

Independent

In the Studio with Ruby Neri

March 2018



Ruby Neri in her studio, 2018. Photography: Jeff McLane Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.

"I have always been attracted to materials that have a sense of immediacy, something I can pick up and start working with and quickly use to bring an idea to life."

—Ruby Neri

A behind-the-scenes conversation with the San Francisco-raised, L.A.-based artist about her wide-ranging influences, the fusion of painting and sculpture in her work, and the new ceramic vessels that she will present at David Kordansky Gallery at next week's Independent.

How and when did you start working with ceramics?

I started working with clay in 2005, incorporating it into the mixed-media sculptures I was making at the time, while simultaneously making sculptures entirely out of clay.

Craft techniques like ceramics have often been relegated to secondary status within art history and the art world. Do you see your work as an attempt to break down some of those barriers? How do you conceive the relationship between art and craft?

I use clay to satisfy my sculptural and painterly needs. I align the clay-building aspect of my sculptures with object-making, and the surface impressions and glazes with mark-making. I think of the mark-making as a form of painting.

Craft isn't a word I think about often, but this could be because I wasn't trained in ceramics; my degrees are in painting. My work can cross into craft, and I don't mind that—I appreciate and respect the technical side of my media—but I don't address it consciously. I love the handmade element of ceramics, which can be aligned with craft. It is very important to me that my hand is visible in the final result. A lot of artists who came before me and whose work inspires me probably thought a lot about the distinction between craft and art. To me, it is ridiculous and mainly a market-driven idea: the cost of a ceramic work will never have the same value as a like-sized painting. These conceptions are unfortunately too often out of the hands of artists. I am not consciously trying to break any barriers. I am lucky to have inherited a more open space, and my ideas aren't driven by such expectations.



Ruby Neri, Los Angeles, 2018. Photography: Jeff McLane
Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.



Ruby Neri, *Among Flowers*, 2017. Ceramic with glaze.
Photography: Lee Thompson. Courtesy of David Kordansky
Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

What are your most significant influences or points of reference in these new works? Do you see your work as being in dialogue with the long history of the ceramic medium in particular?

Ancient prehistoric sculpture such as Paleolithic Venus figurines and Cycladic figurines, folk art, Bay Area Funk ceramics, Pop Art—my influences are a mash-up of many things and, although this includes a history of clay work, I think of my work only existing partially in that tradition.

You've worked at very different scales, from small, tabletop sculptures or vessels to much larger works on the scale of more conventional figurative sculptures or statuary. How do you think about scale in your work? Are there different ways you approach making smaller versus larger pieces (both technically and conceptually)?

I enjoy working on a larger scale, so the forms more directly reference sculpture, with a significant relation to my body. They also more directly reference a canvas for painting—this is very important. I don't want to make small ceramic objects that feel precious. That being said, I enjoy working smaller, too. Often these works are precursors, ideas I am formulating for larger sculptures, and sometimes they are standalone works that I can conceive quickly. Of course, there are technical differences when making larger or smaller objects, but these do not drive the work conceptually.



Ruby Neri, *Slaves and Humans*, 2016, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, installation view. Photography: Brian Forrest. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.

You began your career as a part of the San Francisco "Mission School," associated with graffiti and street art. How do you see the relationship between your early work and the figurative sculptures you're making now?

I have always been attracted to materials that have a sense of immediacy, something I can pick up and start working with and quickly use to bring an idea to life. Like a can of spray paint, clay (aside from the firing process) has that immediacy, too. It is a material you don't want to put down until you're done. It is no surprise I love applying glaze with a paint gun or airbrush. It is the same way I would use a spray can.



Drawings and sculptures inside Neri's studio. Photography: Jeff McLane Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.



You were born and raised in California, to artist parents, and continue to work in Los Angeles—do you see yourself as a California artist, specifically (as distinct from, say, an artist who happens to live in California)? Is there a particular lineage or history of California art that you think contextualizes your practice and your work?

It is hard not to see myself as a California artist, as I have never lived or worked outside of California. I am certainly influenced by both of my parents as well as their artist friends and the community they were a part of, namely the Funk movement, Bay Area Figuration, and the Beat generation. Beyond this history, my work has definitely been shaped by underground comic culture and my peers within the “Mission School,” not to mention the artists I worked for in SoCal such as Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw. Again, it is a mash-up.

The works you'll be showing at Independent primarily feature female forms. What draws you to the female figure in particular as a subject?

At this time in my life and my work, I am very drawn to this space: the female emotional world and psyche, and the physical manifestations thereof, in all their complexity. In a sense, these vessels and figures are self-referential, but in a non-biographical way. They are idealizations and visions based on personal experience—a reflection of the multifaceted, intense energy of everyday living.