



SALON 94

# RUBY NERI

## MADE IN L.A. by Kathleen Whitney



“Made in L.A.” is a biennial survey exhibition of artists working in Los Angeles shown at the University of California, Los Angeles’ Hammer Museum ([hammer.ucla.edu/](http://hammer.ucla.edu/)) in Los Angeles, California. In the 2012 exhibition, much of the work was highly technological, extremely abstract, or conceptual. In its midst, Ruby Neri’s seven figurative sculptures stood out like Martians in Times Square. Neri, a long-time resident of Los Angeles, makes her awkward and idiosyncratic figures in the city that reinvented the cult of the ideal body.

Neri’s sculptures are deceptively simple. They are reductive versions of a body, hardly more than matte white stick figures with some colorful decorative detail. Regardless of their insubstantial appearance, her work upholds the ideal of the figure as an embodiment of meaning. She neither embellishes nor exploits her subject matter; her sparsely decorated, stark forms are frozen in rigidly frontal poses creating an intensely primal atmosphere. Regardless of its appearance of innocence and spontaneity, Neri’s work is not childlike; she knows the history of 20th century modernist abstraction and upcycles its aesthetic and archetypal energy. Her work is deliberately crude, its aura of immediacy aggressive. Every object energizes its environment. She does not plan her work in advance, deciding on form, scale, and color as she works. Accidents are welcomed, retained, and accentuated; immediacy and the ability to make rapid changes form the core of her work. Every mark and gesture moves her objects further from realism; it’s the figure as totem that interests her.

Neri learned how to throw and handbuild in high school but was a painter for many years. Frustration with painting led her to

sculpture and ceramics. She starts a piece by throwing numerous pots and quickly assembling forms—joining bowls and cylinders together or attaching them to handbuilt elements. She does not alter the thrown pieces, using them as heads, necks or torsos. Ceramic is grafted to plaster over a steel armature, making the scale of her work larger and more complex than if it were entirely clay. Because of the way she adds section to section, she considers her figures to be assemblages.

Neri chooses her materials according to how much spontaneity they allow. Clay and plaster can be worked directly, and her welded-steel armatures can be swiftly changed or adapted as needed. All of her other materials—paint, spray paint, and glazes—are chosen because of their immediacy. All these elements lend themselves to ideas that are material and process-driven. The plaster is a natural partner with the white clay body and often the junction between the two is not immediately visible; the combination creates an appearance of lightness and fragility. The throwing and tool marks, glazes and paints Neri uses for surface decoration unify sections and materials, often distracting attention from the areas where different materials merge. She uses both underglazes and shiny glaze, often in combination with acrylics and spray paint. She works like an action painter, caught up in the physicality of the material, finding her content intuitively.

The two untitled, standing, life-sized figures in the exhibition present the characteristic elements of Neri’s technique; the use of multiple materials and the combination of thrown and handbuilt elements inelegantly assembled. The staring eyes, crudely rendered



1 Installation view of Ruby Neri's work from Made in L.A. Image courtesy of the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, California. 2 Untitled (standing woman), 5 ft. 3½ in. (1.6 m) in height, plaster, steel, ceramic and paint, 2012. 3 Untitled (head), 30 in. (76 cm) in height, ceramic and paint, 2012. 4 Untitled (standing figure), 5 ft. 4 in. (1.6 m) in height, plaster, steel, ceramic, and paint, 2012. Photos of individual works: Fredrik Nilsen. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, California.

heads and torsos, aggressively frontal stance, and spindly arms and legs are typical of her idiosyncratic style. Although the brightly colored torsos are focal points, it's the faces that give the figures their manic energy.

Half of *Untitled (standing figure)* is comprised of wheel-thrown elements, while the head and torso are handbuilt. This figure, with its truncated, tapered arms and round hips, is akin to stone-age fertility figures. The stylized body seems to float over impossibly thin, toothpick legs. The head has an archetypal presence; the fixed stare of the eyes and stiff cruciform body is reminiscent of the diagrammatic eyes and ritualized torsos of Cycladic figures. This kind of portrait-like specificity on an otherwise completely nominal, stylized body is surreal; it transforms the piece into a fetish.

*Untitled (standing woman)*, has a somewhat less frozen posture than *Untitled (standing figure)*. There is the implication of movement in the half-bent plaster leg placed forward of the torso. The akimbo plaster arms bracket a sexually ambiguous figure feminized by two pink circles that represent breasts. It's a caricature of a female figure. Her elongated, graceful neck is formed from a grooved cylinder that emphasizes the rudimentary appearance of the head, torso and legs. Her pie-shaped head and face are astonishing in their vitality. The hacked and smeary pink features are vividly expressionist, reminiscent of one of de Kooning's pink women.

Neri's *Untitled (head)* is one of her least confrontational pieces. Its oversized head and neck are joined to a sloping bowl that

mimics the traditional bust's truncated chest. It's strongly frontal; there is no decoration on its back. Mostly white, a patch of lemon yellow streaks some of the kerchief-like hair, emphasizing a cheek and lower eyelid. Two symmetrically painted bands of salmon and turquoise neatly divide neck and chest down the center. The expression, regardless of staring eyes, slashed features, slab nose and hair, is oddly calm. Although it is only 30 inches high, this object seems monumental; it has the same stately poise as Picasso's cubist portraits.

Neri's work mixes diverse sources: Art Brut, visionary environments, and folk and totemic art. While living in San Francisco, Neri was a graffiti artist; graffiti's totemic imagery, energy, and tough sketchiness remain in her current work. Her influences include action painters and assemblage artists. Although she is neither interested in nor influenced by ceramic history, Neri's work can be linked to other figurative sculptors working in clay, especially those who share her deliberate lack of refinement, including Viola Frey, Gina Bobrowski, and Beatrice Wood.

Neri's work is a sophisticated version of the primitive; it subverts figurative sculpture with a strong infusion of punk aesthetic. This potent combination creates a powerful, mythic reality—regardless of time, culture, and location. Isn't that every artist's job?

**the author** Kathleen Whitney is a sculptor/writer living in Los Angeles, California. She is a regular contributor to *Ceramics Monthly* and *Sculpture Magazine* and has also written essays for numerous exhibition catalogs.