

Furman, Anna, "In the Studio With an Artist Who Makes Giant Woman-Shaped Vases," *NYTimes.com*, May 9, 2019

T THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

In the Studio With an Artist Who Makes Giant Woman-Shaped Vases

Ruby Neri's voluptuous ceramic sculptures depict female figures as they dance, talk and ride horses.

By Anna Furman | May 9, 2019



Ruby Neri in her Los Angeles studio with one of her 400-pound vessels. Chantal Anderson

Ruby Neri's Los Angeles studio — a vast warehouse space with floor-to-ceiling windows and a bowstring truss roof — is on a desolate stretch of industrial buildings in Boyle Heights, on the fringes of the Los Angeles River. Flooded with natural light and furnished with weathered reclaimed-wood chairs and tables crafted by her father, the Bay Area sculptor Manuel Neri, the studio is teeming with her clay sculptures of cartoonish female nudes, which range from pint-size to five-feet tall.

In the early '90s, Neri was a core member of the Mission School, a group of countercultural street artists in San Francisco's Mission District that included Barry McGee and Margaret Kilgallen and later featured in the 2008 documentary "Beautiful Losers." Using the tag name Reminisce, Neri sneaked onto train tracks and spray-painted galloping horses on the sides of cars and derelict buildings. "All my creative energy definitely spawned in San Francisco," she told me recently, as we stood in her studio.

Furman, Anna, "In the Studio With an Artist Who Makes Giant Woman-Shaped Vases," *NYTimes.com*, May 9, 2019



The sculptures in Neri's latest body of work deal with "dominance and subordination" in intimate relationships, she said. Chantal Anderson

When she moved to Los Angeles for graduate school in 1996, she began to make three-dimensional work, marking a critical shift in her decades-long practice, which she describes as an ongoing exploration of conflicting parts of herself. This month, seven of her 400 - to 800- pound ceramic vessels — airbrushed with women embracing, dancing and arguing with each other, and tagged in spray paint with Neri's name — will go on view at the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles.

"People have told me that these characters are intensely threatening or aggressively sexual," Neri explained. "I don't see them as hypersexual, though. They're a fractured character dealing with hierarchies, power struggles." The artist views each yellow-haired, pink-skinned figure — inspired both by women in her family and the blond bombshells depicted in Pop Art — as a facet of the same imagined character, which is in part informed by Neri's own various identities as a mother, lover, daughter and maker.

Barefoot and seated on one of her father's solid timeworn chairs, Neri answered T's Artist's Questionnaire.

When you start a new piece, where do you begin? What's the first step?

I don't have a plan for what a piece is going to be. I have a general idea and I work in that direction, but I like to let the clay lead me there. Everything is coil-built. So I start from the bottom, making a snail, going around and around. It's repetitive work; I push and pull to make the forms. In a year, I'll be 50, and I've started the most physically demanding work of my life. It's definitely important to me that it's a physical challenge. My paintings were always physical. Everything I do is a form of action or activity.

Furman, Anna, "In the Studio With an Artist Who Makes Giant Woman-Shaped Vases," *NYTimes.com*, May 9, 2019



"The pigmented color is actually underglaze, and then I put a clear coat of glaze on top to make it shiny and brighter," the artist said. "I made a conscious effort to make the works feel emotive and personal." Chantal Anderson



"I'm really obsessed with yellow and pink," Neri said. "Certain colors have an effect on my brain that's satisfying." Chantal Anderson

How do you know when you're done?

There's a definite end date. I don't have any questions about that. I make the form, I put the white slip on it, and then I fire it. I never go over it again after I spray the glaze on. It's a one-time deal.

What is your day like? How much do you sleep, and what's your work schedule like?

It's very rare that I sleep through the night. I've separated from my husband, so I have my daughter a week on, a week off. When I don't have my daughter, I work like 15-hour days straight. I love to work.

What do you usually wear when you work?

I wear tank tops and leggings. Tight clothes.

What do you buy in bulk with the most frequency?

Clay, definitely.

What's the first piece of art you ever made?

I drew horses endlessly as a kid — and aerial views of land that I would own to herd horses. I also

Furman, Anna, "In the Studio With an Artist Who Makes Giant Woman-Shaped Vases," *NYTimes.com*, May 9, 2019



The artist outside her Los Angeles studio. Chantal Anderson



Neri often returns to Veronese green, vermillion red and carmen red in her work. Chantal Anderson



Neri has experimented with different ways of firing clay, including using a Japanese anagama wood-firing kiln to create a highly textured, organic effect. Chantal Anderson

Furman, Anna, "In the Studio With an Artist Who Makes Giant Woman-Shaped Vases," *NYTimes.com*, May 9, 2019



On a table that once stood in her father's studio are an iPod with clay-coated earbuds and a memoir by the artist Erick Lyle. Chantal Anderson



Horses recur in Neri's work. Pictured here is a watercolor illustration from her high school sketchbook. Chantal Anderson

would take chunks of plaster from my dad's studio and carve them. I remember making a tennis shoe and a knife. When I was 11, I nailed wood together, wrapped it with wire and splattered paint on it — and was like, "Ta-da!"

What's your favorite artwork by somebody else?

I was pretty blown away by a crazy pink jar covered with little women that Viola Frey made. The forms were bizarre, like intestines. Her work is bananas. It was on view at the di Rosa Center for Contemporary Art in Napa. Simone Leigh's "Brick House" piece on the High Line in New York City is also unbelievable. It's so beautiful.

What music do you play when you're making art?

I listen to a lot of Depeche Mode and Molly Nilsson. I love to listen to tapes and records. Sometimes I stream KALX, the U.C. Berkeley radio. It reminds me of home.

What's the first work you ever sold? For how much?

I remember trying to sell something when I was an undergrad for like \$1,200. It seemed outrageous. I was upset when the person didn't end up buying it. It felt like a really big deal when Dean Valentine bought my sculpture after grad school — in a show at China Art Objects.

How many assistants do you have?

I have two people helping me once a week each. I definitely prefer making work myself, but it's

Furman, Anna, "In the Studio With an Artist Who Makes Giant Woman-Shaped Vases," *NYTimes.com*, May 9, 2019



In the early '90s, Neri often spray-painted buildings and train cars with illustrations of horses. Here, a poster she made in graduate school. Chantal Anderson



A dollhouse built by the artist's father contains photo slides and sculptures by Neri's daughter. Chantal Anderson

just not realistic. It was really difficult to figure out which tasks to assign that someone can spend a legitimate amount of time on. I finally realized that it helps if you find someone that you don't have to train.

What's your worst habit?

Smoking and drinking. I like Camel Lights. I have some obsessive-compulsive habits I could definitely get rid of. I've been slow to catch up to the healthy lifestyle. And too much texting. Too much phone use.

What do you pay for rent?

Four thousand dollars.

What was the last thing that made you cry?

I cry pretty easily because I'm premenopausal. It's really intense. Hormones are so crazy. I cry over the news a lot, especially hearing about shootings and kids getting hurt.

What's the weirdest object in your studio?

My mom's old cigarette butts. She used to smoke True Blues. It's a cigarette that they don't make anymore. But my whole life, growing up, she smoked True Blues.