



Project Gallery: Nicole Cherubini
October 8, 2014–April 5, 2015

Nicole Cherubini

b. 1970, Boston; lives in New York and East Chatham, New York

All works courtesy the artist, Tracy Williams Ltd., New York, and Samson Projects, Boston

500, 2014

Earthenware and glaze, 10 earthenware boxes, 8 x 8 x 14 inches each; earthenware form, 8 x 9 x 8 inches; overall dimensions variable

Blue Spot, 2014

Earthenware, glaze, pine, and spray paint, 18 1/2 x 13 x 3 1/2 inches

Cleo(patra), 2014

Earthenware, glaze, and birch plywood, 66 x 18 x 12 inches

Earth Pot #6, 2014

Earthenware and bronze, 49 x 20 x 20 inches

Page 18, spring 2014

Earthenware, glaze, pine, and paint, 22 x 22 x 7 inches

Panel #1 and #2, 2014

Earthenware, terracotta, glaze paint, medium-density fiberboard (MDF), acrylic paint, and enamel, 57 x 86 x 4 inches

RED POT, 2014

Terracotta, birch plywood, and industrial plastic wrap, 59 x 20 x 21 inches

Sun was Blue, 2014

Earthenware, glaze, pine, and paint, 18 x 21 x 4 inches

The birds are part of everything, 2014

Earthenware, glaze, pine, and spray paint, 18 x 13 x 6 inches

Twisted Banyan Root Tree, 2014

Earthenware, glaze, pine, and spray paint, 22 1/2 x 12 x 6 inches

Two Soap Bubbles, 2014

Earthenware, glaze, pine, and spray paint, 19 x 14 x 5 inches



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Project Gallery

Nicole Cherubini

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English

Reckless grace. Funk and elegance. Baroque Minimalism.

These are phrases that emerged while planning this project and that sought to capture the tone and tenor of what it could be.¹ The words seem dichotomous and contradictory, but they also describe states of being that are illuminated by their coexistence and relation to one another. These terms are among the guiding elements of this exhibition, titled 500, and, perhaps more broadly, Nicole Cherubini's practice. Best known for her work with clay, a medium in which she is trained and with which she has consistently worked for 20 years, Cherubini's sculptures embody a raw and dynamic tension. She has honed a distinct vocabulary of motifs, gestures, and shapes that recur throughout her work, and the vessel—the definitive clay form emerging from ancient history—remains an abiding interest.² Many of her works take this functional object as a point of departure, radically reinterpreting and exploring it as a sculptural form.

Earth Pot #6 (2014), a large vessel that sits on a low plinth, is a central work in this exhibition. The pot functions like a protagonist in the choreography of the gallery space, establishing a bodily presence that is reflected in the architecture and textures of the works surrounding it. The piece reveals its construction through stacked coiled layers. Its cratered scales and roughly hewn shapes evidence the artist's touch and reveal the way in which, as the artist posits, clay has memory—its surface bears the traces of its making, marking the passage of time.

The central layer and top of *Earth Pot #6* are comprised of extruded ropes of clay that the artist uses both to create physical structure and as ornament reminiscent of painterly lines, industrial rope, and organic vines. The work is unglazed, exposing the opaque and absorbent chalky white clay that stands in sharp contrast to its cast bronze base and pitted band. Like ceramics, bronze recalls prehistoric artifacts, but it also represents a radical shift in materiality and process for Cherubini. While the medium shows the marks of the artist's gestures—perhaps even more so than clay—bronze shifts the final stages of art making out of Cherubini's hands and fundamentally changes the physical and visual weight of the work, imbuing it with a dense gravity. This massive amphora, a jar form of ancient Greece, invokes the long history of clay and its traditional functionality, while simultaneously emerging from the unbounded, exploded nature of contemporary sculptural practice—awkward, refined, present.

Since 2009, Cherubini has been exploring boxlike vessel forms, which are made from slip-casting the actual boxes in which clay is shipped and stored. The artist creates wall-mounted works from these structures, digging out a hollow space from the back of the clay after removing it from its package and then firing it with the shape and textured imprint of its mold—the cardboard container. These forms are affixed to carefully considered, wooden supports often painted in electric, neon colors that dialogue with the richer, more nuanced glazes applied to the surface of the clay boxes. While the minimalist wooden mounts are a necessity of display, in Cherubini's hands, this functional apparatus becomes a vital formal counterpart to the clay. These works move between painting and sculpture, an in-between zone that defines for Cherubini the nature of working with clay, in which “you are building with it in three dimensions, yet



¹ “Reckless grace” and “funk and elegance” emerged from a series of text messages exchanged between the author and Nicole Cherubini, Aug. 5, 2014. Cherubini has returned to the idea of “baroque Minimalism” repeatedly, most recently in an interview with the artist Sarah Braman. See Sarah Braman, “Nicole Cherubini,” *Bomb* 129 (Fall 2014): 142, in which Cherubini discusses her interest in both ornamental and minimalist tendencies as well as historical sites that she reads as embodiments of this impulse.

² For further examination of the artist's formal trajectory regarding vessel forms, see *ibid.*, p. 138.

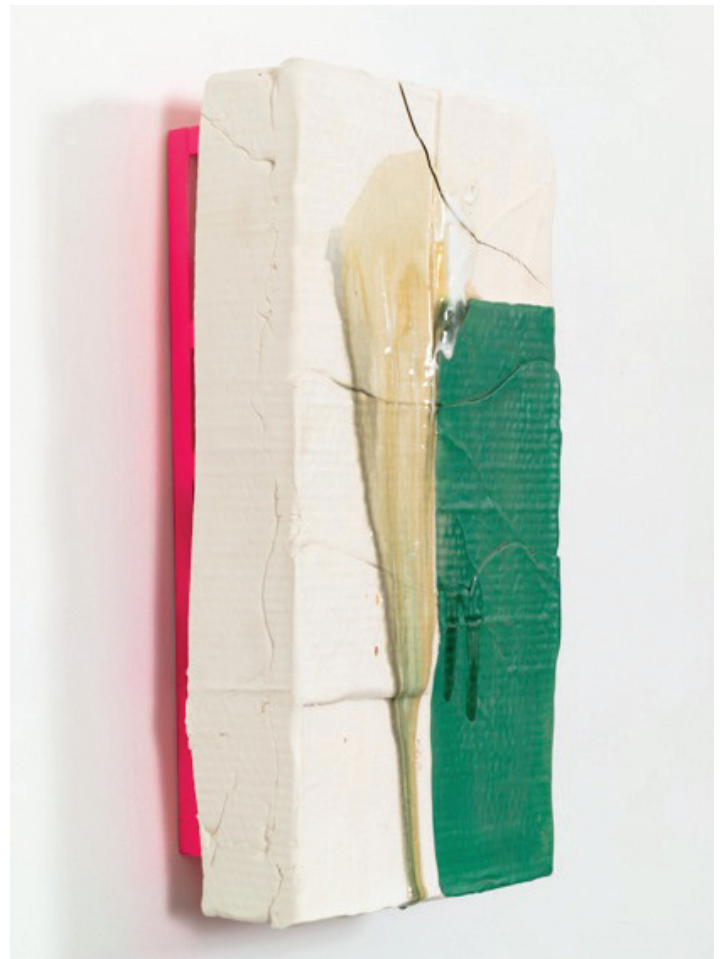
simultaneously, you are forced to deal with the surface, the colour, the texture.”³ Their shape, resolute border, and frontality reference a painting’s canvas while simultaneously asking us to engage their depth, uneven sides, and wooden support. On the surface of *Twisted Banyan Root Tree* (2014), a bold, geometric green quadrant is paired with a thin, veiled drip that abuts it, while a hot-pink mount peeks out from the edges. Creases, folds, and wrinkles, legible in the clay beneath the surface of the glazes, are traces of the original cardboard mold.

For this exhibition, Cherubini has extended her investigation of box forms. *500* (2014) is a pile of ten white boxes placed on a simple medium-density fiberboard (MDF) base, glazed to shine with cracked, glossy surfaces, but without other adornment. These are elegant, minimalist forms and Cherubini’s inclusion of a lump of unglazed clay only heightens their unexpected delicacy and beauty. Taking a cue from conceptual practices of the 1960s and 1970s, in which an artist’s labor and process were often made transparent to the viewer and employed as content, there is a complex relationship among source, process, and final product in these works. Their ultimate form suggests alchemical transformation through craft, but nonetheless they are inescapably tied to their origins—they resolutely remain boxes. The title of the piece, which lends its name to the exhibition as well, refers to the number of pounds of clay that would have been contained in the ten original boxes.

Unlike work by a number of her contemporaries who employ packaging and systems of transport to reveal and play with notions of exchange that define the art market and global economy, Cherubini’s boxes instead seem to reiterate her complex conceptual interpretation of the amphora—the precious but expendable vehicle that typically has value ascribed to it by virtue of its contents. Likewise, *RED POT* (2014) employs an inexpensive packing material—its tall, slender base is wrapped in green industrial plastic wrap. Beyond a revelation of its shipping history, this translucent film appears like a corporeal and decorative skin on an already anthropomorphized, regal sculpture.

Central to this project are also wall-based works that employ new shapes for the artist: diamonds, hexagons, and heptagons, which appear as both single pieces and in groups on MDF panels, here exemplified by *Panel #1 and #2* (2014). Individually, and particularly when stacked or set side-by-side, these shapes create a mirrored negative space of their own forms. Cherubini has discussed this as being about the suggestion of something “additive”: their edges that fit together and their recurring presence suggest the possibility of endlessly repeated tiling—achieving and addressing seriality and architecture by implication and absence.

Nonhierarchical space, which insinuates itself with regard to abstract art, is in these works thought through as both a formal mode and symbol of social structure.⁴ Cherubini is interested in forms that, when joined to similar forms, create something architectural, like a beehive or a geodesic dome,



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both exemplars of communal living. Bees, and their unique cooperative hive existence, are a subject of interest for the artist and an important touchstone as part of larger notions of community and function that guide her practice.⁵ Taking a cue from a series of published lectures on bees by Rudolf Steiner, Cherubini is interested in the deep matriarchal and systemic structure of the hive and Steiner’s analysis of the role love plays in the beehive. Steiner proposes that because hives function with the highly specified responsibilities undertaken by each member at the service of the community, and because reproduction and propagation is undertaken only by queen bees, a spirit of love pervades the entire community: “In many ways the bees renounce love, and thereby this love develops within the entire beehive...bees live as if it were an atmosphere pervaded thoroughly by love.”⁶

This radical interpretation of the biological imperative of the beehive resonated with Cherubini and is reflected in the mode through which feminism infuses her practice. Rather than adopt a discourse of feminism through craft traditions and ideas of “women’s work,” Cherubini embraces feminism for the way in which it presents the possibility of assuming an oppositional position within the world and relates to notions of collectivity. Her use of additive forms that give way to ideas of reproducibility and repetition echoes this interpretation.

3 “Labours of Love: An Interview with Nicole Cherubini,” by Jack Tan, *3rd Dimension: The PMSA Magazine and Newsletter*, July 6, 2014, <http://3rd-dimensionpmsa.org.uk/interviews/2014-07-06-labours-of-love-an-interview-with-nicole-cherubini>.

4 Nicole Cherubini, in conversation with author, July 8, 2014.

5 Tan, “Labours of Love.”

6 Rudolf Steiner, *Bees: Lectures by Rudolf Steiner* (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1998), 3.



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In contrast to the singularity of the rectangular canvas and the gendered official trope of vessels, Cherubini finds a progressive social analog in the elegant and evocative geometry of hexagons, heptagons, and diamonds.

While recent years have witnessed an upsurge in the use and popularity of clay as a sculptural material in contemporary art, Cherubini's technical skill and her abiding conceptual interest in the medium and its history, both formal and social, distinguish her practice. The metaphors built into her materials, the history excavated in her forms, and the deep sensitivity to the uncertain but rich space between painting and sculpture evidenced in this exhibition speak of a practice that is at once firmly grounded and deeply experimental. Reckless grace, indeed.

Diana Nawi
Associate Curator

Biography

Nicole Cherubini was born in Boston in 1970 and lives and works between New York and East Chatham, New York. She received her BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, and her MFA from New York University. She has presented solo exhibitions at the Santa Monica Museum of Art; Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; Nassau County Museum of Art, Roslyn Harbor, New York; Jersey City Museum, New Jersey; and La Panadería, Mexico City. Her works have been included in group exhibitions at institutions such as the Boston University Art Gallery; Boston Center for the Arts; Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan; Permanenten: The West Norway Museum of Decorative Art, Bergen; Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Providence; MoMA PS1, Long Island City; and SculptureCenter, Long Island City.

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- Cover Nicole Cherubini, *RED POT*, 2014. Terracotta, birch plywood, and industrial plastic wrap, 59 x 20 x 21 inches
- 2 Nicole Cherubini, *Earth Pot #6*, 2014. Earthenware and bronze, 49 x 20 x 20 inches
- 3 Nicole Cherubini, *Twisted Banyan Root Tree*, 2014. Earthenware, glaze, pine, and spray paint, 22 1/2 x 12 x 6 inches
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