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Los Angeles Times

Ruby Neri sculpts flamboyant, fearless, nakedly female figures

By Leah Ollman | June 7, 2019



"Pietà" by Ruby Neri, 2019, ceramic with glaze, 59 inches by 38 inches by 30 inches. (Jeff McLane / David Kordansky Gallery)

Ruby Neri's boisterous, bewildering sculptures on view at the David Kordansky Gallery are something to be reckoned with.

Seven large pieces are in the show, each a vessel whose walls are defined by the lumpy, voluptuous shapes of multiple female figures. Meandering among them, appreciating their verve and coping with their incorrectness, feels like an endless ride on a psychic Slip 'N Slide.

The pots, distant relatives to amphoras and urns, stand on the floor and reach to the viewer's ribs and higher. The tallest is just under 6 feet. If Peter Voulkos pushed ceramics to a new level of machismo, Neri's work closes that gender gap with its brash, irreverent, all-caps NUDE WOMEN machisma.

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"Ghosts" by Ruby Neri, 2019. Ceramic with glaze, 66 inches by 46 inches by 45 inches (Jeff McLane / David Kordansky Gallery)

Are these representations of women or really one universal woman, in myriad sizes and positions? Neri, who is based in L.A., renders them with a reductive sameness that reeks of caricature, because the stereotype she adopts and applies with cartoonish simplicity is that of the blue-eyed, buxom blond with full, juicy, red lips. Nipples on the women's ample breasts protrude like molten missiles, and their exposed genitals are summed up as a red-hot triangle.

The characterization registers viscerally as an objectifying debasement, and yet the figures appear gleefully self-possessed. They face outward in pairs and clusters, small ones on the laps of larger ones, elbows out or entire bodies leaning away from the central form to create handles. Like glistening human candy, their skin shines a glossy pink, their cheeks blush rose and their hair radiates sunny yellow.

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"Women With Dolls in Their Laps" by Ruby Neri, 2019. Ceramic with glaze 51.5 inches by 54.5 inches by 30 inches (Jeff McLane / David Kordansky Gallery)

The exaggerations are at once ridiculous and endearing. Tall rows of sculpted daisies sprout in a few pieces, and a sky-blue fills space overhead, weirdly countering the sexual charge with a note of saccharine wholesomeness (never mind that the swollen leaves, too, have vulvar orifices). Hearts, cutesy emblems of happiness and love, pop up here and there, modeled or glazed.

Perhaps the women Neri depicts occupy a state of Edenic innocence, and their nakedness corresponds more to fundamental vitality than sexual display. But what of those high heels? The women all have them, most as perverse extensions of their bare feet. If those aren't a symbol of acculturated sexual objectification, I don't know what is. The fashion photographer Helmut Newton, known for skirting the edge of kink and porn, always put his models in high heels, believing that women weren't fully nude without them.

Slip, slide, slip, slide.

Flamboyant and fearless, these sculptures jolt the body nearly as much as the social conscience. Neri's finger trails add texture to the raw cavities (which she tags in airbrushed underglaze) and some of the external surfaces as well. Eyelashes might be dark, drawn dashes or ridged rims, like pie crusts. Everywhere, breasts bulge. The intense materiality of the pieces never recedes. They stand at the nexus of women, bodies, self-definition and power — as acts of reclamation, perhaps, provocations absolutely.