



Pot Art

Jennifer Rochlin's larger-than-life ceramics are vessels for both introspection and experimentation.

By Michael Slenske

Photographed by Ye Rin Mok

Behind the home that Jennifer Rochlin shares with her twin teenage sons in Altadena, outside of Los Angeles, you'll find a garden full of sycamores, sage, saltbush, mallow, and milkweed. Beyond that is Rochlin's cozy ceramics studio—a former garage—where the Baltimore-born artist shapes her wonky terra-cotta pots. They are carved with decorative markings that create episodic narratives about her life, family, and adopted hometown, depicting everything from native California vegetation to friends and lovers; feminist icons, including Wonder Woman and Joni Mitchell; and Los Angeles landmarks like the Hollywood Sign and the Angeles National Forest, where Rochlin mountain bikes every week. She then paints over these three-dimensional forms with underglaze, in a style reminiscent of late-period Matisse.

"Let's start with this one," says Rochlin, dressed in a vintage Blondie T-shirt, faded Levi's, and black Converse high-tops on a sunny Friday morning in March. At the end of a long worktable sits a large vase in the shape of a blooming tulip, with a painting on one side depicting a handsome young man seated on an orange slipper chair, his hair mussed, his shirt undone, a guitar resting on a blue blanket draped over his presumably naked nether regions.

"It's called *Two Weeks in July*, for the two weeks that my kids were in summer camp and this old flame whom I hadn't seen in almost five years came back to town," says Rochlin, who is now 56. "He's half my age, and we had a very passionate love affair. My friends were like, 'No, no, you can't see him.' But of course I was like, 'Yes, I can.'"

On the backside of the pot, there's a painting of Rochlin swimming in a friend's palm-lined pool. Elsewhere, butterflies hover around the bite marks made by an L.A.-based painter. Rochlin started biting pots a few years ago, after another lover, the gallerist Kirk Nelson, who owns La Loma Projects, requested she bite his back to relieve stress. What Rochlin didn't expect was that she'd like the sensation. Soon she was biting clay and asking fellow L.A. ceramicists like Tony Marsh, Sharif Farrag, and others to bite hunks out of a Seussian-proportioned vessel, then painting their dental imprints into bruise-colored floral formations. "It's like a dirty bridge from primal sadomasochistic fun into an inspired form," says Nelson. "It was great to watch it come together as art."

Rochlin fired the resulting work, *Community Bites*, in the large kilns at Cal State's Center for

Contemporary Ceramics, which has allowed top-flight guest artists such as Simone Leigh, Rose B. Simpson, and Rochlin to realize large-scale projects in its monumental facilities. (*Community Bites* is now in the permanent collection of SFMOMA.) "I liked having the bites become a collaborative mark-making for me," says Rochlin. "It became more about community and less about kink, but I still feel vulnerable talking about the origin of those pieces. I guess I'm just so honest with things, it's hard to filter."

You could call Rochlin the Taylor Swift of ceramics—chances are that if you fall into a platonic or romantic entanglement with her, you'll end up on one of her works. In fact, on a pedestal across from *Two Weeks in July*, there's a pot featuring another fellow she started dating after her young paramour left town. Upon hearing this comparison, Rochlin breaks out in laughter. "I love that, because I'm a huge Taylor Swift fan and have been for a really long time," she says. "I tried so hard to get tickets to that tour."

While Rochlin might not be on Miss Americana's radar yet, the New Zealand-born singer-songwriter Lorde did slide into her DMs to buy a work from the artist's sold-out booth with her L.A. gallery, the Pit, at the 2021 Armory Show. Rochlin's also been the subject of recent solo or two-person exhibitions in Tokyo, Brussels, and New York. Her latest show, "Paintings on Clay," is her first at Hauser & Wirth and runs from May 2 to July 12. It is one of four solo presentations of female artists—including the first ever exhibition of five of Eva Hesse's sculptures,

This page: Jennifer Rochlin, wearing a Loro Piana jacket, top, pants, and shoes, in her studio outside of Los Angeles with (clockwise from bottom left) *In Paris: Giacometti's Studio, the Seine, and Me and MAC on a Van Gogh Street*, 2024; *Two Weeks in July*, 2023; *Highway Kind*, 2024; *Trans-Siberian Railway*, 2023; *Green Tapestry with Poppies and Bites*, 2024. Opposite, from left: *Fiona and Jasper at Leo Carrillo*, 2023; *Green Tapestry with Poppies and Bites*, 2024; *Orange and Green Tapestry Tile*, 2015; *Late Afternoons*, 2023.





This page, clockwise from top left: Rochlin, wearing a Loro Piana dress, with a scale model of her exhibition at Hauser & Wirth. Works in the show will include (clockwise from left) Fiona and Jasper at Leo Carrillo, 2023; Pure Color, 2023; Two Weeks in July, 2023; Moonlight, 2023; City Skyline in the Garden, 2024; Up Brown Mountain, Down El Prieto, 2024. A Bend in the Trail, 2024 (on easel). Opposite, clockwise from left: Sunflowers From Italy, a work in progress, 2024; paint colors in the studio; Up Brown Mountain, Down El Prieto, 2024. Sitings Editor: John Celaya.

loaned by American museums; a show of Mary Heilmann's recent works on paper, along with ceramics and furniture; and a suite of new paintings by Rita Ackermann.

"I love the rawness, the different shapes, the paintings.... Each piece is unique—even the inside of the vessels is painted," says Hauser & Wirth cofounder and copresident Manuela Wirth, who fell in love with Rochlin and her pots on a visit to her studio. She commissioned Rochlin to make two vessels depicting the dealer's family's life and likenesses as a birthday present for her husband, Iwan Wirth, last year. "I'm fascinated by Jennifer's celebration of community and female attitude in her practice, and the boundaries she pushes her medium to. I was so impressed when I learned about her unique method of biting into the surfaces of vessels and inviting others to collaborate in this mark-making. I have participated myself!"

At Hauser & Wirth, Rochlin will also unveil her latest collaborative effort, *Honey Pot*, a bulbous vase with an open lip featuring female genitalia drawn by 22 women artists, many of whom worked on the pot in the back of Rochlin's SUV. "I like the idea that I can take this artwork around in the trunk of my car, like a tailgate, and just say, 'Who wants to draw?'" says Rochlin. She enlisted Katie Grinnan, Kim

Fisher, Michele O'Marah, and Jasmin Shokrian to make their marks during a recent opening for her pal Evan Holloway at David Kordansky Gallery, where she parked her Toyota illegally. "It's fun, like a performance. Kim bore a hole through the pot with a needle tool."

L.A.-based painter Hilary Pecis was a little intimidated when she went to scribe on the pot at Rochlin's studio. "At the time, there were only a couple other people who had worked on it. Jen Guidi's drawing was on the pot, and it was a diagram from a medical journal with all these pointy arrows to describe what you're looking at," says Pecis. "The funny thing is that although I have a vagina, I didn't really know how to illustrate one, so I Googled vagina illustrations because I wanted to make sure you could tell what I was drawing."

Pecis is the one individual who not only collaborated on a community-made piece but also owns another: *Cock Pot*. A precursor to *Honey Pot*, it was Rochlin's contribution to the exhibition "Brigid Berlin: The Heaviest," curated by Alison M. Gingeras last summer at Vito Schnabel Gallery in New York. Rochlin was referencing the Warhol superstar's *Cock Book*, the 500-page tome of penis drawings that Berlin had gathered from friends and art world luminaries like Jean-Michel Basquiat, Brice

Marden, and Cy Twombly. For her ceramic ode, Rochlin enlisted male and female friends to make sgraffito drawings of penises.

"There was a little party, and everybody was working on that pot. It was a pot party," says the artist Henry Taylor, laughing. Taylor scratched a cartoonish penis ejaculating through a glory hole. "I just rolled up and did something." So did Guidi, Delia Brown, Kelly Akashi, David Altmejd, Louise Bonnet, Edgar Bryan, Jennifer Cohen, Gerald Davis, Danny Gibson, Mark Grotjahn, Caitlin Lonegan, Susanna Maing, Simphiwe Ndzube, Laurie Nye, Katherina Olschbaur, Jake Sheiner, Sissón, Joe Sola, and Jason Meadows, the father of Rochlin's two sons.

"The history of vessels as a narrative medium goes back to the Etruscans and the Greeks. Jen has this whole complicated body art, feminist perspective," says Gingeras of Rochlin's practice. "She can push vessels in so many different directions at once—craft histories mixed with conceptual art, painting, drawing, and performance. I think that's super compelling."

While this multivalent approach has certainly helped Rochlin carve out a niche over the past decade, for many years she existed as a painter little known outside of L.A. circles. She wasn't even interested in visual art growing up. "I was more into dance as a kid," she says. Her parents

divorced when she was 1, and Rochlin spent her childhood shuttling between Baltimore and its suburbs. Her father was a lawyer, and her mother played piano, collected Persian rugs and Thelonious Monk albums, and maintained a library of art tomes. A Helen Frankenthaler book gave Rochlin an early glimpse into what a career in art might look like. "There were these images of Helen in the studio," she says. "And maybe I unconsciously loved seeing a big book of a woman artist."

It wasn't until she was a sophomore at University of Colorado Boulder that she started making art in earnest—mainly mixed media paintings created with oil, melted wax, and ceramic shards. "One of my roommates was an experimental filmmaker, and the other was a writer. The three of us would make Super 8 films all day long in this house by the mountains," says Rochlin. She went on to earn an MFA in painting at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where classmates included her then boyfriend, Gerald Davis; artists Jessica Jackson Hutchins and Sanford Biggers; curator Ali Subotnick; and Guidi. "I was always a nontraditional painter, working on large pieces of paper and projecting pieces of film onto them. My thesis show was these collages made of mountain bike parts."

When Rochlin moved to L.A., in 2000, she focused on heavily patterned paintings of rugs inspired by her mother's home decor and a year she spent in Russia after completing her undergraduate degree. She eventually became an art teacher at an all-girls Catholic high school, and started working with clay when the school got a grant to start a ceramics program. In 2008, she began incorporating clay into her own practice. "It felt really experimental and freeing," she says. "I didn't have to worry about the history of painting, and I liked that there's a collage element to it."

At Hauser & Wirth, Rochlin will also show a few plein air paintings of the images on her ceramics. "I like making a painting about a pot with a painting on it," she says. In one vessel, Rochlin teases out a random romantic scene she captured on Super 8 while on her Russian sojourn in the 1990s. During an hours-long stop on the Trans-Siberian Railroad, she witnessed a man throw a bouquet of wildflowers to a woman on the train. In Rochlin's version, however, she is the object of desire: part author, part voyeur.

"This show is just another evolution in my work," she says. "It's not a full circle, not a period, just another word in a sentence. Or maybe it's a paragraph." ♦