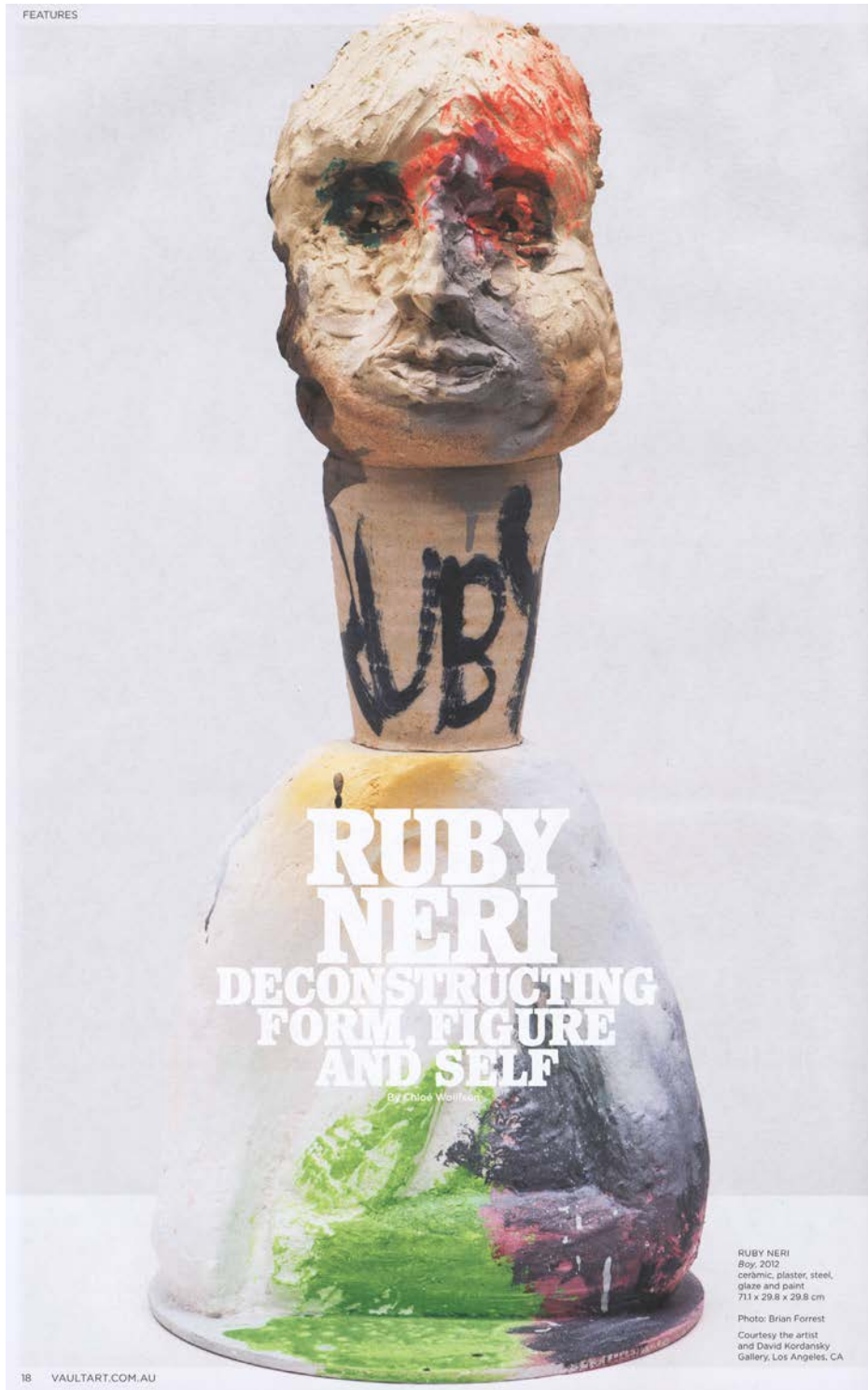


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RUBY NERI  
*Untitled (table with sun disc)*, 2013  
ceramic, plaster, wood, glaze  
and paint  
208.3 x 188 x 61 cm  
Photo: Brian Forrest  
Courtesy the artist  
and David Kordansky Gallery,  
Los Angeles, CA

**Drawing upon her graffiti background and embracing an intensely personal approach to art-making, Los Angeles-based artist Ruby Neri loosens and eschews the baggage of art history.**

On a long white table sits a careful arrangement of objects, flanked on either side by a terracotta-coloured brick and a white goblet. The irregular, chalky surfaces of the objects are echoed in a number of spindly pipes, which resemble discombobulated parts of a three-dimensional bar graph. Another pipe-like form creates a glistening gold eternity symbol next to a white sculpture of a human head with half-lidded eyes. In the centre of this group stands a white ceramic disc scrawled with yellow, atop a glazed blue tower. This talismanic collection offers a telling preface to the rich psychological landscape of Californian artist Ruby Neri.

Neri, who has exhibited since the mid-1990s, has developed a practice rooted in experimentation and a gestural approach to materials. Totemic figures with flat, plate-like faces often take centre stage, their torsos formed from ribbed, wheel-thrown pots with stubby protruding limbs. Raw clay is smeared thickly with oil paint, or subtly splashed with watery ink. The artist's signature writ large over an entire work forms a colourful graphic device.

Neri is based in Los Angeles but has a strong connection to the Bay Area. Her father, sculptor Manuel Neri, is a noted member of the second generation of the Bay Area Figurative

Movement. Neri herself studied in San Francisco and was a prolific graffiti artist before turning her focus more fully to sculpture. She chatted with *VAULT* about developing a personal relationship with her chosen media and avoiding getting caught in a vortex of technical and historical baggage.

**HOW DO GESTURE AND MATERIALITY GUIDE YOUR PROCESS, BOTH IN THE WAY YOU WORK WITH YOUR HANDS AND ALSO IN TERMS OF A BODILY RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SCALE OF YOUR WORK?**

I'm a very physical and process-oriented person, so the materials I work with are important in terms of immediacy. I've been working a lot with clay, plaster and paint. I don't like a lot of process in terms of technical difficulty, [such as] moulds or casting. I like to pick something up and work with it. I'm not interested in monumental scale, although the thought has crossed my mind. I like a scale that is one-to-one with my body. My work is branching out to these objects on tables, so it's important that I don't have diminutive or precious work on a small scale [either]. It's very personal to have a direct reference to the human body, in terms of that relationship that you're sharing with the object.

A lot of my work is a cathartic process. I've not done performance or made art before an audience,

FEATURES

but I feel that some of the pieces have a remnant quality in terms of a moment that I was processing – a ritual of working with the material. I approach painting in a very physical way as well – at times it can be very three-dimensional.

**THERE'S AN INTERESTING DIALOGUE BETWEEN YOUR PAINTINGS AND SCULPTURES. HOW DID YOU APPROACH THAT IN YOUR STUDIO PRACTICE?**

Yeah, that is a big deal. At one time, I had separate practices and I was running around the studio like a chicken with its head cut off. I couldn't deal with it anymore, because each practice was becoming more and more time consuming in its own right. At that point, around 2012, I was doing plaster sculptures, ceramics, and paintings. So I combined all three elements and was working three-dimensionally. It was all coming from the same place.

Painting is so demanding in terms of its history. The whole idea of what painting is became problematic for me and I didn't have time to address all these issues that were not interesting to me at all, so that was why I chose to throw it onto my sculpture. When I switched to the three-dimensional, I became [more] interested in clay. Now my ceramics have totally taken over, although I'm not a trained ceramicist. I come at ceramics from a sculptural perspective and had to catch up with any technical knowledge.

At one point I was interested in the fact that I was going at it rather blindly, but I think that my newfound knowledge has saved me a lot of time, in terms of problem solving. Ceramics is a bit like painting for me, in that its history is oppressive. I'm really happy that I don't have that ceramics history. I love knowing about it now, but I probably wouldn't have been so involved with clay if I'd had that technical training... I try to go about it in the simplest ways possible. The most basic things out of the jar are really interesting to me actually.

**IN YOUR EARLIER CERAMICS, IT LOOKED LIKE YOU WERE HAVING A LOT OF FUN WITH DIFFERENT TYPES OF GLAZES AND PIGMENTS. THE SURFACES OF THE WORKS IN YOUR 2012 SHOW SEEMED MORE GESTURAL, OR EVEN GRAFFITI-INFLUENCED.**

The graffiti I did back in the day has definitely transferred over into mark-making. I'm still obsessed with writing my name on things. The mark-making I'm interested in comes out of painting [as well as] the physical way of working with the material. I love putting everything on clay. When I first started those earlier pieces, I would throw everything on there. I was working at a community college and was [using] whatever the hell they had there. I love oil paint on anything. The materials I use have a nice way of reacting with oil and other paint. Plaster and clay are both so absorbent; ink or water-based paint just absorbs into it and leaves this beautiful surface.

The latest work I've been doing is grounded in object-making, so I hold back a bit with colour. I've been making a lot of these tableaux, working with object and spatial relationships. Those works are much quieter and calmer, and have a more muted palette.

**THE TABLEAU PIECES REPRESENT AN INTERESTING PROGRESSION. I SEE THEM IN SOME WAYS AS DECONSTRUCTED VERSIONS OF YOUR EARLIER FIGURES, WITH LIMBS AND VESSELS. HOW DID THEY COME ABOUT?**

I got tired of working with singular figurative pieces and wanted to branch out into more complex compositions. I didn't really think about this until my show with Dave [David Kordansky] in 2009: I actually had a grouping of figures. But they're covered in oil paint and there is no material exposed. The deconstructed works are more about paring things down to an essence. That was one of the reasons I was focussing on material itself, like the raw clay body, or paint straight out of the tube. I'd had this fanaticism of coverage with paint, the singular figurative element, composition – all of those things overloaded at one point and I just stopped and pulled away from it. I wanted them to become a little more formal, and they're not so purely gestural now.

The tableaux are becoming self-portraits, I feel, because a lot of them have, like you say, almost limbs, or a direct figurative reference like a bust or head and other objects around them. So it's definitely like a deconstructed figure and it's very psychological in that sense. Each element is its own thought, like this is like the inside of my brain, and every tableau I've made lately almost seems like a conversation that I might have with myself.

**MANY OF YOUR WORKS HAVE AN ALMOST TOTEMIC FEEL TO THEM. ARE PARTICULAR CULTURAL TRADITIONS INFORMING THAT?**

My 2012 show in LA was very much based on totemic forms. It wasn't anything specific. There's the Pacific Northwest Native Americans who made totem poles, which are incredible works of art. I was also looking at Louise Bourgeois' sculptures at that time; she did a lot of upright wooden forms that were really appealing to me. A lot of African works I look at are iconic forms that mankind almost everywhere has made, culturally across the board. These lasting forms that have withstood time are so important. I think that's why I pulled out of that pretty quickly – I felt restricted. Although the totemic pieces were emotional, they were almost rigid, timeless somehow, sort of omnipotent. I felt like I wanted something a little closer to myself emotionally – a more self-reflective way of working. The tableaux pieces became more emotional and I'm really interested in the surrealistic element that's coming out in those pieces.

Below left  
RUBY NERI  
*Untitled (Blue Faces)*, 2011  
oil on canvas  
152.4 x 137.2 cm

Photo: Brian Forrest

Below right  
RUBY NERI  
*Red Gloves and Shoes*, 2011  
oil on canvas  
76.2 x 61 cm

Photo: Fredrik Nilsen  
Courtesy the artist  
and David Kordansky  
Gallery, Los Angeles, CA





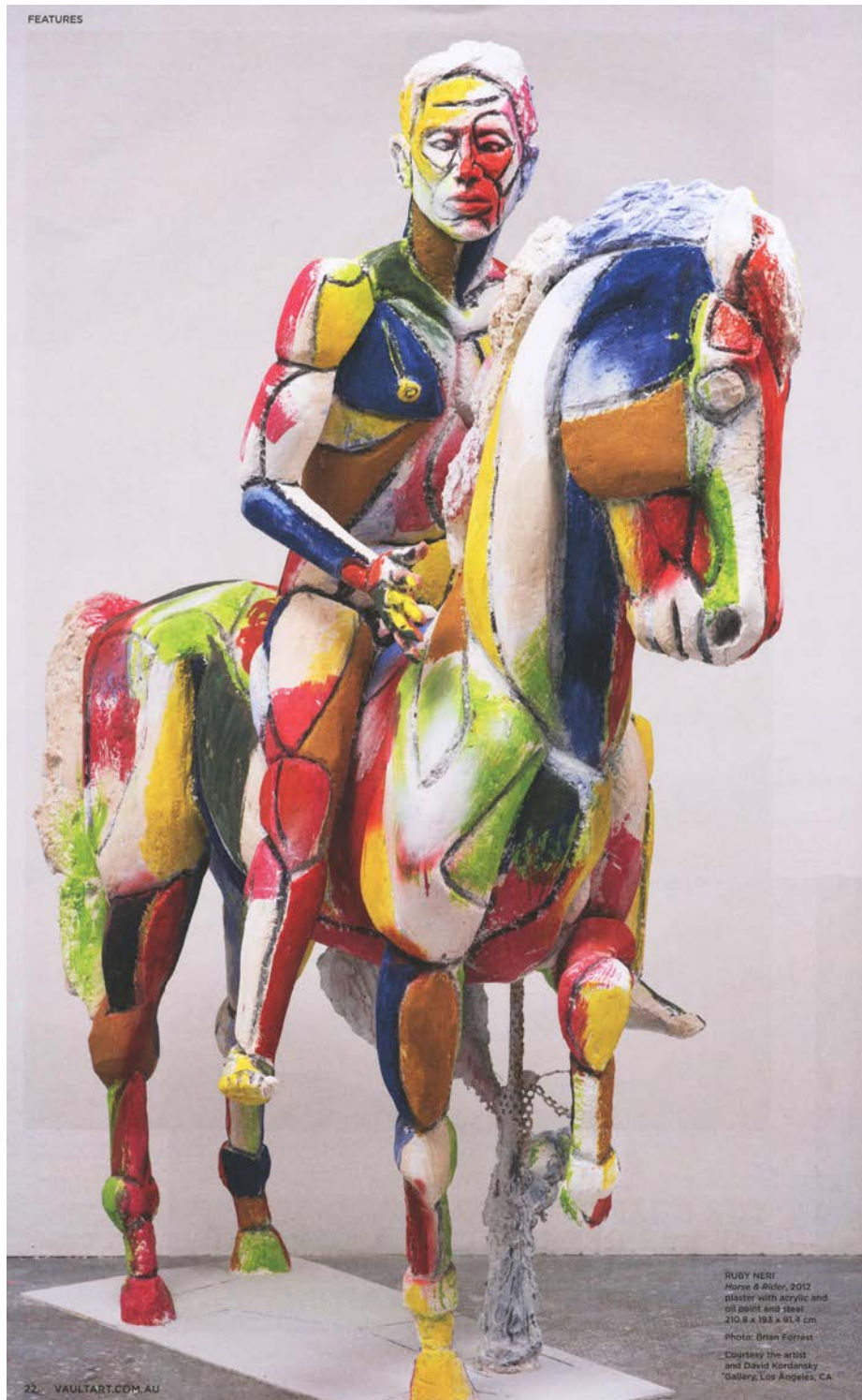
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**"THE GRAFFITI I DID BACK IN THE DAY HAS DEFINITELY TRANSFERRED OVER INTO MARK-MAKING. I'M STILL OBSESSED WITH WRITING MY NAME ON THINGS"**

RUBY NERI  
*Untitled (Sitting Girl)*, 2012  
ceramic, plaster, glaze,  
acrylic paint, and enamel  
85.1 x 95.3 x 48.9 cm  
Photo: Fredrik Nilsen  
Courtesy the artist  
and David Kordansky  
Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

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**DOES GENDER PLAY A ROLE IN YOUR APPROACH TO YOUR PRACTICE?**

Someone told me years ago – it was meant as a compliment – “You make art like a man would.” Oh my God, I had never thought about that. Ever since then, [my work has] become very purposely feminine. It’s not necessarily about womanhood, but I wanted to allow a female ideology to rise to the surface somewhat. My earlier figurative work was non-gender specific and the longer that I’ve been making work, [the more it has become] based within a female perspective or female self-awareness. That comes into play with these newer pieces because they’re more psychological, and that psychology has a lot to do with being a woman.

**HOW DOES TEACHING IMPACT ON YOU AS AN ARTIST?**

I love teaching, undergrads specifically. I don’t know how people have a career in art-making and teach full-time, but if I could have one undergrad class per semester I would. It’s so fun working with students. It’s pure energy. Especially undergrads – they just want to make stuff all the time, [which is] so inspiring.

**WHAT IS COMING UP FOR YOU?**

I’m going to be doing traditional wood firing soon.

**NICE. IS THAT FOR A PARTICULAR SHOW?**

No, I’m probably going to do a lot of functional stuff. I did do a lot of sculptures once before and now that I’ve seen what comes out of it, I’m going to try and do a lot of bowls [as well as] some sculptures. It’s a two-week-long process where you have to put wood into this thing 24 hours a day. I’d never done anything like that. You feel this ancient weight of history on you, working with fire and earth. [It’s] transformative... I’m excited to do that again. I like doing a lot of different things in different areas, which gets a little crazy, but it keeps it interesting. **V**

Ruby Neri is represented by David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. davidkordanskygallery.com



Above  
RUBY NERI  
*Sculpture #8*, 2014  
ceramic and oil paint  
74.9 x 30.5 x 15.9 cm  
Photo: Lee Thompson  
Courtesy the artist  
and David Kordansky  
Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

Below  
RUBY NERI  
*Untitled (table with  
lamp post)*, 2014  
wood, ceramic, glaze  
and paint  
207 x 182.9 x 61 cm  
Photo: Lee Thompson  
Courtesy the artist  
and David Kordansky  
Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

