

LAWEEKLY



Depending on which way one throws a quick glance upon walking into David Kordansky Gallery, one might toss Ruby Neri in with a number of different early modernist movements and isms from the Symbolist and Nabis artists to the Fauves and the Expressionists, and to link Neri's efforts to individuals and practices as varied as the paintings of Paul Gauguin, Maurice Denis, Paul Signac or Franz Marc, the paintings or ceramic works of Picasso in his more rough-around-the-edges moments, or the sculptures of Wilhelm Lehmbruck or Marino Marini (none of which would be off the mark). And one only needs to read the gallery's online press release once to see how it tries to dance around categorizations of Neri's work that might lead to a regressive labeling, including alignments with both early modernism and outsider art. But what the words bumble through, Neri argues more clearly through her work. Having grown up with the immediate influence of Bay Area Figurative artists like her father, the sculptor Manuel Neri, as well as David

Park and Joan Brown, Neri understands, it seems instinctively as much as intellectually, what a bunch of young Germans who came of age more directly connected to the late-twentieth-century paintings of A.R. Penck or Georg Baselitz than with the likes of Kirchner or Nolde also get — that expressionism is not a fashion that gets trotted out for retreading periodically, as detractors suggested of (neo) expressionism in the '80s, but a tradition that has fallen in and out of critical favor while nonetheless being continued by multiple generations. Neri knows her history — both her origins and her precedents — and nods to them routinely, but she also brings to the table an exuberance often absent, downplayed or sublimated in the works of her predecessors, as well as a perspective that is born of a longer history and wider range of influences. There are hints of hippie, punk, new wave and hip-hop added to her mixture of harlequins, nudes, lovers, horse riders and heads, and as has been the case with much recent abstract art, Neri's latter-day descendants of mixed-modernist heritage have a distinctly post-pop feel. Though her sculptures have great presence, it's Neri the painter who triumphs here, partly because her paintings are so strong, and also because her sculptures seem thought through more as paintings, whether in the submission of anatomy and three-dimensional form to the demands of surface decoration, or in the tendency toward formality that makes her painted plaster figures seem like actors on a stage composed for an audience with a predetermined point of view, or her ceramic heads that so fully abdicate sculpture's peripatetic potential that the artist lines them up along a wall, and in some instances has scrawled signatures across their backsides as one might expect to find on the flipside of a canvas. The sculptures hold up by the sheer verve they share with the paintings, but they leave one looking forward to what will happen when Neri more fully explores the potential and limitations of form in the round as she has in two dimensions.