

Interview with Ruby Neri

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In the summer of 2016, the cleanly-proportioned space of David Kordansky Gallery was invaded by an unruly horde of artworks that were raucous, excessive, ungainly, and defiantly fun. *Slaves and Humans* was a body of new work by the Los Angeles-based artist Ruby Neri unlike anything she had done before. Large pots, some over five feet high, were adorned with sprayed images of grinning, naked, yellow-haired women. Often the pots themselves were anthropomorphic, with contours that threw the paintings on their surfaces into three-dimensional relief. The works were unapologetically sexual, though not in the way that popular culture typically sexualizes nude, large-breasted women. It seemed as though Neri was co-opting misogynist depictions of femininity and making them her own. This new body of work had been brewing for years, but it felt like absolutely the right thing for its time and place. This month, Neri follows *Slaves and Humans* with a new exhibition at the same gallery. At the time of this interview, she was still in the midst of firing the new work, and I spoke to her about what these objects mean to her, how they've evolved, and where her arresting visions of femininity spring from.

Jonathan Griffin: This new exhibition at David Kordansky Gallery builds on the body of work begun in 2016 for your previous show there. How has the work developed since then?

Ruby Neri: It's definitely become more focused. The scale of the work has become much larger. I've become more comfortable, I feel, with my imagery. The psychological element has become more focused, definitely. I was sort of searching before, and I feel like I've found something in this work. But I now feel like I'm at the beginning of all these other directions that I'm going to take, which is really exciting to me.

JG: Is there a distinction, for you, between a ceramic sculpture, a painted vessel, and a vessel with sculptural, anthropomorphic qualities?

RN: For me, no. I refer to these as pots although they're quite sculptural. The basis of my art-making practice is in painting and sculpture, not in ceramics, so I use the medium of clay to pursue other ideas and thoughts. I feel like clay doesn't really get appreciated enough as a sculptural medium. I don't really like the word "vessel." I prefer "pot." There's not as much weight to the idea of a pot. I actually don't really like talking about vessels or pots very much, even though I like making them. I find that conversation really uninteresting. I'm much more interested in the scale of what I'm making, in terms of it referring to painting or sculpture. The reference of my body.

JG: Perhaps it's a bit like a painter being asked to talk about rectangles or squares all the time, rather than what they're painting!

RN: I came about using clay in such a roundabout way. For me, sculpture is the most freeing of the genres. There is a huge umbrella over what a sculpture can be. Painting always has this really heavy history weighing it down.



Ruby Neri, *Pietà* (2019). Ceramic with glaze, 59 x 38 x 30 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Jeff McLane.

Ceramics too. I prefer to just talk about object-making. I try to skirt the heavy references, I guess. I'm really into the physicality of materials like paint. Clay is even more tactile, more expressive. I have a strong love of materials, and the physicality of handling them. Clay is really closely tied to body movement. Any kind of physical activity is really appealing to me in my work.

JG: In many of your earlier works, there are areas of bare brown clay that show through—although usually in the negative spaces around the bodies. Why is this?

RN: It's the richness of the clay body. That goes back to my interest in materiality. It's also why I don't use opaque glaze—because I love the actual color of the clay. I didn't want to cover that up, I wanted it to be a large part of what the piece is. But the new work has trended more towards Pop and my interest in applied color. The color of the clay body is only accessible on the interiors now.

JG: Is clay naturally analogous to flesh?

RN: Maybe. I think of it more as a representation of movement. All my past paintings in oils are really heavy, with the thick paint pushed around. With spray cans, you use your whole body when you're using them. Clay is very much like that. It's so intensely physical.

JG: Did the women that you depict on the pots emerge as a response to the medium or the forms, or are they just projections onto forms?

RN: Well, I've always made figurative work. I've never been an abstract maker. At first I was making smaller clay figures in different parts, but when I got access to a larger kiln in 2015, it gave me the opportunity to create one singular piece. Then all kinds of weird surreal qualities entered

the work. Part of my interest in clay is that it is strongly associated with ideas of control—people are always trying to master it. But it's really out of control. You put this thing in the kiln, in the fire, and what you get out is somewhat unpredictable. I wanted the clay to be what it wanted to be. That gave me some freedom in terms of the compositions, in terms of the figuration, so if the scale was weird—if an arm was too small or a hand was too big—I kind of just let it go, and didn't really worry about it. I'm working with this pot, this very basic shape, and you can only do so much with it. It also made them more psychological. Unconsciously, the important things rose to the surface without me even really pursuing them, without knowing about what they were.

JG: Who are these women to you?

RN: They're like elements of my psyche. They're very self-referential without being self-portraits. They're very emotional, and personal.

JG: Is it one character who repeats or a cast of characters?

RN: One character, for sure.

JG: How would you describe her?

RN: Well, she kind of represents this larger female emotion. She's portraying all these different feelings—basically, elements of myself. Maybe elements of a larger, even universal, conscience. Aspects of female identity, perhaps. Or facets of being female, put it that way. I say "universal" in that maybe some other women feel that way, too, but I can't really tell how other people feel. It's about me being a woman. I don't want to lay too much claim to it—it's not entirely me, but it's definitely how I feel moving about in the world. It's like an interaction with the world, or society, as a woman.



Ruby Neri, *Slaves and Humans*
(installation view) (2016). Image courtesy
of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery,
Los Angeles. Photo: Brian Forrest.

JG: How much of your biography or subject position do we need to know to read these works—at the very least, the fact that you're a woman?

RN: Well, as with all art I hope that someone is taking something from it that they find on their own, that doesn't necessarily have to be about me.

JG: I have my own thoughts about this, which are that it's always significant to know who the artist is and where they're coming from. It's interesting to me that you're a mother, for instance. It's interesting to me that you don't look anything like these figures. And it's even more interesting to me that you identify with them still.

RN: It's a mystery to me too! I feel like they're coming from a deep well inside me. I feel like after going to art school I was basing my work on formal object-making, from a very removed non-personal perspective. I sort of flipped it around, and I wanted to make something incredibly personal. I made a conscious decision to do that. While it had to do to some extent with hysteria, and came from an anxious place, it was mainly influenced by just day-to-day thoughts. Power struggles, sexuality, having fun, being sexually active, what have you. Struggles in human relationships. It's very basic.

JG: Do these things belong in a gallery or in a home? I ask that because most gallery spaces are typically cool, businesslike, impersonal environments, and the home is typically a warmer, more relational and subjective setting, perhaps aligned with a more female energy. People describe your sculptures as aggressive—is that because when they see them in galleries they feel they're aggressive against their environment?

RN: I definitely feel that, yeah. I think they are really important in a gallery

space. I think they're powerful. They came from feeling like, "I'm here, I'm present, my work's important to me." But I've felt that with all my work. They're also made for a private space as well. I have work of my own in my home and I love it. I love the scale—they take up a lot of room. They're so demanding of your physical attention. It's like having someone else in the room with you.

JG: Can you say a little about what spray paint means to you? You mentioned the immediacy of it, and of course you have a history in graffiti, going back to your time in the Bay Area when you painted murals of horses under the tag Reminisce.

RN: It goes back to my interest in the accessibility of materials. I need to be able to pick things up and use them straight away. I don't really like a lot of waiting around. That is number one. But then there is definitely something naughty about spray paint that I really love. Destroying things is really incredible—not necessarily destroying private property, but the spray can is a tool of power. With a can of spray-paint you should do whatever you want, be free. It's very powerful. It's free speech.

JG: You've worked with children in the past. Has a child-like approach to making been influential on you?

RN: I mean, for sure. This goes back to control, or controlling scenarios. There's something obviously very freeing about children's work. The way in which they interact with materials is very interesting to me. Kids don't covet their materials—they waste all sorts of things. And often they're not precious about the finished objects. With my kid, there is such a strong sense of process when she's making something. It's like she's working something out in her mind, and then she just moves on. That's really amazing.



JG: That's something we also often see in Art Brut, especially in the classic trope of the psychologist collecting work by a patient in an institution—the doctor would “save” the work before the artist destroyed it.

RN: All of that art is incredibly interesting and beautiful to me. I'm definitely not a conceptual artist. I enjoy feelings. [laughs] It's very uncool, but yeah.

Jonathan Griffin is a writer living in Los Angeles. He is a contributing editor for *Frieze*, and also writes regularly for *ArtReview*, *The Art Newspaper*, *Art Agenda* and others. His book, *On Fire*, is published by Paper Monument.

Ruby Neri is an artist based in Los Angeles. Born 1970 in Oakland, she was associated with the Bay Area Mission School in the 1990s, before moving to Los Angeles in 1996. Recent exhibitions have included *Alicia McCarthy and Ruby Neri / MATRIX 270* at the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, and *People* at Jeffrey Deitch, Los Angeles (both 2018).

Ruby Neri, *Untitled (Dancing Women)* (2018).
Ceramic with glaze, 34.5 × 42 × 21 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and
David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.
Photo: Jeff McLane.