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Nicole Cherubini
by Sarah Braman



Since Nicole Cherubini and I live in and out of New York City, it wasn't easy to find time to talk. Back in June, I wound up driving from Amherst to Nicole's studio in the Brooklyn Navy Yard and coming back the same day. The three hours spent with her were an oasis. Studio visits are exhilarating because you get to witness people fully in their element. Nicole's studio is bright and filled with sculpture; just standing in the room, I got a sense of her long relationship with materials. Even with her interest in minimalism, what I felt most in the work was the expressiveness of the clay.

Whether it's a slip cast of a cardboard box or a hand-built pot, Nicole's touch is there.

We had a good talk. Funnily enough, as soon as the tape was turned off, the conversation about our feelings on motherhood and the role of gender in the art environment became more frank. I guess we felt more comfortable talking about those issues off the record. We both laughed about that at the time. Maybe there is another interview to work on?

SARAH BRAMAN

right:
**POSEIDON'S
SISTER, 2014,**
earthenware,
MDF, glaze, pine,
52 x 29 x 28 inches.

opposite:
ASTRALOGY,
2013, pine, MDF,
earthenware,
terracotta,
porcelain, glaze,
paint can, acrylic,
ronan finish, spray
paint, 55 x 46 x 9.5
inches. All photos
by Jason Mandella.
Images courtesy of
the artist and Tracy
Williams, Ltd., New
York.



SARAH BRAMAN: It's great to be here.

NICOLE CHERUBINI: Well, thank you! I'm so happy you made the trip.

SB: We're standing and looking at a studio full of work. You were telling me about an upcoming show you have—

NC: —at the Pérez Art Museum Miami, in October.

SB: Why don't we take a piece, and then you can talk about it. Can we have a sign language so if there's a question that's too corny or bad you can tell me to stop talking?

NC: (*laughter*) How about this piece? It's one of my big earth pots. I've been working with the vessel for so long ... How far should I go back?

SB: Go back.

NC: Okay. As an undergrad, I went to RISD for ceramics. Then I lived in Mexico for a year with a NEA travel grant; I studied figurative folk ceramics and I spent some time in Mexico City's contemporary art scene. Then I came back to New York and I started making big sculptures—it was the '90s. I was using a lot of fabric and paper, and doing a lot of photography. I started researching the history of the decorative within a feminist context and was spending much time at the Met. I kept coming back to all these pots there and actually realized that they were this incredible signifier of historical precedence. They held the presence and concerns of their time period—through both surface and form.

At the time, I was also taking photographs of my grandmother's house. She has a beautiful home full of beautiful objects, much in the style of the Italian-American—it's a mini-Versailles of sorts, if that makes sense. She was a bridal and ball-gown designer, and is still living alone at 101. I was trying to understand her aesthetic and, at the same time, challenge it. It was during this time that I became aware of grappling with my love of lavish material, yet also of minimalism. As I was documenting her home, I began archiving and writing about the images. It was then that I started making these little pots to go with each photograph. I was doing that

for about a year, when I realized that the pots were more interesting than the photographs. So I started focusing on them.

I had also spent time in Turkey, where I was looking at Hittite pots, studying their use and function—they have big handles to tie them to horses, or pointed bottoms for standing in sand, for instance. I was putting all this information together, and I came to the questions of: What is the function of a pot in contemporary society? In the fine arts? And what is function? That's when I started the crazy pots with all the chains and furs—about nine years ago.

Using clay, I've always had this idea that I have to reference the history of the material. It has so much fertile cultural meaning; this had to be addressed. That's where all the pots have come from; through the years they've gone in and out of the work. Now there's always a pot in my studio, being made along with other works. My earth pots are grounding for me; they're a reference point to everything else going on in the room. Without the pot, everything loses its meaning somehow.

SB: So will this be the only pot you'll have in the show?

NC: Yes, there will just be one, *Red Pot*. Over the years, I've become a devoted materialist. I divide clay and glaze, and think of them as two different materials. I use more and more raw clay in the work, to show that glaze is a separate material.

Working with pots, I've learned that if they're completely glazed, people see them as fetishized objects. When I break them up, with some parts glazed and some not, then they are viewed as sculptures whose parts and constructed details can be seen.

SB: So the pot's probably four feet tall? I love the base under it.

NC: About that. Yeah.

SB: The top three quarters are unglazed white clay and then the bottom quarter looks like a flowerpot under which is a thin slab of clay that's glazed yellow. I can feel how fragile that is. And that tiniest bit of yellow is very powerful.

NC: Without the glaze you can actually

see the hand marks so much more, too. When it's glazed, the making of it—the most interesting part to me—just disappears. Clay records everything. Another one of my favorite things about clay is that you're always traveling between two and three dimensions.

SB: You mean from the slab to the form?

NC: You have this mound of clay. You must make something with it, then it comes out of the kiln and you have to deal with the surface. Clay inhabits the space between sculpture and painting. I think of it as those weird twelve inches between the wall and the floor, you know, when, because of the baseboard, you cannot fit the sofa flush to the wall. (*laughter*)

There was a period when I became tired of making the pots—the glaze would always move in the same direction due to gravity, and the forms always followed the same rules. During this time, I became way more intrigued by the cardboard boxes that the clay came in. I would have piles of them in my studio. Coincidentally, Rauschenberg's show was up at Gagosian, which included a few trompe l'oeil cardboard sculptures that he had produced in clay in Florida. They looked just like the other works, maybe slightly smaller due to the materials. I couldn't figure out, it made no sense to me why he would do that—the sculptures looked exactly like cardboard and had nothing to do with the material they were made in. With this, I tried to see what I would do to a cardboard sculpture made out of clay. I started using the boxes as one-time molds, and then I would smash, fold, and flatten them, thereby emphasizing the process of making and sculpting material. Then I'd put them up on the wall, and they would have this wonderful texture, almost canvas-like.

This allowed me to continue investigating wall sculpture, or those actual "twelve inches" of space. Somehow Rauschenberg's clay versions seemed more decorative to me. There is always that line with objects and painting. I have been working on these wall pieces for a few years now. For this show, I'm actually casting the cardboard boxes in the full three dimensions, or round, and I'm finally making the pile of boxes that started all of this.

sb: How do you do it? I don't know very much about—

nc: I slip cast them. You pour liquid clay into a plaster mold and then you let it sit for a while. Plaster is water-seeking, so it sucks the water out of the clay, forming a thin wall. Then you flip the mold, emptying out all of the extra slip inside, and you let it set for a bit. It's how all those fancy baroque figurines are made, as well as everyday ceramic objects.

sb: This part looks like a hunk of clay ripped in half. It reminds me of Jeff Koons's Play-Doh sculptures. It's not something you normally see in ceramics.

nc: The roughness of it. I'm trying to figure out what to do with that right now.

sb: And for the wall piece that you were talking about, you pressed actual clay into the cardboard box, and then mounted it on wood?

nc: Yes.

sb: And that's painted, so the mount, sculpturally, is as important as the box.

nc: Exactly. It's an obvious reference, but I think a lot about Judd's idea of the functional support being as important and visually interesting as the sculpted mounted piece. And in these wall works, I am also interested in the quality of glaze, its beauty and movement on this not-so-beautiful form or material. It's as if frontally you're looking at a painting, yet as you move around it, the piece becomes sculptural.

sb: This part with these little bits of painted color is reminding me of—

nc: —Anne Truitt?

sb: Uh huh. Have you ever read *Daybook*, her journal? I read it before I had kids and then again when my kids were young. It was really powerful.

nc: I have read it too. As a mother, it's absolutely incredible—the struggles she went through with making works as a woman and as a mother, and the solace she gained from both.

sb: Yeah, I remember it gave me a lot of

hope. (*laughter*) It's like this other alternative I didn't learn in school.

nc: There are a couple of entries right after she'd had that show that was so successful [André Emmerich Gallery, 1969]. She was so honest about her confusion about how to function in this new world, being a mother, and continuing to make her work.

sb: She showed her doubt, and that's not always what's expected in the art world. Sometimes I feel like people want me, as the artist, to have all the answers. Do you have fear? Does it have a role within your practice? Is that too weird a question?

nc: No. (*laughter*) 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.

sb: Can you elaborate on that?

nc: I question my hours in the studio. What am I making here that's possibly more important than being at home with my children? The thing about being a mother that totally opened up making art was that for the first time I could fully trust my intuition—if you don't have intuition as a mother, you're screwed. The same goes for artists.

But going back to *Daybook*, Truitt was the only one from that generation of minimalists who ever brought that subject up. Did you see her last show at Matthew Marks? I just wanted to lie down and cuddle up to that long piece on the floor.

sb: The weird, chunky black piece in the backroom?

nc: Yeah. It's hard to cuddle up to a piece of rectangular wood—

sb: Spiritually you can. (*laughter*) Is there a spiritual aspect to your work?

nc: There is. It goes back to that moment of intuition, trust. There is a space that I'm attempting to enter that isn't didactic or on this plane.

sb: Are there things you do that help you get there?

nc: Being upstate helps me a lot, learning how to just be there. Also being in my studio, being with my children, taking in the silence when everyone is sleeping, having conversations like this one, thinking about the color yellow . . .

It's even more of an exercise outside of the studio than in it, learning to be present amid all the hecticness. I have made a lot of choices in terms of how we live our lives, from our daily rituals to the schools to which I send my children—it all somehow comes back to my studio practice. Maybe it's all just a giant research project?

sb: That makes sense. We're looking at another wall piece. What shapes are those?

nc: The piece is called *Panel #4*. Those are hexagons and one heptagon.

sb: I'm glad I asked. They are mounted on a thin sheet of MDF. One of them is unglazed, but has two different colors of clay, and the other two have really different types of glazing. Did you have a sense of what the piece was going to look like when you put it in the kiln?

nc: This one was a real surprise. I was not expecting the glaze to hold in such a circular pattern. I know glaze and its movement really well, but I cannot completely predict or control the outcome—like the little drip right there. It's a bit longer than I expected. It goes back to our conversation about the spiritual, intuition, and trust. Every time I open the kiln, I learn something. It must be similar to your works with glass and how they change with the light and surroundings.

sb: I only did a couple of ceramics classes as an undergrad, but I do remember that—

nc: —magic. Even if I glaze something the exact same way two times, I'm still a wee bit surprised. The element of fire comes in and takes over. It's a material that's one step away.

sb: It comes and finishes the job for you.

nc: Yeah, so, the heptagons and the hexagons are new for me. For the show I did at Tracy Williams last fall, I'd gone into this long journey studying utopian

communities. I've always been obsessed with them—ever since I was little. It was the time of *Little House on the Prairie*; that hit home hard.

A few years ago, I read everything I could about communities in the '60s and '70s, and then went back to the turn of the century and looked mainly at the Shakers and at anthroposophic communities. Our house upstate is right on Shaker Mountain, so I spent a lot of time at the Shaker village there.

SB: *Anthroposophic*—that's a word I've never heard before.

NC: It's Rudolf Steiner's. It is a school of thought that came out of Theosophy. They're very similar mystical communities, but one main difference is that in theosophy your destiny is predetermined, and in anthroposophy you create your own destiny. That's one reason why it became so popular at the time—there were so many political and social changes in the world. What I learned from doing my research was that I was more intrigued by how the communities functioned than about their utopian ideals: things like the role of egalitarianism within the community, and how every little part of daily life was important, or else the community could not maintain a presence.

I started applying this to making work; the idea of a non-hierarchical space came out of this. Every material is needed and of equal importance; the same with every action. This was the conceptual framework behind my show at Tracy Williams.

A few years ago I read this beautiful book by Steiner on bees and their functionality within a community, and I kept coming back to it, sort of moving the subject and concept around, like moving away from the penis, the patriarchy, and thinking more about the beehive, you know? (*laughter*) That's where the hexagons originally came from. Then I fell in love with the shapes, because instead of being closed off—like the rectangular boxes—they are additive. Your mind's eye helps to create an optical illusion; it places a shape next to it or fills in around the edges.

SB: And what about the—

NC:—heptagon? That was a totally formal decision. Seven sides changes

the symmetry when divided vertically in half, always.

SB: When you were doing all the reading on utopian communities, was there any one that stood out?

NC: There was an amazing book, *The Modern Utopia: Alternative Communities of the '60s and '70s*, by Richard Fairfield, a journalist who lived in the East Village and traveled around all these communes throughout the country, and wrote these flat articles explaining why they each exist, what they do, and how they survive. He also wrote about their successes and failures. What was amazing to me was that the communities that survived, or survived the longest, all had a craft. They had potters, or weavers, or sold corn. I think about this all the time and cannot quite come to an answer: They left one culture to go make their own, but they're still dependent on the one they left behind to survive. In other words, they made something to produce and sell, and they're selling it through the system they fled from. Is that a success or a failure?

SB: You mean, as opposed to the communities that were completely self-sufficient?

NC: Yeah, but those never made it for that long. It's weird; you can go in circles on it constantly.

SB: Maybe we need each other in the end. (*laughter*) Is this an older piece?

NC: It's a newer one that's not finished, but it's similar to the ones that were in that show. It's a stick of clay—with lots of finger marks.

SB: And silver. And this is a wooden hexagon.

NC: Heptagon.

SB: Heptagon, okay. (*laughter*) With like a diamond shape underneath.

NC: And there's a paint can in the wooden diamond underneath, filled with a glazed hunk of clay.

SB: It's really elemental—paint, wood, clay. I can see what you were talking

about earlier with the materials just being themselves.

NC: And existing in conversation, yeah. This was the first piece I started after the last show, and I'm still working on it.

SB: I like the way that the diamond is built. It's extra layered, and sort of doesn't make sense, but I trust that it probably made perfect sense to you.

NC: It kept saying, "I need a support," and making it kind of obvious.

SB: It's human, with that quirky construction. And your husband [Patrick Purcell], he's a ceramicist?

NC: He's a potter.

SB: Did you meet when you were studying?

NC: He was in grad school at RISD, and I came up as a visiting artist for two weeks one summer.

SB: Did you fall for each other in those two weeks?

NC: He fell for me. (*laughter*) I fell for him too, I just wouldn't admit it.

SB: That's so romantic. When was that?

NC: In 1998.

SB: Has he been practicing and making pots the whole time?

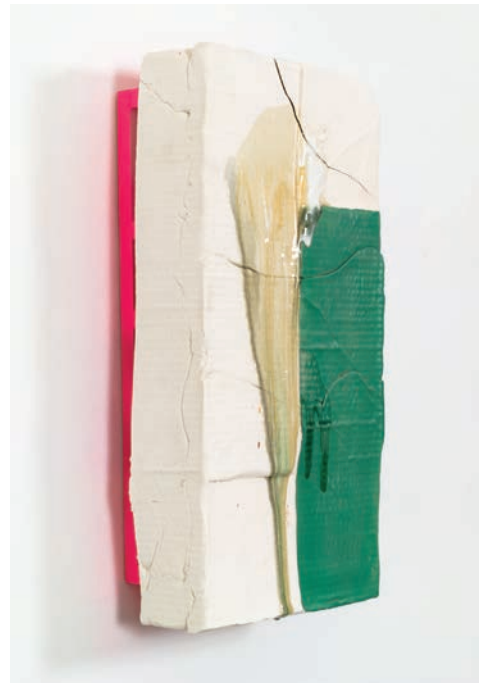
NC: Yeah, he loves teaching. He was in a show at Dodge Gallery in March. And he was in the *ARTnews* top ten ceramic trends this spring. I was very happy for him.

SB: Have you ever shared a studio?

NC: No. He helps me a ton in here, though. I don't really have the foundation he has. He knows all about clay and glaze, and loves all the technical information. He has allowed me to push the material and have it actually hold together. He has been casting the boxes, and a lot of times he'll throw forms for me. I am incredibly lucky.

SB: It's good to have support. I sometimes feel like I'm cheating, because Phil

RED POT, 2014,
terracotta, birch
plywood, and Saran
Wrap, 20 x 21 x 59
inches.



left:
**TWISTED BANYAN
ROOT TREE, 2014,**
earthenware, glaze,
pine, spray paint,
22.5 x 12 x 6 inches.

below:
**EARTH POT #3,
THE FANCY ONE,
2013,** earthenware,
terracotta, glaze,
spray paint, 52 x 20 x
20 inches.



[Grauer] is such an amazing help. What about this? What an orange! Oh my God.

nc: Isn't it incredible?

sb: It's kind of speckle-y.

nc: I made it for Tracy Williams's summer show about water. I call this crazy, weird barnacle pot *Poseidon's Sister*. It was fun to make.

sb: The pattern, your fingerprints in here are so beautiful.

nc: That's another thing about clay—the process allows for so much patterning through the rhythm of making.

sb: But there's also restraint, which goes back to what you were saying about your love of minimalism *and* ornamentation.

nc: Yeah, my baroque minimalism. That's what I always call it. Patrick had a Fulbright to Turkey in 2000. We went to Konya, which was where Rumi is buried. We went into this beautiful building, the Mevlana Museum; the first room you walk into is filled with the Sufis' tombs and sarcophagi. They are all covered in bright turquoise and green glass tile, and have gigantic twisting turban-like shapes covered in gold tile. Around all of them are these decadent velvet stanchions with ceramic pillars in a transparent drippy green glaze. They're insane! The next room you enter is an empty square with the most perfect wood floor and perfectly plastered walls; it was where the whirling dervishes would spin. I understood so much about how the empty space is really not about emptiness but more about abundance, and vice-versa. Maybe it is somehow a parallel to John Cage's work on silence.

With my sculptures, I'm trying to create those moments. The materials I've chosen to use can be so abundant, in life, in process. You can just pile on glaze after glaze, you know, but then you can't see anything but a whole. Even all those layers of glaze get lost.

sb: Right; it seems like it would be easy to want to throw more and more on.

nc: I'm trying to get more of those moments in which you're able to see all

the layers and fragments. In 2004–2008, when I used to make the big G-pots that were covered in chains and other elements, I realized that the way I build the pieces could be as much a part of the discussion on adornment and surface as the things that were on top. So I started building the works in sections, and piling them on top of each other. I created these set sizes for the ware board so I could build parts that would slowly get put together into a whole sculpture.

sb: They're beautiful boards. They have a real history of marks. When you're making the wall pieces, are you working on your intuition or do you make drawings beforehand?

nc: I don't make drawings at all for these works. I've always had painter's envy; it seems incredible to inhabit a space and to have everyone know what space that is.

sb: Let's just say it right now: it's easier.

nc: Until I tried to do it. *(laughter)* And I realized that painting, like sculpture, can exist as or in the decorative. I'd never thought of that before.

sb: It's funny that you came to it when you were actually making paintings, rather than when you were working on decorating pots. It makes sense, though.

nc: It's interesting how much space these wall pieces hold. If this small work was on a wall alone, it would still hold the wall. But then the second I put them into a constructed form, such as a panel, they don't hold space anymore. The panel contains them. Maybe this goes back to the rectangle versus the hexagon conversation.

sb: I didn't think of that.

nc: I don't know what to do with that yet; it's something I've learned about painting and shape.

sb: They're ceramic relief paintings, in a way.

nc: Exactly. They've always been paintings to me, I'm trying to do the same things with paint that I do with glaze, but it's this love-and-hate struggle right now. Some days I come in here and

I can see the light, but the next day I think, I gotta take this down.

sb: Once these clay parts are fixed to the board, do you move them around at all or are they fixed?

nc: They all come on and off.

sb: So there's room for each work to be in flux.

nc: Yes, for as long as it wants to be.

sb: For better or worse. *(laughter)* This hand-built pot on a pedestal is heart-breakingly beautiful. Is it terracotta?

nc: It is, yeah. I received the pedestal with the green Saran wrap, and I have since fallen in love with it.

sb: The terracotta and this green, shiny Saran wrap make such a great combination—it turns into a found object. I'm looking at this pot thinking, Wow, it's so perfect. The shape seems to be so much the way it should be. Do you make a lot that you throw away?

nc: Well, with the wall pieces, I have a ton of failure. Clay does not want to be flat. I lose many pieces in the process, but more importantly, they are very slow to make. They sit in my studio for long periods of time, and I just look at them—how the clay comes together, the joints, the lines from the process, etcetera. Then I finally glaze them. I only get one chance for this, due to the delicate relationship between the surface and form.

With the bigger pots, because they're built in sections, I don't have that much loss. I can move the sections around or change them. Lately I've been trying to build more with clay, and have more freedom with it. So this particular pot was the most successful one. It's almost at a point that it's going to crumble—
sb: But it won't.

nc: It won't, no.

sb: I was thinking of John Chamberlain's last show at Gagosian right before he died in 2011. It was such a joy to be in the presence of his stuff; he knew the material so well because he'd worked with it for so long. It was like listening to a symphony. I get that same feeling here. You have so much experience

The element of fire comes in and takes over. It's a material that's one step away.

with this material; I just get to enjoy it. There's an immediacy, a history of real in this material, I can trust it even if you're pushing it all the time.

nc: Every material is like that, but with clay there's slip casting, extruding, hand-building . . . all these processes you can put together differently to form a kind of whole. It's endless.

sb: Do you have any sense of figure?

nc: I never thought so, but these ovaloid pieces feel like busts to me, in some weird way.

sb: Me too.

nc: I pulled her out and was like, Oh, my verdant empress! *(laughter)*

sb: Especially with the little hats.

nc: For some reason all of them needed little hats. They're my feminist busts maybe. I have this need at the moment to place gender into the greater conversation.

sb: I've never been so nervous in a studio before.

nc: Nothing ever breaks, but everyone's so afraid of it. Maybe that is the power of clay?

sb: I love these solid chunky pieces.

nc: My hunks.

sb: Inside that diamond-y mold?

nc: I had a few of these in my last show. They're just solid clay.

sb: Oh, wow. Is it hard to make something so large and solid without having it explode?

nc: They took a year to make. It took six or seven months for them to dry out, and then we started to try to fire them, and they would blow up like crazy. Finally, Patrick figured out this four-day cycle—it was a very slow process.

sb: This is a treasure trove back here.

Do you have any of your old work? It's a sculpture issue: Do you give it away, is it all sold, do you trash it?

nc: Some of it's here and some things are upstate. If I don't love a piece, after a couple years, I store it far, far away.

sb: What about this wood construction?

nc: It was in my last show. I did four pieces that addressed the classical elements or stages of development of a human being. This one was fire or the ego. It's tough to deal with your ego.

sb: It's neat that you found a way to face it head on.

nc: I did this collaborative project for about six years with Taylor Davis—that's when I totally took on the ego. At first we started making things in our studios that we either loved so much that we didn't know what to do with them, or that we despised because they were so intensely what each of us had made. Then we would give them to the other person to finish or complete. We had a subset of rules as well—mostly that we couldn't just solve the pieces with gestures or formal decisions. We had to totally and completely contemplate and deal with the object in all its glory.

So we were confronting our egos constantly. We have very different lives, which provided these outlets for a space of being "de-egoized." I am a mother and she is an amazing professor.

sb: I want to look at some of that work.

nc: We did a show at the ICA in Philadelphia and one at MIT too. She lives in Boston. When I'd go up to work in her studio, I'd also be at home.

sb: Because you would stay with your parents and—

nc: —and have my children. It wasn't my own secret space I could hide away to.

sb: Not only did you have a collaborator but—

nc: —we were in her studio, with my

family calling. *(laughter)* Do you have any shows coming up?

sb: I'm sort of putting things off while I am starting these outdoor pieces. They're glass and steel, not that huge. I'm in love with glass. The range of color is infinite, compared to plexiglass.

nc: And the light that goes through it is so different. They must be extraordinary.

sb: It's going slow, but there's daycare in September so maybe things will speed up then.

nc: It's a gift to have some slower time, though.

sb: So back to your show in October.

nc: The space is almost the same size as my studio.

sb: That's lucky.

nc: Concrete walls and floors, so I've been trying to think about that. It has super high ceilings and there's not much natural light. The museum is absolutely beautiful.