

# Elisa D'Arrigo: Materializing at Elizabeth Harris Gallery, New York City



Janet Koplos [Ceramics: Art + Perception 119 2022](#) [Art + Perception](#) [LATEST ISSUE HOME](#)

Fired ceramic is incapable of movement, yet, Elisa D'Arrigo's small ceramic sculptures, 10.5 inches tall at most, are all about movement. They could almost be characters from a Pixar movie. From their origin as hand-built cylinders, they sag, fold, lean, twist, bend, bow, bulge, curl, they even seem to shuffle or slither. Nothing about them suggests rigidity or stiffness, except that they manage to hold themselves upright. The forms are anything but still. Their surfaces likewise, are alive with color, busy with dots and flecks.

D'Arrigo has returned to ceramics after decades in which she worked extensively in folded, sewn or otherwise constructed cloth and paper, as well as making drawings. The characteristic approach in all her work is detailed surfaces featuring small integers of color or line. Her glazes might recall Ken Price's layered and sanded paint effects, but her detail is perhaps more intimate, more overall and somehow more flowing. The idiosyncratic forms might provoke thoughts of Ron Nagle or Kathy Butterly, but these are softer and less presentational. D'Arrigo has devised a distinctive approach that pulls viewers from one work to the next among these casual, almost humorous configurations that seem anthropomorphic. They either adopt the stance and fattened contours of the human body itself, or convey the suggestion of human effort to make a thing that fails to hold its proper posture.

## THE HOLLOWNESS CONTRIBUTES OCCASIONAL MYSTERY – ACCESS TO A DARK INTERIOR – BUT THESE OBJECTS ARE NOT ABOUT THE VOID MUCH AS VESSELS TYPICALLY ARE

The result is fully sculptural hollow objects that look different from every angle and encourage close study. The hollowness contributes occasional mystery – access to a dark interior – but these objects are not about the void much as vessels typically are. Two works titled *Stancer* (#2 and #3) are mostly vertical, mostly cylindrical, each with a single strap or tube running from the top to meet the support pedestal. They might evoke bags at the point of collapse. But the associations creep into biology as well. *Stancer 2* (2020) also brought to my mind someone breathing heavily, leaning on a cane, with a big mouth like a Muppet. It might be ready to shuffle off stage. In *Stancer 3* the tube seems draped rather than supportive, and I thought of a fat cat body with a thin tail. Both works are covered with a rainfall of dots: #2 in yellow, gray, orange and pink, and, #3 with bigger and more neutral-colored spots that resemble irregular fish scales.

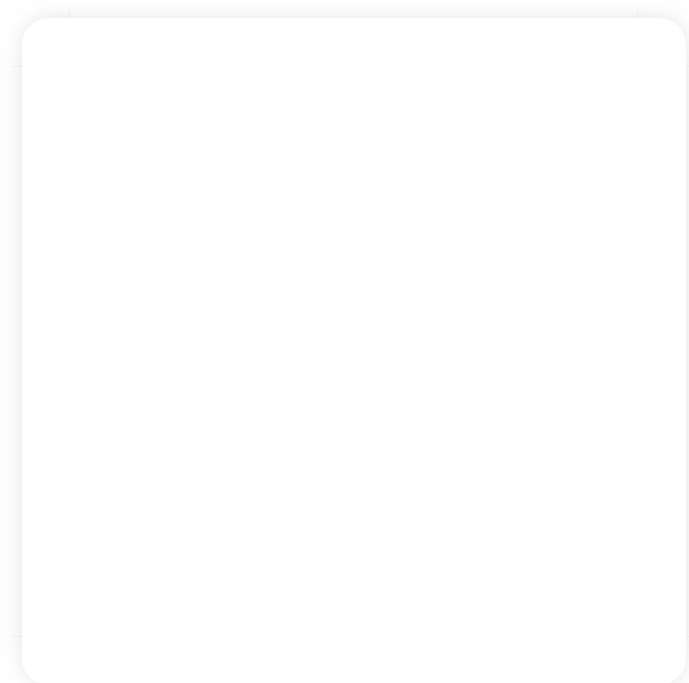


Each of the 17 works in the show has this variety of hue, posture and dazzlingly rich spectrums of association. This is abstraction taken to the level of fantasy. *Bud Noir* (2019) might be an otherworldly grub of polychrome rather than dead white. Four of the works resemble extended legs and hips leaning in some yoga pose – except, of course, that, they are not literally depictive, lack the rest of the presumed body, and have some sort of hole where the torso should be. Moreover, the surfaces shimmer with color. They are usually smooth but sometimes there are dark pimple heads on the dots.

Any one of them could give ample companionship to a viewer, offering seemingly endless folds, bumps, holes, peaks, mouths, and club feet. Besides the already mentioned dots, scales and pimples, there are other variations. For example, in *Edge of My Seat* (2020), short streaks of hot orange that evoke embers or lava at one end, yield to thickening dots of yellow like a congregation of fireflies at the other. At the same time, the form calls to mind a hip joint (rather than the chair the hips might rest in, as the title implies).

## ANY ONE OF THEM COULD GIVE AMPLE COMPANIONSHIP TO A VIEWER, OFFERING SEEMINGLY ENDLESS FOLDS, BUMPS, HOLES, PEAKS, MOUTHS, AND CLUB FEET.

D'Arrigo has made a body of work that reads as a series, due to size, pose and dense color pyrotechnics. There's not a weak one in the bunch, although surely some are more charming than others. It's hard to imagine any limit to this richness. It is ceramics at the peak of referential abstraction, full of possibilities and pleasures, known and strange at the same time. ■



### Image Captions

- Bud Noir*, 2019, glazed ceramic, 8 x 8.5 x 5.5 in (20.3 x 21.5 x 14 cm).
- Edge of My Seat*, 2020, glazed ceramic, 5.5 x 7 x 6 in (14 x 18 x 15.25 cm).
- Spotificationization*, 2020, glazed ceramic, 7 x 5 x 6 in (18 x 12.7 x 15.25 cm).
- Stancer 3*, 2020, glazed ceramic, 10.5 x 11 x 7 in (26 x 28 x 18 cm).

All images credit: Adam Reich, courtesy of Elizabeth Harris Gallery.

### by Janet Koplos

Janet Koplos is a contributing editor to *Art in America* magazine. She has been writing about art since 1976 and has published more than 2,000 articles, reviews, and catalogue essays in the U.S., Europe, and Japan. She is the author of *Contemporary Japanese Sculpture* (1991), *What Makes a Potter: Functional Pottery in America Today* (2019) and is co-author of *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft* (2010). She was named an Honorary Fellow of the American Craft Council (2010) and a Distinguished Educator by the James Renwick Alliance (2022). She lives in New York City.

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