulkos didn't visit Pond Farm, his former teacher Frances Senska, a ceramics professor at Montana State University from 1946 to 1973, studied with Wildenhain.⁶³ Though Voulkos would eventually form his own approach to ceramics aimed at contradicting the sturdy functionalism and rigid practice fostered at Pond Farm and encouraged by Wildenhain's students, Sorkin reveals, "Voulkos's lineage, then, was women potters."⁶⁴ It is suggested that without the pedagogical presence and influence of women, like Wildenhain and Senska in the mid-twentieth century, Voulkos's move toward a more *masculine* and rough approach to clay would not have been as compulsory.⁶⁵

Shechet's sculptures reference more than curators admit. Her sculpture *Beyond Itself (Stripes)* is not a large work, but the modest sculpture nevertheless firmly occupies the gallery space. A two-tiered base made from kiln bricks and a shelf supports the uppermost ceramic part. These three stages are clearly delineated by distinct materials

62. Ibid., 11.

63. Ibid., 91-94.

64. Ibid., 92.

65. Ibid.

and surface choices. The base of the sculpture is comprised of two flat-lying kiln bricks. Kiln bricks are a crucial part of ceramic ovens, but here they have been appropriated and glazed to formally support the sculpture. Another recognizable piece of kiln furniture, a kiln shelf, has been cut to the same width as the bricks. This neutral-colored plane is the only thing that separates the blocks from the ceramics above. One dot of glaze echoes the color of a stripe below and trickles down to meet the brick, which seems to poetically unite the two otherwise disparate surfaces. Like a pile of fallen branches, four humble unglazed terra-cotta forms lie on top of the shelf. One form dares to slightly overreach the sculpture's vertical plane defined by the base. Minimally handled, the red clay sticks are thin and clumsy—made as if the artist quickly rolled and pulled them into shape.

Recalling artworks by Wildenhain and Voulkos, visible fingerprints and indentations bring the artist's gestures to life; they allow the viewer to imagine the Shechet's process by recording her presence in the clay. Together, these layers refer to the process of making ceramics because the materials are associated with the process of firing clay. The three layers in *Beyond Itself (Stripes)* also constitute a three-part hierarchy. Clay tops the sculpture, perhaps valued more for its visceral memory rather than the material's established history. These curious terra-cotta sticks and striped kiln bricks present a formal opposition of surface and material that appeals to the viewer through experimentation and the work's quiet attempt to comment on itself.

In the spring of 2012, Shechet produced a completely new series of work during her residency at the Meissen Porcelain factory in eastern Germany, near Dresden. The residency culminated with an exhibition titled *Meissen Recast* in 2014 at the Rhode

Island School of Design Museum in Providence. *Meissen Recast* showcased Shechet's residency works alongside actual examples of Meissen porcelain. During her residency, she produced original porcelain sculptures using old molds and traditional China paints. Unlike Shechet's abstract and sometimes unseemly sculpture, the porcelain figures she produced at Meissen are pretty, dainty, and somewhat representational. In this body of work, Shechet combines unlike slip-cast figural elements, rearranging traditional porcelain motifs, and creating installations in the galleries. Rather than occupying space like a singular sculpture, these works seem to transcend time and the gallery space because a visual dialogue is cultivated with other works.

Returning to her studio after the Meissen residency, Shechet continues to combine clay and fabricated bases made from industrial materials like concrete, steel, lumber, and kiln bricks. The culminating exhibition of Shechet's career thus far opened June 10, 2015, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. Curated by Porter, *Arlene Shechet: All at Once* was the first museum exhibition to show works from the past 20 years of her career. To celebrate her contribution and pursuit of experimental sculpture, the ICA exhibited over 150 works made from materials like plaster, clay, glass, and paper. In the exhibition catalog, Porter once again acknowledges the existence of Shechet's pedestals and states that Shechet's newest innovation has been her ability to "incorporate pedestal elements within the ceramic," but she does not attempt to explain them further.⁶⁶

66. Jenelle Porter, "Monuments," in *Arlene Shechet: All at Once* (New York: DelMonico Books and Prestel, 2015), 30.

In the short, yet thoughtful essay “Pedestals,” curator, writer, and RISD senior lecturer Debra Bricker Balken muses on Shechet’s bases.⁶⁷ Here, Balken describes Shechet’s bases as “architectonic” forms that contrast against the abstract ceramic components of the sculpture. The juxtaposition between geometric and abstract is precisely what binds the differing sculptural elements together.⁶⁸ The visual allure of sculptures like *Tattletale* (2012) and *No Matter What* (2013) exemplify how Shechet routinely balances formal opposites, such solid and hollow, light and dark, as well as geometric and abstract. Notably, Balken considers Joseph Beuys, Constantin Brancusi, and Marcel Duchamp as precursors to Shechet because of their emphasis on integrating the pedestal.⁶⁹ She also sees the influence of neo-expressionist painter Philip Guston.⁷⁰ However, Shechet’s sculpture was not contextualized with modern or contemporary female sculptors.

Glowing reviews and additional solo exhibitions illustrate the national success of *All at Once* and Shechet’s newfound foothold in the contemporary art field rather than just that of the ceramic world. Despite Shechet’s recent success, she remains aware of the gritty gallantry that is historically tied to sculpting and the many obstacles a woman must overcome to succeed, such as juggling family life and a career. During a conversation with sculptor Janine Antoni, Shechet stated:

67. Debra Bricker Balkin, “Pedestals,” in *Arlene Shechet: All At Once*, ed. Jenelle Porter, 117-119 (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2015).

68. Ibid., 118.

69. Ibid., 118.

70. Ibid., 118-119.

There are not many people to talk with about being a woman sculptor. Maybe both of our relationships to being sculptors is that in the process of struggling in this three-dimensional arena which has collapse, failure, at its center, as well as a history of men doing it and maintaining it as heroic we're packing it with something else. We're doing it from another point of view.⁷¹

Naturally, Shechet is sculpting from another point of view. Her adoption of convenient materials within her pedestals and evolution as an artist are the direct result of her gender, environment, and pedagogy. Additionally, her impulsive approach intimately inscribes femininity through touch, display, and the incorporation of domestic objects within artworks that are commonly found in the home or studio, such as chairs, tables, and kiln furniture. Ultimately for Shechet, to sculpt is to be feminine because her sculptures exemplify a hyperawareness of the issues surrounding art-making as a female sculptor.

71. Jenelle Porter, *Arlene Shechet: All at Once* (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2015), 150.

Chapter 3

Nicole Cherubini

Part thrown, part hand-built, and part purchased, *Bucket #1, The Red One* (2015) [Figure 1] by Nicole Cherubini is a composite form. The quality of red in this sculpture is alarming. At its center is a five-gallon bucket painted bright matte red. Nested inside this bucket is an identical white bucket—they are observably common, cheap, but nonetheless resilient. Their metal handles harmoniously drape to one side, like necklaces. An affixed ceramic handle disrupts the perfection of the mass-produced plastic and metal. Here, the viewer witnesses the duel between hand and machine. Projecting upward from the opening of the white bucket is an excess of white, this time a vase the off-white tone of unglazed earthenware. In fact, two wheel-thrown vases, one atop the other, crown the sculpture. The unglazed topmost vase is spray-painted pink, which fades toward the bottom. The tension between the different modes of production cited here is elevated by the inclusion of a specially made base. At first glance, the base looks like a common three-legged adjustable stool, but upon further inspection it appears to double as a potter's wheel. Here, the artist has provided just enough detail for viewers familiar with the process of throwing pottery to mistake the components of the stool with this necessary machine found in every potter's studio. This semblance is reinforced by the presence of the thrown pottery above. This recent sculpture takes from Cherubini's personal life and perhaps best illustrates her artistic development so far.

Figure 1. Nicole Cherubini. *Bucket #1, The Red One*, 2015, earthenware, spray paint, MDF, pine, metal, plastic, steel, PC-11 paste epoxy, Magic Sculpt, 57 x 12 x 16 in., Private Collection. Reprinted with permission of artist.

Born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1970, Cherubini received her BFA in ceramics from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1993 and later earned her MFA in Visual Arts from New York University in 1998. Professor Katy Schimert recalls Cherubini's 1998 thesis exhibition at NYU titled, *Maybe, you would like to meet for some sweets in the afternoon*, as consisting of "five large ceramic pots and an outscale photograph of the artist dressed in an ornate, festooned wedding dress while eating cake."⁷² Schimert emphasizes Cherubini's early ability to conceptually critique some of the American utopian ideals tied to craft and femininity, themes Cherubini continues to explore in her sculpture today.

For the majority of her artistic career, Cherubini has lived in New York City, where for almost two decades she investigated the history of decorative and feminist art.⁷³ In the '90s, Cherubini photographed her 101-year-old grandmother's home for the series *Rose's House*. Cherubini's grandmother, Rose Cherubini, was a former designer of wedding dresses and gowns. Rose opened her first bridal boutique in Boston during the late '40s, and throughout the '50s and '60s, her gowns were highly sought-after.⁷⁴ Later, Rose's life was commemorated in an article for *The Boston Globe* in 2013, whose author declared:

72. Katy Schimert, *Nicole Cherubini: The Love Tapes, A Retrospective*, ed. Kristen Dodge (Boston: OSP Catalogs, 2016), 44.

73. Sarah Braman, "Nicole Cherubini," *Bomb*, 129 Fall (2014): 138.

74. Christopher Muther, "At 100, Rose Cherubini finds the spotlight— again," *The Boston Globe* (2013): doi: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/style/2013/09/04/designer-rose-cherubini-finds-spotlight-again/2aO8rolytG5HW1vuHsfKNO/story.html#comments>.

Her legend grew as she designed a wedding dress on live TV, fielded questions about wedding attire from an audience on Phil Donahue's talk show, and designed a dress for astronaut John Glenn's wife. More than 40 years before "Project Runway" was dishing out unconventional challenges, Cherubini was challenged to create a dress out of burlap. The end result, a shocking pink, bejeweled burlap gown, was photographed by Life magazine.⁷⁵

The legacy of her grandmother does seem to have greatly influenced Cherubini's interest in decorative art and willingness to experiment with materials. As a high school student, Cherubini began to formally study decorative art. She was a pupil of Richard Martin, the curator of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.⁷⁶ The series *Rose's House* illustrates the impact Rose's life and work had on Cherubini, especially the manner in which Rose decorated interior spaces, which Cherubini describes as a "mini-Versailles of sorts."⁷⁷ Sometimes coupling photographs of Rose's home with pottery and writing, Cherubini documented these spaces and explored the differences between mediums. After this series, Cherubini focused on ceramics, specifically the form and function of the pot, rather than photography because of the material's rich decorative history.

In 2002, Cherubini attended a nine-month residency program at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine. Shortly after, she moved to Brooklyn, New York, and began to exhibit a new series of ceramic sculpture called the *G-Pots*. Since 2005, Cherubini has been an adjunct faculty member at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn

75. Ibid.

76. Francesca DiMattio and Nicole Cherubini, "A Conversation between Francesca DiMattio and Nicole Cherubini," in *Nicole Cherubini: The Love Tapes, A Retrospective*, ed. Kristen Dodge (Boston: OSP Catalogs, 2016), 10.

77. Sarah Braman, "Nicole Cherubini," *Bomb*, 129 Fall (2014): 138.

and a visiting artist at many universities, including RISD and the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Currently, Cherubini has started a family and splits her time between Brooklyn and Hudson, New York.

Among Cherubini's *G-Pots* are some of her most well-known artworks, such as *A Pair of G-Pots with Lions* (2005) and *G-Pot with Rocks* (2006). The *G-Pots* share some fundamental characteristics integral to the concept of each sculpture; for example, all sculptures include large hand-built vessels made without bottoms. These holes negate the pot's traditional function to hold and store, emphasizing its impenitent emptiness. Instead of storing goods inside, riches or decorative elements are showcased on the pot's pinched and prodded surfaces, lavishly glazed and decorated with gaudy gold chains, fur, and ceramic gems atop complying lumber pedestals. Some chains drape over the pot like a necklace, while others pile on top of their pedestals or reach to the gallery floor. Like Shechet's pedestals, materials such as lumber, plywood, Plexiglas, and stone are incorporated in the bases and are essential parts of the sculpture. The bases of the *G-Pots* vary in form, height, and color. In some cases, the styles of the bases crudely and minimally resemble architectural infrastructures, while other bases look closer to a traditional pedestal, plinth, or pillar.

It is no coincidence that Cherubini's ceramics break traditional rules associated with pottery. In fact, she deliberately performs rebellious acts to place her work in the realm of sculpture rather than that of ceramics:

When I first started making the G-Pots, I created a manifesto that basically provided rules to defy function: the pots could never have bottoms; they couldn't be glazed on the inside; they had to record every gesture my fingers made (I would mark time by creating a hole with my finger or thumb); any handles I

added had to fail in function (their size or placement would make it impossible to use them to lift the pot); any clay that was taken off, by cutting holes or punching through, had to be placed back on and used for the decoration of the pot.⁷⁸

Unfortunately, Cherubini has not mentioned or commented on a set of rules she follows to create her pedestals, but perhaps her impulse to challenge the traditions of ceramics are also reflected in her unconventional bases.

Like Shechet, Cherubini was also invited to exhibit sculptures in *Dirt on Delight: Impulses That Form Clay* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, in 2009. In the exhibition, two of Cherubini's sculptures neighbored three vessels placed on the ground by Beverly Semmes and one sculpture with an incorporated ceramic pedestal, *Pair of Figurine Trees* (1981), by Viola Frey. Notably, all of the sculptures in this section of the gallery explore alternative methods of display, whether the work is directly placed on the floor or elevated by a device of the artist's own creation. Cherubini's sculpture *G-Pot with Rocks* has a tiered pedestal made from marble, wood, and foam. At first glance, the base looks elegant and understated, like a little black dress. Compared to the gloss and rough texture of the vessel above, the base appears strikingly minimal. Entirely painted black, except for the small slab of marble that separates the ceramic from the wood elements below, the cheap materials that make up the base are subtly disguised.

Since the *G-Pots*, Cherubini has explored different ceramic forms and methods of display that continue to integrate the pedestal within the sculpture. Like Shechet, she also combines unconventional materials that reference the process of making inside the studio.

78. Francesca DiMattio and Nicole Cherubini, "A Conversation between Francesca DiMattio and Nicole Cherubini," in *Nicole Cherubini: The Love Tapes, A Retrospective*, ed. Kristen Dodge (Boston: OSP Catalogs, 2016), 5-6.

In *Bucket #1, The Red One*, we can observe how Cherubini has traded the feminine and decorative accessories characteristic of her *G-Pots* for hardware-store commodities. Like the commonplace materials that made up the bases of the *G-Pots*, these new do-it-yourself materials further exemplify the artist's views on tradition, innovation, function, and her studio environment. When asked about living and working in New York City, Cherubini stated, "My home and studio practice were intertwined with the city."⁷⁹ Although everyday materials consistently elevate the ceramic elements of each sculpture, these distinct materials are as important as the clay because the combinations illustrate each material's usefulness in Cherubini's studio:

I attempt to work with each material, form, and process for its inherent use and value, and to have them work together to make a whole. Clay, glaze, throwing casting, hand-building, wood, paint, MDF, enamel, Saran wrap—all have certain properties that the other does not...I want the viewer to see each process as information.⁸⁰

The artist's choice of materials communicates information about the values of the artist and transmits ideas about why she selected them. To a certain extent, they are selected because of society's familiarity with these materials. A viewer can easily recognize a bucket and begin to unravel Cherubini's perspective as an American living in New York. Moreover, the fact that Cherubini is a mother adds another layer of meaning to these materials.

Bucket #1, The Red One was included in the 2016 exhibition *Nicole Cherubini: The Love Tapes, A Retrospective* at the Retrospective Gallery in Hudson, New York.

79. Francesca DiMattio and Nicole Cherubini, "A Conversation between Francesca DiMattio and Nicole Cherubini," in *Nicole Cherubini: The Love Tapes, A Retrospective*, ed. Kristen Dodge (Boston: OSP Catalogs, 2016), 7.

80. Ibid.

Conflating old works with new investigations in clay and wood, *The Love Tapes* nonsequentially exhibited works spanning most of Cherubini's career. This solo exhibition asked broader questions, as stated by the show's press release: "We have been feeling the compressed space of external demands, and the limited space for more than a few. We have been wondering about women artists, and creating a disjuncture in primary narratives."⁸¹

Although *The Love Tapes* only lasted seven weeks, the exhibition's coordinator, art dealer Kristen Dodge, organized an exceptional catalog to accompany the show.⁸² In keeping with her interest in women artists, Dodge published a lengthy conversation from 2015 between Cherubini and contemporary New York-based artist Francesca DiMattio. Notably, this conversation touched on similar aspects to those of various interviews with Shechet, such as how living in New York and how being a mother have influenced their work. On the topic of motherhood, Cherubini does not view being a mother as a disadvantage, but a new perspective that has given her confidence inside the studio:

I'd say that I think of speed as intuition. I've learned so much from motherhood. It greatly changed my working process. I have less time in the studio, but I have more trust in myself and in my choices. Intuition is all you really have as a mother, as an artist. One informs the other. I have welcomed the relationship.⁸³

81. Kristen Dodge, "Press Release: Nicole Cherubini: 'the love tapes', a retrospective," *Retrospective*, accessed February 9, 2016, <http://retrospectivegallery.com/exhibitions/past/Nicole-Cherubini/Press-Release/>.

82. Kristen Dodge, *Nicole Cherubini: The Love Tapes, A Retrospective* (Boston: OSP Catalogs, 2016).

83. Francesca DiMattio and Nicole Cherubini, "A Conversation between Francesca DiMattio and Nicole Cherubini," in *Nicole Cherubini: The Love Tapes, A Retrospective*, ed. Kristen Dodge (Boston: OSP Catalogs, 2016), 8.

In this light, Cherubini's struggles have helped to form her process and aesthetic. Motherhood is an obstacle she has embraced and overcome by staying true to herself—by doing what comes naturally. We have already discussed how Shechet picks up on these ideas about motherhood and the feminine within her own sculpture, but also DiMattio, the youngest artist in this survey, does so by directly quoting ceramics' decorative history within her sculptures.

Chapter 4

Francesca DiMattio

Born in 1981 in New York, Francesca DiMattio attended graduate school at Columbia University, where she specialized in two-dimensional mixed-media works on paper. Large canvases painted in oil, acrylic, and collage depict cathedral-like interior spaces, banal household objects, and fragments of the figure. Layers of shape and pattern flatten into shadows or pop into another plane's relative space. It was not until graduating with her MFA in 2005 and meeting her future husband, artist Garth Weiser, that DiMattio began to experiment with clay. Guided by her father-in-law Kurt Weiser, ex-director of the Archie Bray Foundation in Helena, Montana, and present chair of Arizona State University's Ceramics Department, DiMattio started referencing the decorative and feminine associations of the vase throughout history. Interested in the concept of the vase rather than the desire to achieve technical perfection using a potter's wheel, she hand-builds and casts molds of everyday wares.⁸⁴ DiMattio recently became a mother and currently lives and works in New York.

DiMattio deliberately highlights craft in her artwork to comment on the history of ceramic art. Combining her interest in nostalgic motifs with new techniques and forms DiMattio conflates processes associated with decorative and contemporary art. In this way, DiMattio has developed a new aesthetic while keeping craft's rich decorative

84. Jenni Sorkin, "Remix/Reframe: Francesca DiMattio's Mash-Ups," in *Francesca DiMattio* (Houston: Blaffer Art Museum, University of Houston, 2015), 24-25.

history alive. Like Arlene Shechet and Nicole Cherubini, DiMattio credits New York City, her native environment, for her eclectic taste and proclivity to mix unlike elements:

I grew up in Chelsea and I never really left; I live on the fourth floor and grew up in the basement [of the same building]. The range that you see everyday in terms of cleanliness and filth, high and low cultures—I couldn't imagine living anywhere else. Even London was too clean. I love taking the subway to go to the studio and seeing a huge mix. You look up and the ceiling is falling down with layers of dirt. There are parts that almost take the filth to a sculptural place. I'm really uncomfortable in places that don't have [the range]. From growing up here, I get really uneasy when it's not there.⁸⁵

DiMattio embraces the different cultures and styles of New York City, but also enlists the decay and grime of city life. On one hand, DiMattio uses clay to elicit sensations of “filth” from her experience living in metropolitan areas.⁸⁶ The correlation between clay and filth is an obvious one—earth, the stuff we know as dirt, mud, and muck. Ingrid Schaffner discusses literal and metaphorical interpretations at length in the essay “On Dirt.”⁸⁷ On the other hand, DiMattio employs clay for its decorative history and its affiliation with outdated ideas about appropriate feminine pursuits. Originally, porcelain décor had no association with grime outside the manufacturing process, but in the twenty-first century, the ubiquity of porcelain objects has changed this perception. Porcelain décor can regularly be found in secondhand stores, which are notoriously seen as dirty establishments that are primarily located in low-income urban areas.

85. Emily McDermott, “Francesca DiMattio in London,” in *Interview Magazine* (October 2015). http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/francesca-dimattios-instable-stability#_.

86. Ibid.

87. Ingrid Schaffer, “On Dirt,” in *Dirt on Delight: Impulses That Form Clay*, ed. Ingrid Schaffer and Jenelle Porter (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 2009), 25-31.

In 2012, DiMattio premiered her sculptures in the solo exhibition *Francesca DiMattio: Table Setting and Flower Arranging* at the Salon 94 Bowery, New York. The scale of the sculptures ranges from ironically large to domestically manageable, and the sculptures themselves take the form of vases influenced by examples from porcelain factories like Sèvres, Meissen, and Wedgwood. However, DiMattio's vases are precariously stacked, stuck, and fired together, forming complicated surface juxtapositions. Delicate China-painted decorations merge into washes of dripping glaze, while actual flowers are arranged in the sculpture's multiple openings.

Fresh and fragrant, cut short or left long, flowers have always seemed to need a vase—a vessel that civilizes nature and arranges it inside the home. Flowers not only reference the art of flower arranging predominantly practiced by women, but DiMattio also alludes to the subjugation of women by skewing well-known forms and motifs from ceramic history. DiMattio's large sculptures not only display her skill in replicating delicate China-painted motifs historically found on porcelain wares, but also combine her immediate/intuitional response to clay by mixing heavy, strangely textured, and abstract forms. Like Shechet's and Cherubini's sculptures, stools, chairs, and tables are an integral part of DiMattio's bases. Furniture is covered in clay and fired in the kiln, mortaring the materials together. For instance, sculpture *Fleur de lis* (2014) [Figure 2], is a monumental blending of domestic/institutional space and high/low art. DiMattio's progression toward sizable multi-handled vases that are fixed to found chairs and stools is exemplified in the solo exhibitions *Francesca DiMattio: Housewares* at the Blaffer Art Museum, Houston, in 2014, and *Domestic Sculpture* at Salon 94 Bowery, New York, in 2015.

Figure 2. Francesca DiMattio. *Fleur de lis*, 2014, glaze on porcelain and stoneware, wood, enamel and papier-mâché, overall dimensions 185.4 x 71.1 x 71.1 cm, 73 x 28 x 28 in., Private Collection. Courtesy Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London. Copyright the artist.

Francesca DiMattio: Housewares featured paintings and sculpture focused on domestic interiors. DiMattio's ceramic sculptures were exhibited alongside her paintings and at first appeared to function like exaggerated household objects primarily because of her bases. Embellished and overstated, the sculpture *Chintz* (2014) consists of secondhand furniture, vases, epoxy, paper pulp on metal, and porcelain. The four legs that sprout from the base of *Chintz* announce the inclusion of a chair, which has been covered with cheap hobbyist materials. Decorating the surface are motifs popularized by 17th century French Chinoiserie. Unlike the crude texture that covers the sculpture's surface, the motifs are masterfully painted using traditional China paints and underglazes. Delicately composed pink rosebuds remind the viewer of precious porcelain wares made by European porcelain factories. Almost blanketing the entire front of the sculpture, the rosebuds clash against a metallic tar-like surface. The motifs do not extend into this dark surface; instead, the contrast between light and shadow illuminates gestural marks and fingerprints DiMattio purposefully leaves in the clay. The base of the sculpture is a chair, a support for a series of vases. Real white roses are arranged near the top of the sculpture throughout multiple openings in the vases. In this exhibition, sculptural objects reclaim their traditional functions inside the gallery.

In conversation with Cherubini, DiMattio states, "I want to fuse the undeniably feminine with danger, roughness, and toughness to find different and less fixed ways of

seeing and experiencing what's been associated with the feminine.”⁸⁸ The formal juxtapositions between large and small, strength and fragility, unique and commonplace are opposite characteristics associated with traditional gender roles. Generally, Western cultures value the former more than the later, but by contradicting these attributes, DiMattio uses the history of decorative art and sculpture to conceptually subvert society's perception of the contemporary woman artist—or perhaps all Western women for that matter.

88. Francesca DiMattio and Nicole Cherubini, “A Conversation between Francesca DiMattio and Nicole Cherubini,” in *Nicole Cherubini: The Love Tapes, A Retrospective*, ed. Kristen Dodge (Boston: OSP Catalogs, 2016), 5.

Conclusion

The struggles of being a woman artist in the twenty-first century seem to determine the ideas, processes, and aesthetic intrinsic to Shechet's, Cherubini's, and DiMattio's sculptures. Identifying and understanding their shared experiences as mothers, as well as their presence in New York, provides valuable evidence in support of why they incorporate furniture and common materials within their pedestals. The lenses provided by feminist art historians and scholars in the field of sociology could have solely been applied to these artists' use of clay and "sloppy craft" to make a feminist argument; however, an analysis of the pedestal—no longer a supplemental object—has explored the concept of institutional marginality to a greater extent. There is something to be said about the fact that the incorporation of the pedestal remains constant. The pedestal not only speaks to their circumstances as women artists, but also recalls the act of decorating interior spaces with furniture, similar to DiMattio's commentary on flower arranging.

Furthermore, by infiltrating institutional space with references to the home and studio, these metaphors for womanhood take advantage of the museum's need to collect and expand. In this way, when exhibited, the process of making and viewing is subverted because these artists present a sculpture about the creative process. Along these lines, Shechet, Cherubini, and DiMattio have achieved success in the field of contemporary sculpture on their own terms. They have victoriously done so by embracing and critiquing traditional aspects of womanhood instead of evading or sacrificing them.

As this thesis has demonstrated, it is important not to consider just one artist, one work of art, or one institution to understand the recent change that has occurred in the field of contemporary sculpture. If given more time, further case studies exploring new versus old museums could further elucidate the systems of power inside contemporary art institutions, leading to a better understanding of why sculpture made from craft-based materials and sculpture by women are being collected. This would also require a better picture of the curators themselves, as well as an understanding of acquisition processes. Recognizing the struggles of the woman sculptor in New York has acknowledged her point of view and slightly begun to uncover the motivations of museums that exhibit new art.

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