

The Dreamy Botanical Sculptures That Invite You To Take A Closer Look

BY JENNY BRADLEY PFEFFER / APRIL 6, 2021



Organic and intricate, raw and revealing, Anat Shiftan's ceramic sculptures feel simultaneously calming and thought-provoking. Defined by quiescent details and a conversation between discomfort and beauty, each piece is designed to be carefully considered—both decorative and inviting closer scrutiny.

The Jerusalem-born artist's compulsion to create began during childhood, where at an early age she learned to turn to craft to reshape her world. That same inclination later carried Shiftan to the United States, and ultimately to the State University of New York at New Paltz, where she currently heads the ceramics department in addition to her private practice (represented by Hostler Burrows).

Perhaps unsurprisingly for an academic, Shiftan's work is informed by her knowledge of art, philosophy and history. The symbolism behind Renaissance Dutch still lifes, in particular, provides a well of inspiration. "A typical Golden Age still life would often show an arrangement of idealized botanical floral samples," she explains. "These scenes portray a rich cultural environment, but also corruption, which is shown with hints of temporality (dying flowers) and social decadence (a fly or snail)." One look at the artist's evocative *Flora* series, a collection of tabletop sculptures featuring blooms with entangled orifices, suggests an entirely original reference.

Using various methods of formation, from slip casting to the potter's wheel, and most-often combining smaller creations to build a larger composition, Shiftan crafts each piece by hand. More recent forays include wall art composed of delicate ruffles and floral centerpieces in a prism of fresh colors. "I often ask how far I can stretch the manipulation of my clay without leading to failure," says the artist, who enjoys the challenging nature of her chosen medium. "I ask how big or translucent I can make my work, or how complex," she says. "If I develop a blue clay body, I try to see how blue it can get."

That consistent urge to push further—to find the most intense portrayals of color—is deep-seated. As a child in Israel, Shiftan recalls a formative moment of experiencing color, which informs her artistry to this day. "As a 10-year-old, I remember taking a yellow daisy and putting it so close to my eye that the floral structure vanished and just the yellowness was observed," she says, adding, "I try to create that same sensation with my work."

PHOTOS: WINONA BARTON-BALLENTINE

