

Nicole Cherubini

DEREK ELLER GALLERY

No single word suffices. To describe Nicole Cherubini's sculptures as "urns" connotes antiquity's lost grandeur, archaeological recovery, or the ashes of the departed. To call them "pots" implies decorative home wares, Sunday ceramic workshops, and that scene from *Ghost*. "Vase" is too elegant, "vessel" too vague. "Specific object" has the benefit of stressing a phenomenological dimension but is otherwise useless. In any case, volumes assuming the shape and material histories of clay containers have been the central motif of Cherubini's work for more than twenty years. Here, the artist included two additional motifs. On the floor, four ceramic sculptures based on Charles and Ray Eames's classic design for a plastic shell chair stood alongside three of her signature pots. From the wall hung two ceramic disks, the apparent inspiration for the exhibition's title, "Full Moon."

To be clear, though, neither of Cherubini's "moons" could be legitimately considered "full"—if one means to suggest the purity and plenitude of the luminous white plate that appears at regular intervals in the night sky. In *Bronze Age* (all works 2019), a clay disk with the patina of worn copper was pockmarked and riven with fissures; bisquered fragments and glazed castoffs clung to its uneven surface. The glossy aquamarine base of *Deep Blue Sea* struggled to be seen behind an unruly accumulation of rough-edged chunks. Cherubini had made a virtue of clay's inherent vice by recovering the brittle bits that crack in the kiln or otherwise break off and then incorporating them back into the final work.

This patchwork moon motif carried over into Cherubini's Eames-inspired sculptures. One stained with motley drips of enamel and resin



formed the seat of *Chair 5—turquoise with shard*. The chair's overall gestalt cohered around it, variously glazed in matte black, NyQuil green, and cake-frosting white. A turquoise shard lay at the seat's lowest dip, and another stuck out from the chair's back. The whole fragile composite was held aloft by a set of spindly legs, which were cast in bronze but fashioned to resemble the plain wood assembly of Shaker carpentry. (The other chair sculptures in the exhibition featured bases made from clay blocks or bronze cylinders.) The Eameses' design, like the outline of the moon, was clearly recognizable, but the sleek and obdurate inviolability of monochrome plastic had given way to the antique delicacy of earthenware.

It would be easy enough to read Cherubini's emphasis on breakage as a critique of the search for unadulterated origins. Archetypal symbols, ancient vessels, modernist icons: None ever achieved the organic wholeness we retroactively attribute to them. Perhaps that should be part of the takeaway, but I suspect that an interpretation of Cherubini's sculptures as yet another avant-garde attack against myth or autonomy misses the mark. (The exhibition's press release leans heavily on the language of milquetoast subversion, i.e., "questioning," "reinterprets," "reconsider," etc., none of which sits right.) For instance, it overlooks the full import of Cherubini's choice to engage with the Eameses specifically. As aficionados are well aware, the couple's first major success was molded plywood leg splints that greatly improved outcomes for wounded soldiers in World War II. Somewhere embedded deep in every Eames design is an impulse to mend.

In an influential essay on "reparative reading," the theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick called for an alternative to critique's default position of tearing down or laying bare, one that would seek out sources of pleasure and succor. "The desire of a reparative impulse . . . is additive and accretive," she wrote. "Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self." Sculpture already has terms for additive processes—"assemblage," "bricolage," the catchall "mixed media"—but none quite capture Cherubini's approach to the chance occurrences and inevitable disappointments of kiln firing. A reparative aesthetic begins with the acceptance of fragility.

—Colby Chamberlain

View of "Nicole Cherubini," 2019. Foreground from left: *Red One, Athena*, 2019; *Chair 1—blue VW bus*, 2019. Background from left: *Chair 5—turquoise with shard*, 2019; *Deep Blue Sea*, 2019; *Chair 4*, 2019.