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Straight to the heart of the style

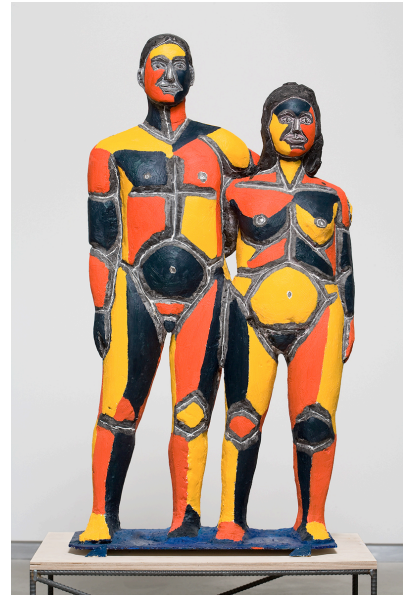
Ruby Neri's painted clay figures and big, blazing paintings take visitors back to the heyday of German Expressionism. In the first decades of the 20th century, artists such as Franz Marc, Emil Nolde and Paula Modersohn Becker sought the crude truth in deliberately inelegant works that embraced childlike innocence, primitive vigor and the naked basics of life: pleasure and pain, love and death, food and sex.

But unlike all too many second-, third- and fourth-generation Expressionists, Neri does not use the ham-fisted simplicity of first-generation Expressionism as an excuse to work swiftly, freely and easily with the unselfconsciousness of an unschooled naïf following her unsullied intuitions.

Instead, the 39-year-old artist gets past the superficial attractions of the often-imitated style by getting to its heart. The underlying structure of clashing colors and simple shapes controls its emotionalism. Her dazzling yet strangely subdued works marry the discipline of Formalism to the boldness of Expressionism, making for a union that is original and moving — of the moment, and out of this world.

At the David Kordansky Gallery, Neri's breakout exhibition features three bodies of work. Any one would make for a strong solo show.

First, four 6-by-5-foot paintings line the rear wall. Depicting figures kissing, riding horses, strolling under the stars and cavorting amid flowers, they create an awesome backdrop for the small and midsize sculptures that fill the main space with a riot of shiny reds, blues and yellows, set off by a rainbow of luxurious purples, screeching oranges, vibrating greens and lipstick pinks.



Next, on a row of 11 pedestals along the left wall, 11 stoneware pieces portray a sympathetic group of oddly endearing misfits. The size of tall vases or generous cookie jars, Neri's weirdly captivating fusions of faces and vessels convey a wide range of demeanors, attitudes and

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personalities, whether grizzled fatigue or grumpy world-weariness; formidable determination or curiosity-crossed shyness; and dopey indecisiveness or profound self-doubt. Each of her potent visages is covered with an untraditional combination of glazes and paints, including oil, enamel, acrylic, tempera and ink.

Finally, eight larger sculptures, resting on low pedestals, are scattered around the middle of the gallery. Made of plaster slathered with oil paint, these pieces feature a single nude figure picking monstrous flowers, or pairs and groups of mostly nude figures walking, talking, lolling or standing stoically, like the guardians of ancient tombs or unspoken secrets.

The profound sense of patience they exude complements their vibrant, eye-grabbing colors. This gives them the depth and the resonance that provide long-lasting satisfactions.