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# LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS

QUARTERLY JOURNAL | SPRING 2014



## ARTIST PORTFOLIO

# RUBY NERI

*The painting, sculpture, and ceramics of Ruby Neri possess a bold expressiveness, a kineticism that would often seem to illuminate the very process of their creation. Whether working with paint, clay, steel, bronze, plaster, or a combination thereof, Neri's work retains the mark of her intuitive hand, the layering of different materials and applications of them that make for pieces of affecting depth and formal complexity. The following is a portfolio of some of Neri's recent ceramics and sculpture, including Before a Framework, a bronze cast she made as a commission for the High Line's year-long show Busted in New York City, which ended in April. In the accompanying interview Neri speaks with fellow artist Evan Holloway about her work, her return to San Francisco, and the legacy of other Northern California artists, including her father, artist Manuel Neri.*

**EVAN HOLLOWAY:** Could you pick a recent work and tell me how it came about and what the initial thought behind it was?

**RUBY NERI:** I'll talk about my table piece, which I call a tableau. It's untitled and was made late in 2013 for a group show in San Francisco this past January. The piece is comprised of a table made of wood that is six by two feet and upon it are placed objects I had made in ceramic or plaster, some painted and glazed, others left as raw material. I think this work came out of the sculptures I did for the first show I had at David Kordansky Gallery in 2009. There, I had a few sculptures that were comprised of groupings of plaster figures upon a plaster ground, as one piece.

I'd been feeling tired of the singular figure and wanted to try smaller, abstract pieces for bases or tables, basically sculptures for table tops. The piece didn't turn out small, though, it's 82 by 74 by 24 inches and I have decided to make a series, of which there are two already. The table that the objects rest on (the base) is always the same dimension, but each table has its distinct objects that make up a still life study. I really wanted to get away from singular representational sculptures (although, in some ways this is still that) and think about the psychology of objects together sharing a space, pretty basic stuff. I wanted to work with a very rigid structure. I also wanted to explore other things, such as narrative, though I'm wary of it, especially seeing as these pieces can become dioramas, which I am not interested in in this case. Narrative is compelling to me and repulsive simultaneously.

"Artist Portfolio: Ruby Neri," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Spring 2014, cover, pp. 56-71



UNTITLED (TABLE WITH SUN DISC), 2013  
CERAMIC, PLASTER, WOOD, GLAZE AND PAINT  
82 X 74 X 24 INCHES

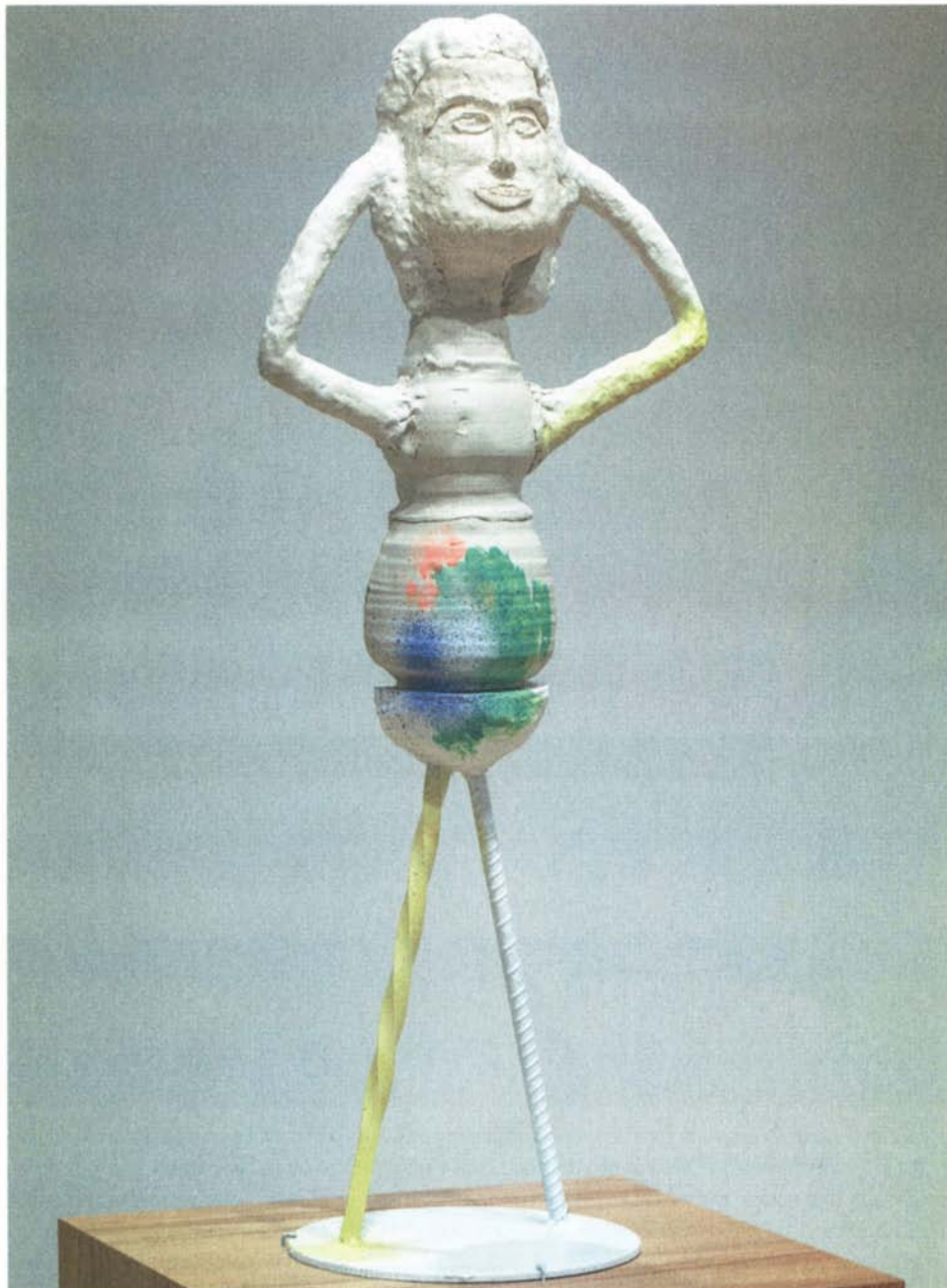
PHOTOGRAPHY: BRIAN FORREST

COLLECTION OF NION MCEVOY, PROMISED GIFT TO THE BERKELEY ART MUSEUM AND PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE



"Artist Portfolio: Ruby Neri," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Spring 2014, cover, pp. 56-71

LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS



UNTITLED, 2012  
CERAMIC, STEEL AND PAINT  
41.5 x 16 x 6.5 INCHES  
PHOTOGRAPHY: FREDRIK NILSEN

ARTIST PORTFOLIO: RUBY NERI

**What's attractive or repellant about narrative to you? How do you think it applies to the work you make?**

I'm never thinking about narrative when I go about making a piece or a body of work; I don't feel I have a story to tell or anything. However, I think it's there nonetheless because I make representational work, though I'm not conceptualizing the narrative element in any way intentionally. I really like the idea of making things that come out of intuition and/or formal concerns. I guess I think about narrative more so with the table pieces I've been doing: I like to think of the implied narrative and the relationship the different objects have with each other within the composition. I believe psychology plays more of a role for me within my work as of late, such as memory and my personal associations with forms and materials. This is very interesting to me, how materials and forms conjure up place, time, settings, and images.

**What role does your choice of materials play?**

I'm always interested in the material, whatever it may be; it is generally one of the main focal points of my work. For a long time I used to cover the surfaces of my sculptures with paint, particularly oil paint. I started to pull back from that a few years ago and think about the actual material that the objects were made of. For these table pieces I'm using clay and plaster alongside each other. It's important to me to have an immediacy with whatever material I may be working with. I don't like much process in terms of attaining the end product; I don't like using molds or very technical or sensitive material. Maybe that's ironic because I'm so invested in clay, which can require a certain technicality, but I have found that using it in the most basic way possible is the most satisfying. I think it has to do with control. I don't enjoy controlling the material so much. I don't like pushing it very far beyond what it initially is and it's very important to me that the intuitive use of material is on par with the controlled one. I'm drawn to the psychological element of raw materials and textures and this applies to paint as well as sculptural elements. I like what each material lends to a piece; each has its own language, and I feel that disparate quality brings together something very satisfying.

**What are the different qualities of the materials? How does surface contribute to these differences?**

I feel that plaster and clay are interesting in their immediate differences, but then they can also develop more substantial references that jive well together — one brings out the other, so to speak. The clay offers this link to craft that I really like, but not necessarily "the Craft of Ceramics." I mean more its accessibility and the fact that almost everyone has tried clay at some point in their lives. People usually have a very specific memory about their experience with clay and often the memory is from high school or being a kid. But it could also be taking classes as an adult, or even an experience somewhere like Color Me Mine.

Plaster, on the other hand, offers an immediacy that clay cannot; it doesn't have the technical element that clay has. Both materials appeal to me because of the obvious duality that is set up when they're used together: the clay speaks about history and craft, the plaster about "a material to be used to make things." (Plaster has almost no history for me, though, except for a retro quality from the

1970s, like George Segal sculptures.) The two surfaces together create something opposing. They are both very giving in terms of surface manipulation — one can be rough, the other smooth, and vice versa in different ways. The psychology for me comes from the displacement or banality of material use, or at times the aggressiveness of use, for the object. This also has to do with what the object is referencing. I am interested in common associations with representational objects and reducing that or expanding upon it, merely with the material being used.

**What do you hope a person would understand about what they're seeing when they look at your art?**

I don't really like the idea of having an aggressive agenda with my work. I feel it's very rooted in object-making and I need that language to be at the forefront of the initial response. In that way as well, I like to think that my choice of mark-making with the paint and glaze with ceramics speak to a language within painting. It's important to me that people see my interest in the materials I've chosen and their relationship to each other. It is also important that the control of the materials and the intuitive handling of them create a tension within the work.

In some respects, I like to think that my representational forms, say the figures, represent a sort of "low-fi" aesthetic that hearkens back to my roots in the Bay Area. Sometimes I feel like I'm treading on dangerous ground using this "low-fi" aesthetic with sculpture, but in other ways it's also just being true to my creative origins, meaning all the stuff I was into when I was younger and in undergrad like comic books or riot grrrl bands or using wrapping paper for art materials. I like thinking about it all still being inside me somewhere, why I liked something or was drawn to it, and why it still might have relevance now, because I enjoyed it then. It's a challenge to contextualize it, or again, use it in as non-controlling or non-specific a way as possible, and keep it strictly within a language of object-making.

**What exactly is the dangerous ground of the Bay Area lo-fi aesthetic? What do you mean "use it in a non-controlling or non-specific way"?**

Well, I feel that using "low-fi" or some kind of youth culture naïveté is a language within art-making like any other aesthetic, and with that comes strong associations. As I said earlier, I don't feel comfortable having any one strong agenda within my work outside of a focus on materials. Instead, I really find it interesting to try and move subtly within a few genres and aesthetics, without letting any one thing take hold of the piece and become too distracting. I like to try and reference my origins and interests quietly when it comes to the actual representational element. I feel the same about referencing craft when using clay; I like to try and reference a ceramic history without letting it take too strong a hold of the piece, too much and it becomes really uninteresting to me. Too much history requires context, which can be exhausting.

**What has been inspirational to you recently?**

I'm back in the Bay Area again for about five months while I teach, and this experience alone has been very inspirational. It's strange to come back after having lived in Los Angeles for 18 years.



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ARTIST PORTFOLIO: RUBY NERI



MADE IN L.A., 2012  
HAMMER MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES, CA  
INSTALLATION VIEW  
PHOTOGRAPHY: BRIAN FORREST

The creative people here are very different from creative people in L.A., and because I came from here and my creativity is so rooted here, it's surprising to actually be physically immersed in this environment again after having attained some kind of adult objectivity on my origins. When I see my work here it's like, "oh yes, so this is where it comes from."

Since I've been up here, I've been really interested in local establishments like the Berkeley Art Museum or the Oakland Museum, places I spent time in as a kid. Both museums have these amazing collections of regional art, especially from my dad's generation. I find this work so inspirational to revisit, and yet I have this whole other experience with it now, like it's so crazy how gender-specific some collections are up here. Maybe it's like that everywhere, but here, from my father's era, it's pretty much all male — it's depressing in that way. I visited the UC Davis small collection, thinking they would have pieces from the infamous "Davis School" from the '60s and '70s ceramic Funk movement, but they didn't have much. Perhaps the school thought all that Funk ceramic stuff was trash and not worth saving at the time!

**What were you hoping to see from the Davis school? What women artists of your father's generation would you like to see included in the all-male shows you are seeing?**

The only woman I can find online who did any of the Funk ceramics at UC Davis during that time is Margaret Dodd, who was very interested in making ceramic automobiles. I am no expert on the UC Davis scene by any means, but it seems to have been a small group of male faculty, specifically: Robert Arneson, William T. Wiley, Roy De Forest, my father, David Gilhooly, and Wayne Thiebaud. In the '60s Davis was a tiny agriculture town far from anywhere, and in general I think its faculty at that time was very male-oriented, so I guess I shouldn't be surprised that it was such a male art scene. Peter Voulkos really opened up the door in terms of freeing ceramics from "women's work" and allowing it to be "okay" for men to get rough and tough with ceramics. The broader Funk art scene included more women, but not many by today's standards.

**How do you think studying art in Los Angeles and living there has given you insight into growing up in Northern California? How do you see things differently with this experience?**

If I hadn't have moved to Los Angeles perhaps I would never have made 3-D work. I was just so inhibited because of my father, without even being aware that I was. Going to the San Francisco Art Institute for undergrad was hard because all my teachers were either my father's students or his friends. Moving to L.A. allowed me peace of mind to just make stuff, which was freeing. L.A. is very good for that, closing the door and making work. And that slowly allowed me to gain perspective about my father's work and also his contemporaries, who are so amazing. I started using plaster after grad school because I knew that was one way to make sculpture after seeing my dad do it. I just used the plaster how I needed to use it. I didn't see any reason to get hung up on the relationship with my dad's work. I just believe it's going to be there regardless of what medium or material I'm using, so I might as well just do what I want.

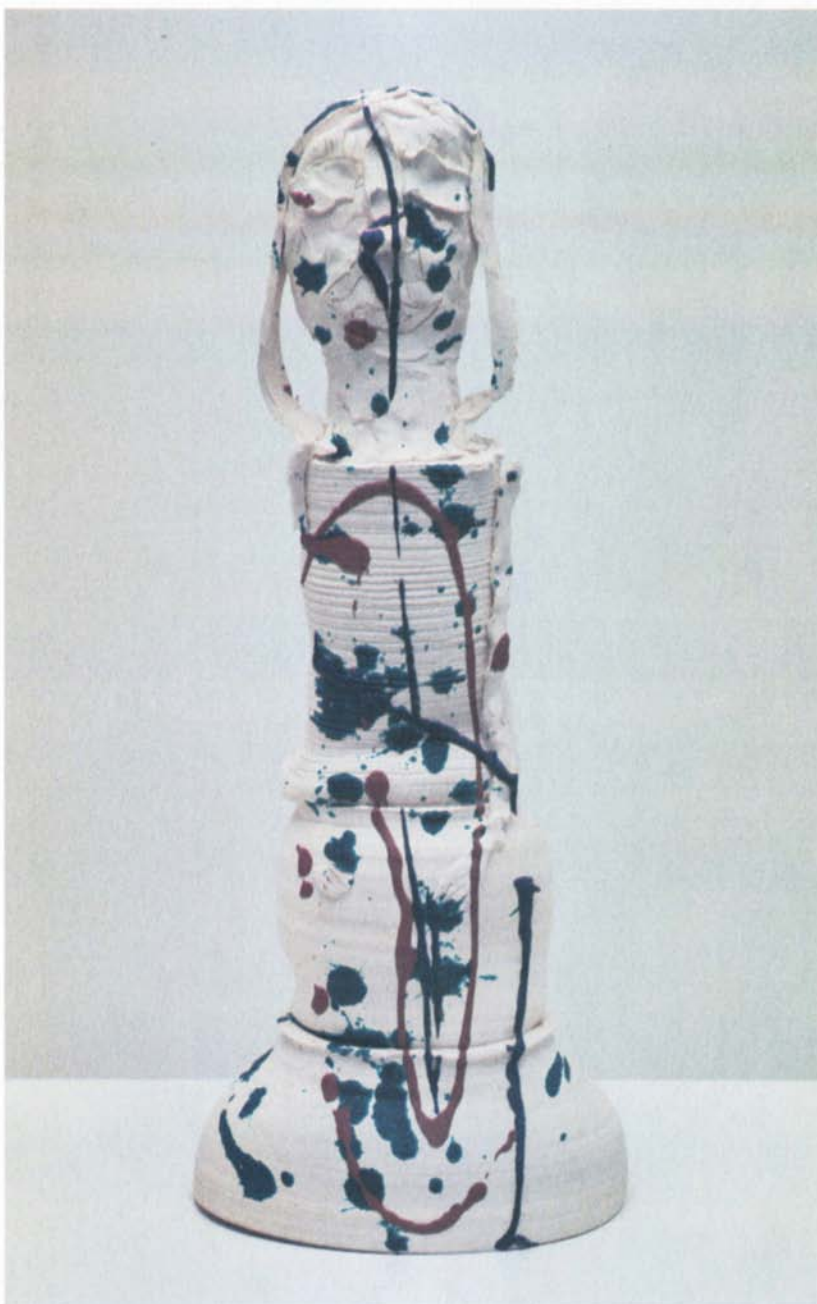
I like coming back to the Bay Area and seeing the origins of my artwork, not only with my father's work, but because the mentality of being creative here is very specific and something I relate to. I like this whole DIY idea that is very strong in the Bay Area. People love counterculture up here. I sort of forgot what counterculture is being in L.A. so long. I'm one of those rare people who loves both Northern and Southern California; each gives me something else. It's interesting to have a geographic relationship to other artists. I'd like to think my work has a relationship with other California artists or to the people I went to UCLA with. ▲

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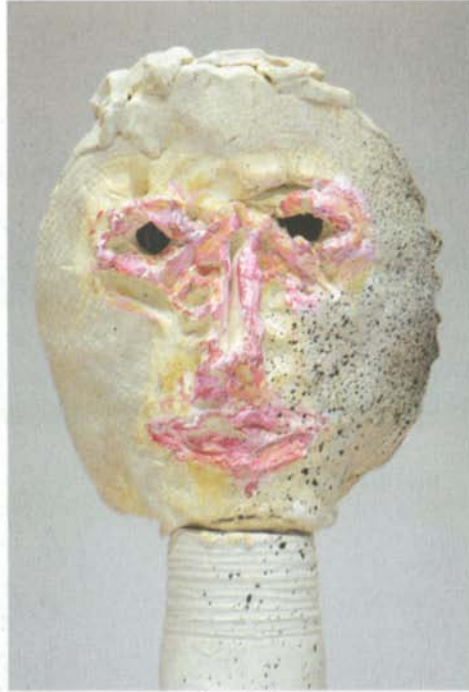
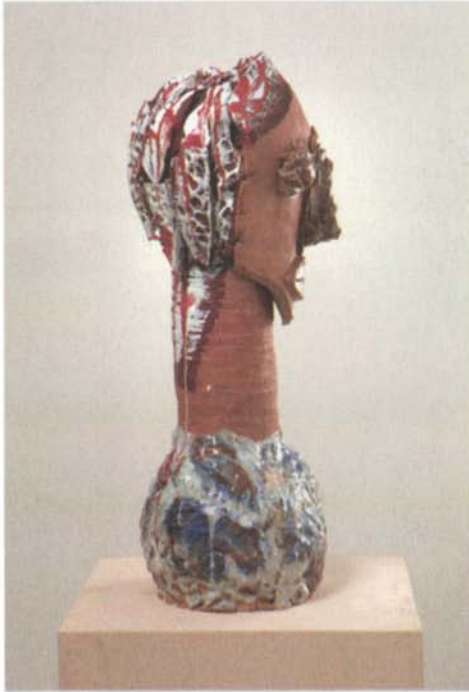
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ARTIST PORTFOLIO: RUBY NERI



UNTITLED, 2011  
CERAMIC AND ACRYLIC PAINT  
24 x 8 3/4 x 8 1/2 INCHES  
PHOTOGRAPHY: BRIAN FORREST

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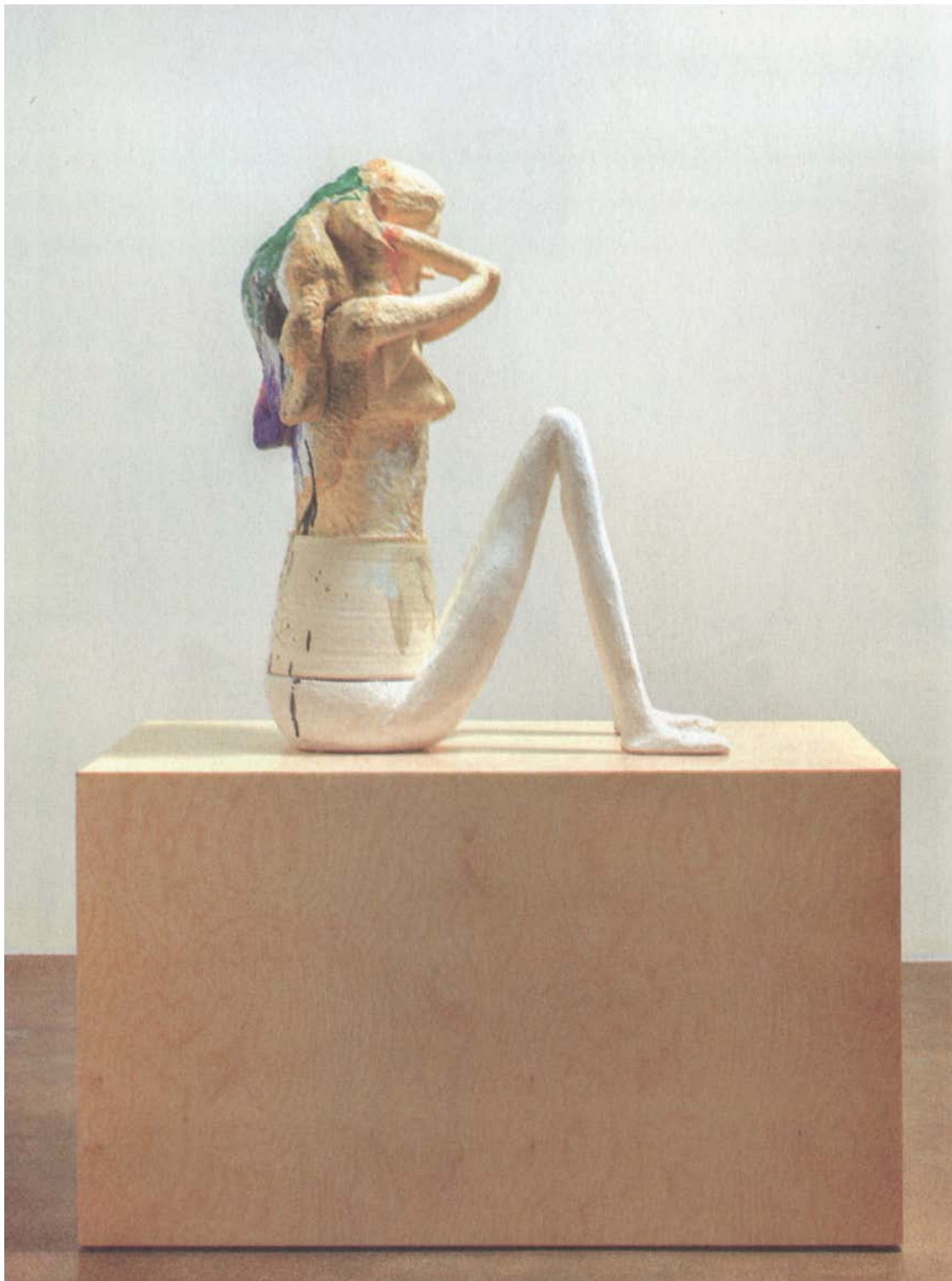


ABOVE: *UNTITLED (WITH ORANGE AND GREEN)*, 2010. STONEWARE, GLAZE, ACRYLIC PAINT. 25 x 16 x 9.5 INCHES  
PHOTOGRAPHY: BRIAN FORREST.

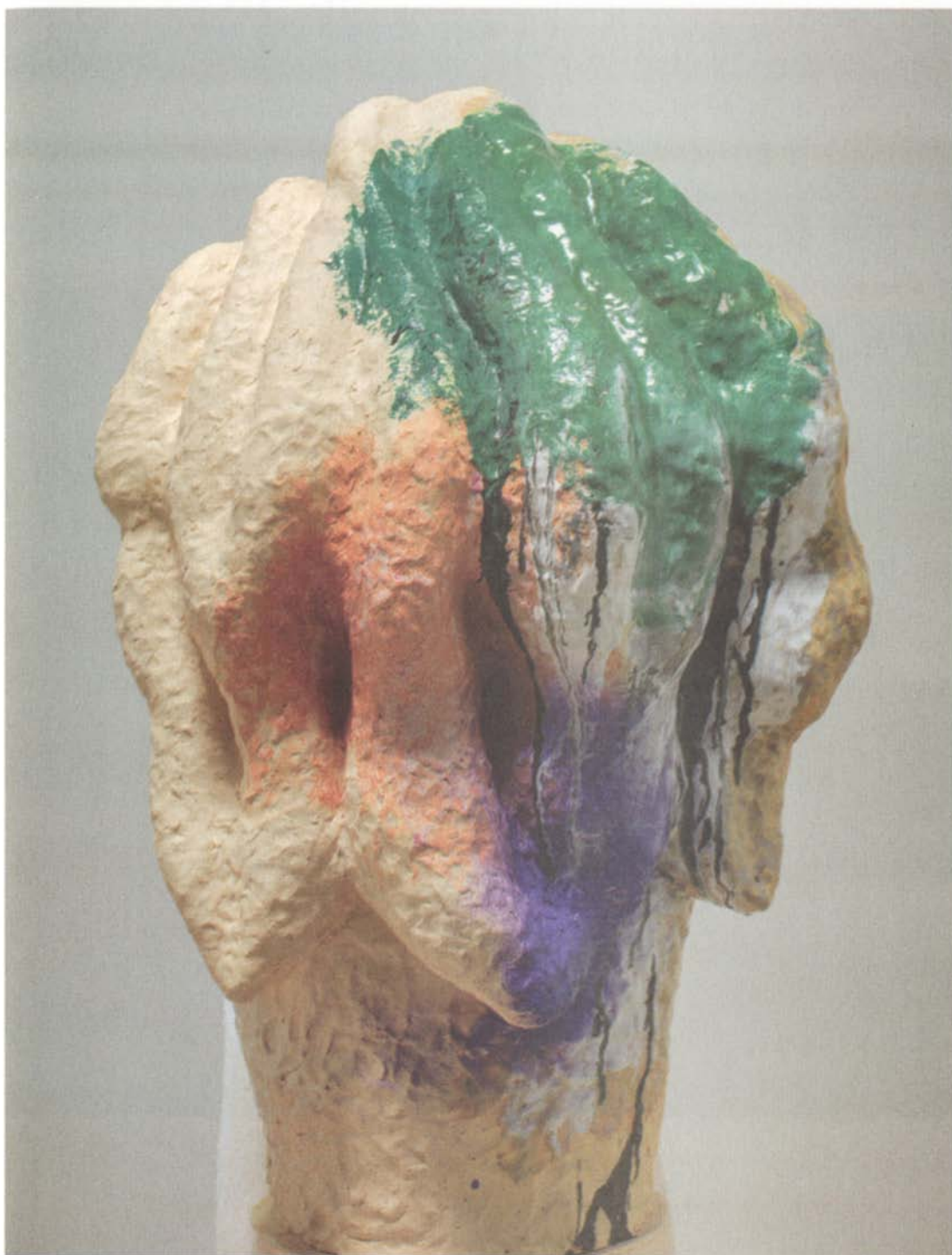
LEFT (LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM): *UNTITLED*, 2008. STONEWARE, GLAZE, TEMPERA, OIL BASED ENAMEL 29 x 10 x 13 INCHES. PHOTOGRAPHY: ROBERT WEDEMEYER; *UNTITLED (STANDING WOMAN)*, DETAIL, 2012. PLASTER, STEEL, CERAMIC AND PAINT 63 1/2 x 17 1/2 x 13 INCHES. PHOTOGRAPHY: FREDRIK NILSEN; *UNTITLED*, 2008. STONEWARE, GLAZE, OIL PAINT 19 3/4 x 9 3/4 x 11 3/4 INCHES. PHOTOGRAPHY: BRIAN FORREST; *UNTITLED*, 2009. CERAMIC WITH GLAZE AND ACRYLIC PAINT 26 3/4 x 8 1/4 x 11 INCHES. PHOTOGRAPHY: BRIAN FORREST.



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PREVIOUS PAGE:  
BLACK HOLE, AND DETAIL, 2012  
CERAMIC, PLASTER, GLAZE, ENAMEL PAINT. OVERALL: 58 x 42 1/2 x 24 1/2 INCHES. SCULPTURE: 33 1/2 x 25 x 12 1/2 INCHES.  
BASE: 24 1/2 x 42 1/2 x 24 1/2 INCHES.  
PHOTOGRAPHY: FREDRIK NILSEN



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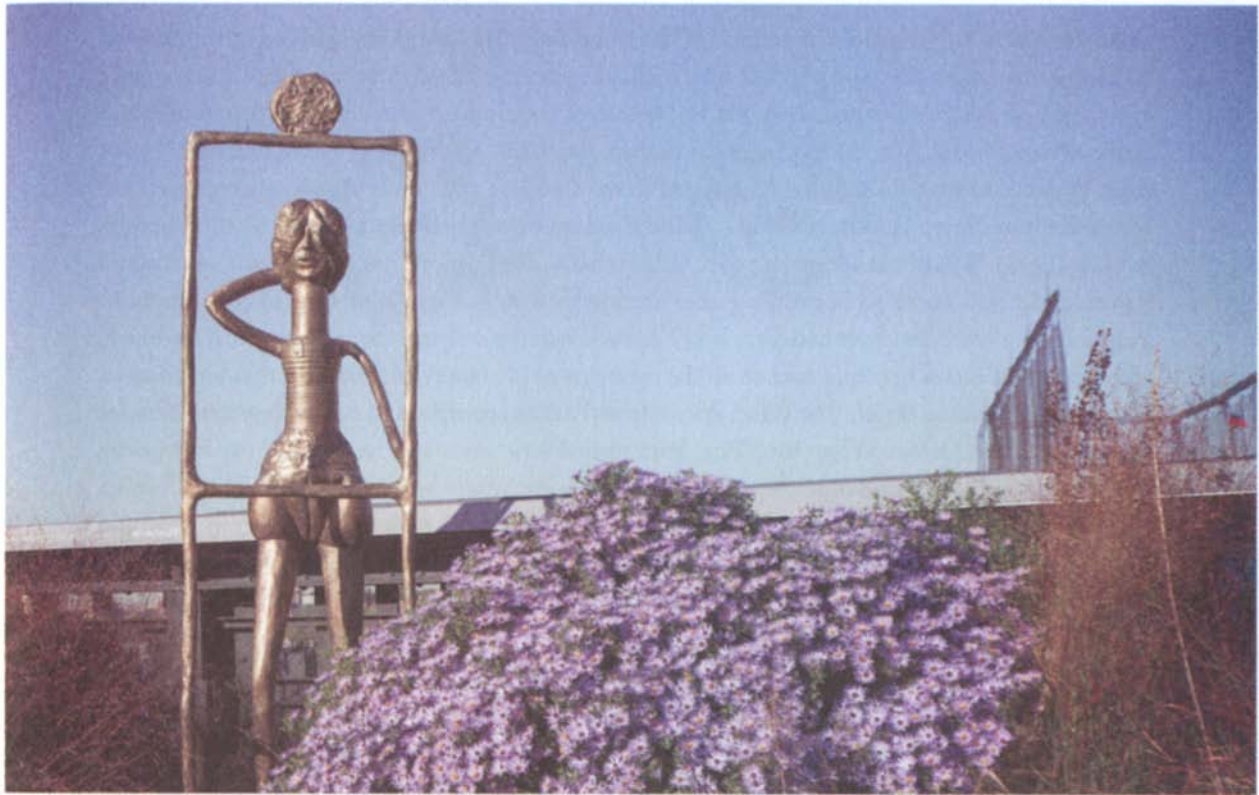


SCULPTURE, 2012  
DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY  
INSTALLATION VIEW  
PHOTOGRAPHY: BRIAN FORREST

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BEFORE A FRAMEWORK, 2013  
BRONZE AND CONCRETE  
77 x 31.5 x 30 INCHES. EDITION OF 3, 1 AP. PART OF THE HIGH LINE COMMISSION BUSTED.  
ON VIEW APRIL 2013 - APRIL 2014. ON THE HIGH LINE, NEW YORK.  
PHOTOGRAPHY: TIMOTHY SCHENCK. COURTESY OF FRIENDS OF THE HIGH LINE.

LEFT: DETAIL OF *BEFORE A FRAMEWORK*, 2013  
PHOTOGRAPHY: FREDRIK NILSEN