

# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW

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EXHIBITION REVIEWS



View of Peter Shelton's exhibition "Eyehand," showing sculptures from 1975 to 2011; at L.A. Louver.

## PETER SHELTON

### L.A. LOUVER

Peter Shelton's sculpture has made deviously and delightfully clear for more than 30 years that physical space is, inevitably, also psychological space. We occupy our small domains and move about according to a host of internalized assumptions about scale, balance, proportion, rightness—how things ought to look, where they belong. In defying those implicit expectations, Shelton forces them to the surface of consciousness. Experiencing his work, we end up parsing experience itself, its whys, hows and ifs.

Curious notions assume improbable forms throughout this selection of 40 works from the 1970s (some made while Shelton was earning his MFA at UCLA) to the present. Limbs distend, pouches bloat, skins hollow out. A neck rising from a slablike torso loops around itself like a casually tossed scarf (*blackhookneck*, 1999-2000). In *birthbone* (1991-92), a tubular canal extends 10 feet down from a uterus-shaped wedge mounted high on the wall. Several pieces, large and small, make up bulbous lobes clustered together, like bubbles, testicles, folds of flesh or chambers of the

heart.

Shelton works in metals (steel, iron, lead, bronze), glass, cement, water, paint and a variety of the fiberglass and resin composites first adopted by artists in the late '60s. The range of textures he musters from these ingredients is extraordinary and plays right into his love of surprise and incongruity: surfaces look rubbery, chalky, translucent like eggshells, warmly aglow like amber, aged and burnished as Japanese lacquer, with gridded armatures often visible beneath the skins and occasionally a finely barbed exoskeleton. The installation mixed works from all decades (many of them completed over multiyear spans) and illustrated a certain continuity of vocabulary and approach. Shelton has gravitated toward vaguely anatomical forms and bodily suggestion from the start. An early work here incorporates reference to the distances between various parts of his body; another, more performative and participatory, is a cylindrical, cast-iron chamber for one, with perforations placed at the eye levels of different members of his family.

A delicious irreverence threads through Shelton's work, emerging especially well in the pairing of *godshole* (2003)—matte

gray and donut-shaped, 5 feet in diameter and mounted diagonally on the wall—a weightless-seeming cosmic orifice, and *fatring* (2011), a 9-inch version of the same shape, this time a static product on the floor, a dense, dark, fecal coil. Titling his pieces with strings of words compressed into one (a more buoyant version of poet Paul Celan's neologisms) Shelton reinforces his work's sense of simultaneous multiplicity, its embrace of contradiction, its ability to evoke at once lowbrow cartoonish spunk and Zen-inflected elegance. Using all lowercase letters further asserts that the titles, as much as the works, are *improper nouns*.

—Leah Ollman