

## RUBY NERI

Most young girls go through a horse phase: they play with model horses, or maybe they go to horse camp or take riding lessons or, as in Ruby Neri's case, make horses the central subject of their artwork. Neri spent her childhood riding horses, so when it came to art making, the subject was completely natural for her and allowed her to idealize certain moments of her past without going too deeply into her own history. While studying at the San Francisco Art Institute, Neri had a parallel life as a street artist, and under the name Reminisce, or REM, she painted lifelike images of horses running, grazing, and resting on walls, scaffolding, and any other blank spaces she could find around San Francisco (unfortunately none of these works are extant today). She was a founding member of the "Mission School" and collaborated with other street artists such as Twist (Barry McGee), Alicia McCarthy, and KR.

In the late 1990s, however, Neri stopped making graffiti art and focused on her studio art practice, including sculpture. The horses were still present as a subject, and in graduate school she began experimenting with abstraction and sculpting other animals, such as owls and lions. *Untitled (Lioness)* (1998–99) depicts a life-size lioness in all her glory, sitting proudly atop a bright green pedestal. Made out of painted fiberglass, the sculpture has a silent regality and ferocity.

Process is key for Neri. The content is always secondary and often a means to an end, a platform that enables her to tackle each medium and technique with fresh eyes and a risk-taking attitude. Neri confronts her work head-on and, more importantly, hands-on. Whether it is painting on canvas, plaster on a steel armature, or ceramics,

she works in a wildly intuitive and expressive manner. As the daughter of famed Bay Area sculptor Manuel Neri, she initially distanced herself from his figurative and expressionistic style, but in the last decade she has come back around to her roots. Her recent works include harlequin-patterned painted sculptures of horses, figures, and figures on horses. The painted plaster figures are displayed on specially made pedestals that become part of the piece. Figures stand or sit serenely in traditional poses but are painted with thick impasto in vibrant colors—blacks with greens, yellows, purples, and reds. *Girl* (2010) depicts a woman sitting with her arms draped gently across her upright knees; she is painted in a pattern with violet, green, and red, outlined in deep black. Neri also paints figures and horses, clowns, groups of women, and groups of men, again using thick brushwork and brash colors. In the painting *Three Heads with Flowers* (2010), three smiling women painted in an almost childlike manner (they have rosy red circles on their cheeks), beam out at us from a frenzied forest of oranges, yellows, blacks, and blues, holding purple, yellow, and white flowers in their elongated hands. There is no white space or blank canvas anywhere: every inch is covered with abstract or figurative markings or a combination of both but always with luscious, thick brushwork. Seen together, the paintings and painted sculptures create a hilarious and lively conversation as they confront and yet balance one another.

Lately Neri has also begun making ceramics but has thrown out all the traditional rules, experimenting with glazes, high and low fires, painting on the fired clay, and more. She constructs figures whose limbs are thrown pots or that have giant heads and body parts

assembled much like a Mr. Potato Head toy. In an untitled piece from 2008, a giant glazed head is covered with an unglazed sheet of ceramic, the tubelike neck leads to a glazed torso (featuring a foliate pattern), and the two disproportionately small arms extend outward like brooms. Neri stands out among her peers and other Southern California sculptors for her unabashed embrace of an outsider aesthetic mixed with a wide array of influences, including Constantin Brancusi, classical Greek sculpture, and German expressionism. In its energy and sheer vibrancy, her work is incredibly alive and optimistic, a rarity in our dismal times.

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