



Hydria with a Lethykos (Detail).

Nicole Cherubini's Art Pots

Article by
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NICOLE CHERUBINI WAS SHOWCASED IN TWO OF the year's more high-profile ceramic arts group shows: *Confrontational Ceramics*, a New York exhibition and *Dirt on Delight*, a show at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. A 2007 British publication, *Breaking the Mould*, also featured Cherubini among others "who are taking clay into exciting new territory". Such occasions would seem to mark a good run but Cherubini's singular successes have actually been occurring in the fine arts arena.

Making it onto the critic's picks lists at *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times* and *ARTnews*, Cherubini also contributed this past year to *ARTFORUM's Top Ten*. She has been written about in the pages of *The Believer* – a general-interest publication – and at the time of writing was featured in two solo shows: one at Smith-Stewart on Manhattan's Lower East Side and the other at D'Amelio Terras in Chelsea.

Unlike the group shows, which placed Cherubini in contexts, these last two shows were open-ended. The pieces on display – all large vessels, some on the floor, others on plinths, most accompanied by hand-painted digital prints – toyed obviously with ceramics histories. At the same time, each pot transcended clay's antique concerns of function, décor, and materiality. The work suggested that Cherubini is not only a sculptor, like Ken Price or Grayson Perry, able to bridge two audiences but is also one of the more exciting artists of her generation working in clay today.

Born in Boston and now in her late 30s, Cherubini was not always interested in clay. Ten years ago she was taking photographs. (She earned her MFA in Fine Arts from New York University.) While clay certainly came into her earlier work (one photo project comprised images of her Italian grandmother's dishes), Cherubini's practices took root in such diverse fields that one material was never enough. As a younger artist, Cherubini was influenced by Cindy Sherman's portraits and by her printmaking classes at the Rhode Island School of Design. As a maturing artist, she looked to sculptors like Hannah Wilke, Lynda Benglis, Franz West and Beverly Semmes. Cherubini became an artist who, 10 years from now, might turn to latex and stone, to garbage, to anything, because she is first inspired by her ideas. When asked about turning to the vessel form she explains her curiosity

Vanitas #9 (Detail).



not out of a passion for clay but out of an excitement for what pots could represent: "I saw Hittite pots when I was travelling in Turkey. I had just started using clay again and was blown away by how modernist they were. The vessel is an iconic form with direct ties to the decorative. It denotes ideas of beauty and the silhouette, two things that could be used for formal and conceptual material."

It is with the words 'conceptual material' that we begin to distinguish how we are looking, in Cherubini's work, not at a pot but at a sculpture. The decorative arts aspire to formal perfection – to the curve of a silhouette – to the feathery peonies of chinoiserie. What the decorative arts ignore is concept. A fine vase represents taste, such that we notice it tangentially. But art, in caring little about taste, wants to be noticed and analysed.

While it can be tempting with the current generation of clay artists to re-engage these strict and, at times, boring debates of the fine arts versus the crafts – because the current generation is often working well outside of clay's material histories – there is something different in Cherubini's practices in that she engages the formal histories of her medium quite directly. In embracing the symbol of the ceramic arts

Hydra with a Lethykos. 2008. Ceramic, terracotta, porcelain, yellow, green and blue crystal ice, mother of pearl lustre, wood, plywood, mahogany, c-print, watercolour paper, gouache, graphite, ink, aquarelle, wax crayon, enamel and MDF. 109.2 x 147.3 cm. (51 x 43 x 58 in.)



Vanitas #9. 2008. Earthenware, porcelain, terra cotta, glaze, chain, enamel, wood, polyurethane. 177.8 x 50.8 x 50.8 cm. (70 x 20 x 20 in.)

par excellence – the vessel – Cherubini is falling in step with the art pot tradition of the past century, the most famous practitioner of such work being Peter Voulkos and his predecessor, George Ohr and before him, the Brothers Kirkpatrick and moving on forward to today's art pots, most notably to the work of English artist Grayson Perry, whose classical vases are decorated with narratives of his cross-dressing alter ego, Claire. Like Perry, whose pots garnered the 2003 Turner Prize, or Ohr, whose vessels preceded the abstract expressionist movement by some 60 years, Cherubini is making pots that remind us how the revolutionary potential of the vessel as a conceptual vehicle is grossly underestimated. "Clay and the vessel came to me," she says, "as a complete conceptual tool for a discussion of lack and for an exploration of the decorative."

'Lack', an idea that begins with the theories of Lacan and is, for our purposes, another way to say 'desire',



G-Pot/Kalpis, With Lion. 2006–2007. Ceramic, lustre, yellow, green and white crystal ice, fake gold and silver jewellery, brown rabbit fur, enamel, rebar, MDF and grog.
78.7 x 78.7 x 162.6 cm. (31 x 31 x 64 in.)

is also a launch pad concept from Cherubini's graduate school days when she was reading the European feminists and psychoanalysts Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. Both had taken up Lacan's theories of desire and redefined them in positive terms of pleasure and excess rather than in negative terms (envy of the phallus, lack of the phallus and so on). In art, ideas of lack hover around talk of presence and absence, around non-symbolic spaces of 'nothing' or 'non-art' like the empty space a vessel contains. Absence of the other, as protest, as the spaces between an otherwise symbolic and structured patriarchal order has also been a key idea in the feminist theory of the 1960s and 1970s. With Cherubini's influences ranging from Hannah Wilke's vulva sculptures – which aimed to reclaim female imagery from the masters' canons – to Beverly Semmes's monumental dresses – which, like clay pots, play with the craft materials that have long been associated with a woman's 'lesser' work – we see how Cherubini's interests in lack and in ceramics, in decoration and a vessel's emptiness, lend her pots a sub-text of quiet challenge to the George Ohrs and the Peter Voulkos, even to

the renegade Grayson Perrys of the ceramic art pot patrimony.

In Cherubini's early pots – a series called *G-pots*, the G standing in for 'ghetto' or 'glamour' or for a rhyme on a woman's spot of pleasure – the surfaces were holed up and bottoms opened as a way to draw attention to that wanting space inside. Not many people noticed the pots' absences. Critics were entertained by their presence: the dripping gold chains; the flamboyant colours; the fur-lined lips. Words like 'opulence' and 'pop culture' were used to describe the jewels and cherubs that alluded to Cherubini's other interest: the decorative arts. Perched on their plinths like personalities on a red carpet, these pots were decorated, their bright colours accentuating rather than hiding that desirous space inside that causes us to dress up and pose about in the hopes that we might draw in another.

If Cherubini's early pots were ostentatious girls, on display and out on the town, her new pieces have matured into ladies who want to talk quietly about their trip to Greece and the nightmares they may

G-Pot/Kalpis, With Lion (Detail).



be having about *Hydra*, seen there in a museum, on a vase. *Hydra* is a mythic serpent that guarded the Underworld and that Cherubini has evoked via the title of one pot on display at D'Amelio Terras, *Hydras*, with a collar of tangled snakes at it's neck. In characteristic Cherubini fashion, one reference alluding to many ends, these snakes also evoke the Brothers Kirkpatrick; two Illinois potters who were the first to make politically-charged 'concept' pots, in their case, 19th century whiskey jugs that were covered in serpents eating fellows' heads or about to penetrate women and sodomize men. These jugs were thought to support the temperance movement (for example, alcohol makes us do evil things) but were likely parodies of the Puritanism of the time. The brothers' work was seen by George Ohr, who might have taken their seedy aesthetic as a starting point to reject pots as only beautiful forms. (See Richard Mohr's *Pottery, Politics, Art* for more.) In the green arm that extends from Cherubini's *Hydras*, we are given not a functional handle but a diptych of layered George Ohr

Hydras (Detail).



Hydras. 2008. Ceramic, earthenware, terra cotta, porcelain, enamel, lustre, wood, digital c-prints on watercolour paper, gouache, wax crayon, ink, charcoal and graphite.
162.6 x 109.2 x 38.1 cm. (64 x 43 x 15 in.)

and Greek pots. "I have a deluded and growing theory," she says, "that Ohr and the Kirkpatricks are the patrimony of American Art." Her allusions to art pots, to the foundations of American art, to ancient Greece, reflect a movement away from vessels that want to comment on material culture to those that engage more formal conditions of the beautiful. Colours have gone from flashy to calming whites while the titles, no longer referring to glamour and g-spots, evoke a mythic aura: *lethykos* (Greek for oil jar); *amphora* (Greek for two-handled jar).

Another quality that has become more sophisticated is her sculptural focus. Cherubini's plinths, for example, have always been part of the work but in the past they held the pot. Here, the pedestals have become 'pictures', one pushed against a wall where a painting belongs, another, reduced to an arm finishing at a c-print. Backsides of vessels reveal holes and the crude surfaces of the picture part that is hidden against a wall. What is three-dimensional insists that it is two-dimensional and the effect is like a woman who takes off her make-up or like a stage



Amphora and Drawing at Wall. 2008. Ceramic, earthenware, terracotta, porcelain, wood, enamel, lustre, digital c-prints on watercolour paper, gouache, wax crayon, ink, charcoal and graphite. 139.7 x 45.7 x 30.5 cm. (55 x 18 x 12 in.)

set that lifts to reveal the pulleys behind a Greek tragedy. You walk around the vessels and feel a sense of things undone. What is left in Cherubini's empty spaces (the holes, the raw wood) is want and a desire for a completed form.

Over at Smith Stewart – where one manipulated c-print features a flattened view of the *Porzellan-kabinett*, an interior in the Charlottenburg Palace in Berlin, Germany which is filled with Chinese and Japanese porcelain – a plinth with black drips, the drips reflected upward in the pot where a vase would traditionally offer a narrative frieze, echoes abstract expressionist paintings (Franz Kline in the loose black swath; Kazimir Malevich in the white pool on white alabaster) in much the same way that mountains on a Qing Dynasty vase would reflect Chinese

landscape painting. Cherubini seems to know here that pottery's historical handmaiden is painting, not sculpture. She nonetheless finds a way to mix that up, to make her genres – pottery, sculpture, painting – shift into one another and change.

"With this investigation I've become interested in the boundaries between the two and three dimensional," Cherubini says. "I think the most amazing part of working with clay is that you have to deal with both: first form, then surface. That is why I chose to reference the Eva Hesse piece. No one discusses this better."

Cherubini is referring to her piece *Amphora with Rocks and Loop*, a soft white vase with an engulfing loop falling out where a handle might have been. Eva Hesse's piece, *Hang Up* (1966), is a loose steel rod that extends from an empty frame, transforming what we expect to be a painting into a sculpture. Hesse, who was born in Hamburg but who worked in New York, was interested in boundaries, in lines, in the spaces between. "Where does painting end and drawing

Amphora and Drawing at Wall (Detail).



begin?" she asked. "A lot of my sculpture could be called painting." Cherubini's amphora could be called a pot, a column and with that drooping arm, it could be called a sculpture, a line study, a drawing. In not knowing the boundaries of the object (Where is the front and back? Is it decorative or sculptural?), the viewer is asked to come up with a new name or surrender to not knowing.

George Ohr and feminism, Greek myth and Eva Hesse, desire, décor and feeling – perhaps it is too much for any pot to hold. Cherubini nonetheless brings together her ideas and there in that shaped hunger we sense the work's wider appeal. Because to run into big smart pots in a neighbourhood where one usually drinks in hip eateries (the Lower East Side) and to encounter more pots in a neighbourhood that often scoffs at craft materials (the Chelsea art gallery district), is to wonder whether clay vessels are the next cool thing. It is a curiosity rooted, of course, in the hyperbole of excitement. If we were

Amphora with Rocks and Loop. 2008. Ceramic, earthenware, terra cotta, porcelain, wood, enamel, lustre, MDF, marble alabaster and steel. 170.2 x 114.3 x 76.2 cm. (66.5 x 45 x 30 in.)



Installation View: D'Amelio Terras, New York.
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to look more reasonably from inside the fine arts world, we would see that Cherubini's vessels do fit into the formal revival that has arguably been brewing in New York art circles. Quality and skill are in demand. Realistic painters like John Currin and Elizabeth Peyton have been hyped. Devotion to material traditions is meaningful, not embarrassing. And mixing up tradition (playing with the *luxe, calme et volupté* of ritual objects seen in museums) is a gesture that hits us instinctively: we are looking, in Nicole Cherubini's work, at the pots of our time. But we are also looking at so much more. We see women and history, sculpture and intelligence and, in the end, a voracity that reminds us that what we are looking at is art. No matter that some of us – at first glance – might have mistaken it for a pot.

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All photos by Jason Mandella.