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Though Ruby and I have been within each other's orbits for years, we didn't meet until this interview. We have a lot in common beyond mutual friends. We both grew up in Inverness, California; our fathers and mothers were artists; we each had a lot of freedom growing up; and we both went to school in San Francisco and then moved away so we could find ourselves and 'be taken seriously'. My father, JB Blunk, was an artist best known for his large-scale redwood sculptures and his iconic hand-built home. Ruby's father, Manuel Neri, was a sculptor and leading member of the avant-garde San Francisco art scene. He was director of the Six Gallery and associated with the Bay Area figurative and funk movements. Ruby grew up between her mother's hand-built house on the idyllic Inverness Ridge and a church her father converted into a live-work space in Benicia. Her childhood was spent riding horses and navigating house parties. In the early '90s, she studied painting at the San Francisco Art Institute, where she met Barry McGee and Alicia McCarthy. As a member of the Mission School, her practice was founded on street art and graffiti but now includes painting and large-scale ceramic sculpture. Ruby's studio is in Frogtown, Los Angeles—a 'wonderfully weird creative hub', according to the *LA Times*—along the LA River. Ruby's dog, Lucy, greets me at the door, and I'm welcomed into a generous and colourful space full of paintings and ceramic sculptures. Ruby is the kind of artist who makes me want to make art. She's excited and accessible. Her work feels direct and has a playful, sometimes manic, quality to it. She talks about horses and how motherhood has changed her as a woman and an artist. After a studio visit and lunch, we go to her house in Altadena and spend the afternoon in her wild garden full of fruit trees, flowers, and corn. I'm struck by Ruby's home—the layers of art from friends and family, her own paintings and ceramics, the DIY projects. Ruby's practice beautifully integrates her father's influence with her own interests and personal experiences. She has created a world and a language of her own.

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When we first got in touch, you mentioned you had connections to Inverness, the small town in Northern California where I was born and raised. You told me that you were the one who painted the famous horse mural on the local real estate office in downtown! What's your relationship to this place?

The whole Inverness thing is incredible. My dad and my mom were living in Benicia, which is northern East Bay. That area has a really extensive history and was associated with the gold rush and the route to the Delta. It used to be the state capital. My dad moved from San Francisco to Benicia in 1965 because he was teaching at the University of California, Davis, and his friend, the sculptor Bob Arneson, suggested he move there. My dad bought the first Congregational Church built in California, constructed in 1864.

Did he live and work in the church?

Yes, he transformed it into his studio and home and made furniture from materials in the church. He took out the raised area where the services were held and used the wood to make this table. When my brother and I were little, we punched our names into it.

There was the congregational part where he took out all the pews and made his studio, and then there's the back part of the church where there was a really big room with high ceilings, and it was where he had dinner parties. And then upstairs were the bedrooms. People like Bob Arneson and Richard Shaw were around then—the whole Davis group, Clayton Bailey, that whole scene. All these people would come, and they'd have these huge blowout parties. There would be hundreds of people. The bathtub was in the hallway, so to get from the kitchen to the living room, you had to walk past it. And my brother and I would be in the bathtub during this. It was crazy. Our dad would make us a big bubble bath with dish soap, fucking dish soap! So harsh.

Would you just put yourself to bed?

I don't even remember. One of my dad's friends, Jim Melchert, and his wife were so fucking sweet. They'd keep an eye on me.

Did you ever feel unsafe?

No, I never felt unsafe with my dad. I think my older brothers, Raoul and Noel, were wild because of the way we were all raised. One time in Mexico, they set a hotel room on fire. It was super loose, total mayhem. But also really fun. When my parents separated, my mom took me and my brother to live in Inverness at her mom's summer house, which has been in the Morris and Brock family since 1913. Her brother, Dan Morris, my uncle, still lives out there with his family. And yes, I painted the horse mural in the '90s on the side of the little building that used to be his real estate office!

How long did you live in Inverness?

From age two to 11 or 12. I have pictures of me and my pony on Inverness Ridge and in Tomales Bay. I also remember my mom building her house on Woodhaven in the '70s using all reclaimed wood, and Dan and other guys carrying these huge, salvaged timbers. We moved over the hill to San Anselmo in the '80s, and she sold her property when I was a teenager. I try not to dwell on that, but I think she sold the place because the old timbers were making her nervous. The house was on a steep hill, and she worried about the integrity of the materials.

Was it difficult for her to leave such a tight-knit community?

I actually think it was too small of a community for her, and she needed a little bit of space.

The '70s and '80s was such a sweet moment in terms of the West Marin community. How did your parents meet?

My mom's family summered in Inverness along with the di Suveros. She was friends with the di Suvero brothers, Mark and Hank. One day, my mom was walking down the street in Berkeley, and Mark and my dad drove past her. My dad was like, 'Check out that blonde', and Mark was like, 'Oh my God, I know her'. And they made a U-turn.

Love-at-first-sight-drive by?

Totally. That was a really funny story. So I've known Mark a long time, since I was a kid.

When did you move to San Francisco?

I went to high school in Marin, Drake High School, which is now Archie Williams. But I left high school when I was a sophomore. I took the GED test and, if you passed, you graduated early.

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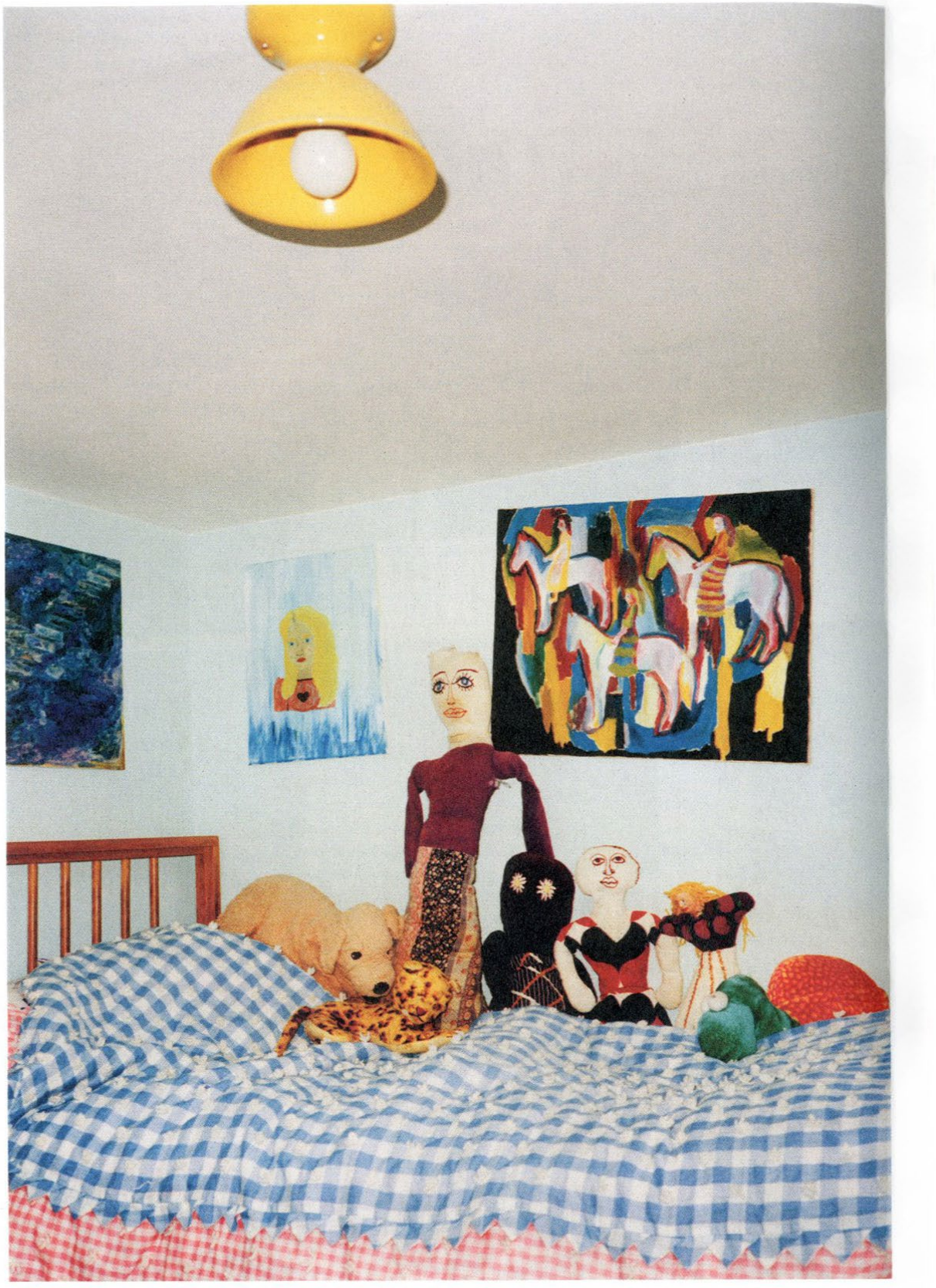

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I also took that test and left high school early!
Ha, no way! Yeah, I knew I wanted to be an artist, so I was like, ‘I’m out of here’. I left high school and did a year at the Marin community college.

College of Marin? I went there for a few years.
Yeah, College of Marin. And then I went to the San Francisco Art Institute at 19, and that’s when I officially moved to San Francisco. I think it was 1989.

Do you feel like your dad was omnipresent in the Bay Area? Was his reputation and your association with him stifling?
Inverness is such a special place, but it’s really nice to have a level of removal from places that are so much a part of you. That’s one of the reasons why I love being in LA. I’m separated from my dad’s identity. I certainly don’t think I would have gotten to where I am if I remained in the Bay Area, to be honest. I really needed to do my own thing.

In your own space.
Yes. Because it’s so easy to get lost in the moment. It was really intense to go to SFAI at 19, and my teachers had been my dad’s students from Davis, or his ex-lovers, or his bitter contemporaries. He had such an immense history and presence there. And that’s really why I only painted, because it was sort of the one area that wasn’t really associated with him. I also did photography and some printmaking. I always really loved ceramics and took ceramic classes in junior high and high school. Apparently, the high school ceramics teacher, Mr. Fairbanks, kept some of my work and would pull it out as a reference, which is awesome. I really liked that.

How did you transition into graffiti?
Through the SFAI scene and Barry McGee. He was ending school when I was starting. I met him outside of school, actually, through graffiti, on the street.

Were there other women in that scene?
No. Although I started going out with one girl who knew the New York graffiti scene, which I didn’t know anything about. But what we were doing was so closely tied to SFAI, it was like art school on the street. You’d go out with a bucket of house paint, and it was really chill. The cops didn’t care. This was the early ‘90s.

Did you feel like you were a part of something at the time?
I was, and I think the scene continued after I left San Francisco in ‘96. I was there at the very beginning of this moment, and after I left it became more established.

Did you feel like you were missing out or being excluded?
I think in the beginning I did, but then I was like, ‘Fuck that’. My friend, Alicia McCarthy, she was definitely a force. We lived together, we dated, and we were making art. We were really, really close. When I would visit San Francisco, I’d get pulled back into that scene, but

I never really made graffiti my formal practice. For me, graffiti was a social element, because I was still making work in the studio.

Graffiti was about the social experience?
Yeah, absolutely. Because graffiti is a language writers share. It’s communication within a small community—it’s very intimate, in a way. Being out on the street with friends at night, the city feels like it’s yours. No one is around. You could sit on a rooftop. It was super romantic.

Also really spontaneous.
Very spontaneous. It was like writing a love note every night. That’s really how I saw it.

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How did it feel to see this scene formalised by the art world?
They came up with the name ‘Mission School’ in 2001, I think, but I was already gone and pushing my work in new directions.

Was your father comfortable being associated with the funk, figurative, and beat movements?
He was there when they did the first reading of ‘Howl’. He was a part of Six Gallery. It was a whole scene. His attitude was, ‘They can call it whatever they want, but it was just us making art and working together and having fun’. These ‘movements’ and schools aren’t really for the artists, they’re for the curators.

Do you think that galleries and curators weren’t paying attention to you because you’re a female artist or because of your father?
I think it was a double whammy where they kind of thought I was a spoof, and I was also doing a lot of graffiti, so they thought I wasn’t serious. It was really frustrating. My favourite teacher from SFAI, who had also been my dad’s student, said, ‘You know what, you should just leave the Bay Area at some point in your life. Leave the Bay Area for a while’. And I did it, and it was a wonderful, amazing thing. I’m kind of like my dad, where I never wanted to go to New York. I love California. My creativity comes from my experiences in California. I didn’t want to just disappear from the West Coast.

It’s impressive that you knew you wanted to be an artist at such a young age and made it happen despite the obstacles that the association with your father presented. I can relate to your experience studying art and navigating that dynamic, not feeling like you were being taken seriously. You came to LA to achieve your independence, and that’s why I moved to London. I wanted to be completely anonymous.
When I think about people finding or pursuing art, people that come at it from a non-artistic background, it’s like, ‘Wow, how did you ever find art? How did you arrive here without a single creative person in your family?’ It’s magical. I’ve been simultaneously burdened and blessed by my family legacy. I don’t really know how to explain that. I feel like I was on a trajectory that I couldn’t have deviated from, regardless of the barriers my dad presented.

Was your mom an artist?
My mom was very creative in a very chill way. It was just a part of her nature, you know? Everything she touched came together in a creative way. But my dad was so intensely focused on his path. He was such a force, super patriarchal. He never raised any of us. Really, we were sort of like these planets in his orbit.

Did you and your dad ever talk much about his art practice?

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I remember when I was little, kids would ask me, 'What does your dad do?' I was like, 'I don't fucking know what my dad does. He mixes plaster in a bucket?' No one told me that he was an artist. I never really heard that term growing up.

It was just what he did, and you were surrounded by it.
Yes, I had no language for it at all. My father definitely didn't come down and sit at the dinner table and talk about his ideas or what he'd made that day. All my dad wanted to do at the end of the day was have a glass of wine, watch TV, and completely shut down. He was such a

maniac in the studio. We weren't allowed in there because it was dangerous, like an axe was going to fall on your foot.

When you were older, did you work with him?
Yeah, when we were older, my siblings and I took turns helping him in the studio, mixing some plaster or something. Or in Carrara, Italy, I would help him in the studio.

When did you begin to make sculpture?
I was in grad school at UCLA, and my teachers were dudes like Chris Burden and Charles Ray. I just dropped painting altogether. I slouched off the graffiti thing. I got really involved in sculpture, but it didn't have anything to do with clay for ages. Then after grad school, I had a series of jobs, and one of them was teaching art to kids.

Is that where you made that early ceramic piece of yours, the purple head?
Yeah. It's so funny you know that piece! So, teaching kids was where I revisited ceramics. I was painting with acrylics on clay and blowing up all the kids' work in the kiln—by accident, of course. I was like, 'Sorry kids!' But yeah, my early sculptures were weird abstract steel things, and then I did a series of table pieces.

That series makes me think of Giorgio Morandi's paintings and the arrangement of objects.
I literally call them *untitled (tableau)*. So yeah, the early sculptures incorporated a lot of lo-fi materials, and that goes back to my Mission School roots and just picking shit up off the streets. I got really into cheap, off-the-shelf, immediate materials and using them in unconventional ways. I didn't know anything about glaze. I didn't even know where to buy glaze. I just painted directly onto the clay.

Were you painting on the bisqueware?
Yeah, I just painted on bisqueware with oil paint. It's really beautiful, because the clay sucks in the oil, and it creates this really soft surface. The pigment is left on top of the clay. I was working in an unconventional way, and I learnt through trial and error. I started firing because I was teaching and also working for Mike Kelley.

As a studio assistant?
Yeah. That was really formative. That was probably better than grad school.

Why?
I really loved the people that I worked for. And Mike was really hands off. We were a small studio at that time and very close-knit. And Mike had a material sensibility that I could relate to. It felt random and unconventional. I also loved his loose way of weaving between mediums—he makes film and performative stuff. I worked for Mike from '99 to 2004. And then I was teaching a little bit here and there. So wherever I was teaching, I started doing the ceramic stuff, because I could fire it at the schools. I felt really creative at that time. I was working with a gallery called China Art Object.

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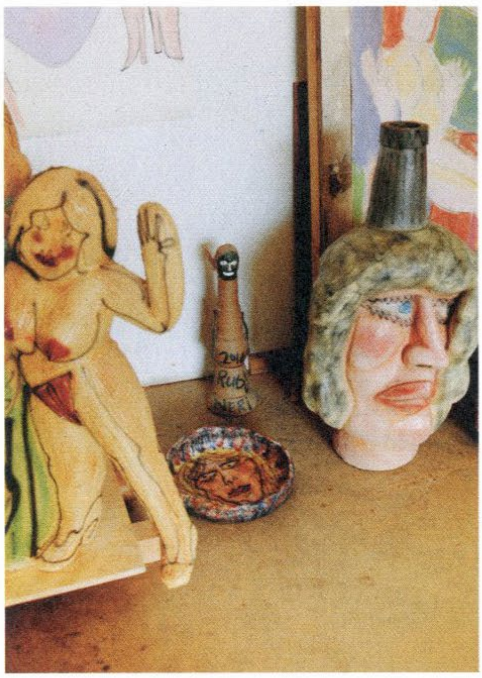
What was the transition like for you once you started working with galleries?
I started working with China Art Object just before the gallery closed, and then in 2008, I met David Kordansky, who ran a contemporary arts gallery, and I started working with him. I'd say between leaving China Art and starting to work with David, I was really developing my interest in ceramics, and clay was slowly taking over my sculpture. It was super gradual; I was drawing on my dad's experience and what I learnt from Mike. I was welding armatures, using plaster. I was casting fibreglass and doing metal work. And when clay came up, I eventually gave everything else up. All the compositions that I see in my head, I can work out in clay immediately.

Is there a difference between the mark making in your paintings versus your clay work? Do you approach clay as a canvas?
I think it's actually the other way around, at this point. I base all my flat work on the ceramics. I haven't really had enough time to focus on flat work. For the first time in a long time—in like four years—I'm not working on a solo show, and that's a huge relief. The way that I work—I have people helping me, but I basically have to make everything myself, and I probably always will, because I don't have a preconceived design. I'm making the compositions as I go. I don't have studies. It's all in my mind.

I see a lot of female bodies in your early work.
I was making really enclosed figurative work for a long time. I was investigating the emotional content of objects, and they were introverted. The figures all had hidden faces. And I really wanted to drop all of that, to stop making work that was based on sculptural fundamentals and start making work that was basically about identity—not identity based, but more personal and crazier works. So that's where my imagery came in. I think that was something I wanted to investigate after having had a baby and making art and being a parent. After my daughter was born, it was a really rich, creative time, and also really hard. A cycle of going to work to pay for childcare so I could go to work. My daughter, Sigrid, was six months old when I had my first solo show with David. It took me a long time to get pregnant, and when I finally was, I felt so empowered and fertile. I was just going for it.

When I first saw your large-scale ceramic work, I immediately thought of Viola Frey. But unlike her work, your sculptures depict a single female form. Your woman looks like she's trying to fit in, literally morphing her body into the shape of the vessel or object.
She's schizophrenic. I consider all of these figures to be different aspects of one woman.

Who is she?
She's kind of me. She's versions of myself. The blonde woman has something to do with my mom. I was thinking a lot about where sexuality comes from, about mania and obsessiveness. Both my mother and daughter



are blonde, and I've also been thinking about female relationships and how they're often fractured, how there's a power struggle. It's definitely one person with different elements of the psyche.

Your work is often described as hypersexual. Yes, the female figures are large and naked, but does that mean they're sexual?
Yes, my sculptures are sexual, although this sexuality is often a shield for what lays beneath the surface. They have inner lives that the sexuality is not allowing us to see, whether it be vulnerability, secrets, fear, amusement, etc. As if the figures don't need the viewers to see their true character or thoughts. It's

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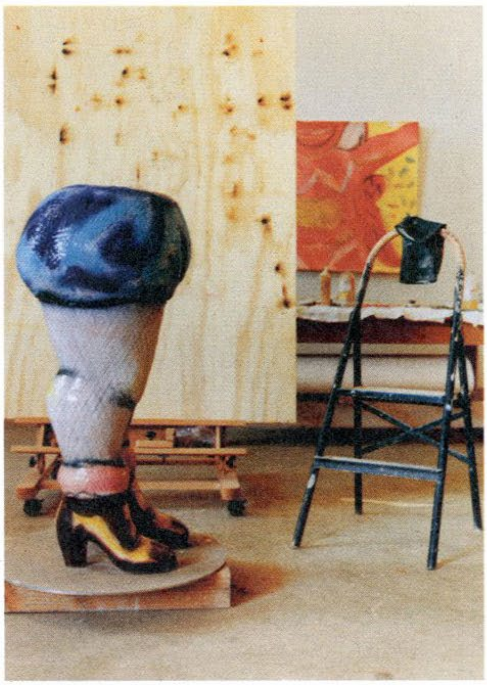
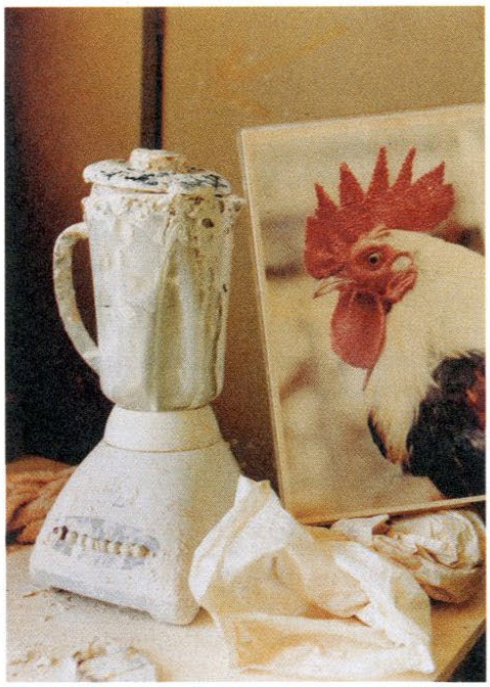
why the figures have feet that look like pink shoes, as well, because the sexuality is almost something like an outfit they are wearing and can remove at their own will.

Where do the narratives in your sculptures come from?
The sculptures evolve from one to the other. It's like a trail, a never-ending wealth of images in my mind. Now that I have time between shows, I'd like to focus on some flat work again. I want to bring back some of the graffiti—not spray paint, necessarily, but I want to bring back some of the line quality and graphic elements I love. People don't realise that I gravitate towards spraying glaze because it comes from graffiti. When I started working with clay, I was repulsed by the way the opaque glaze covered the clay. I wanted a closer relationship with the clay body. I wanted a lighter touch. I want to make more wall pieces from clay, where I can sort of bring back more of a specific reference to street work. I'd also like to make a book about my graffiti and that moment in time in San Francisco.



How do you manage the pressure and expectations of producing so much work for shows on a regular basis?
It's not the expectations that I struggle with, it's finding the physical strength. Some days I'm really fucking tired. I'm not just painting. The ceramic work is so physical and intense, and that's also why it's so gratifying. I can imagine your dad's work required a lot of physical exertion.

Absolutely. My dad would take breaks and stretch when he was working with a chainsaw. He had a hanging bar in his studio—it's still there—and he would hang for 20 minutes to stretch out his back and arm muscles.
I totally understand that. The movement required when I'm working with clay is almost performative. There's such a physical connection with the material, and I'm just completely absorbed in it. I get into a frenzy when I see things in my mind that I want to make, and I want to see them in the space.



Did you have expectations of yourself as a mother that conflict with your expectations of yourself as an artist?
My husband and I have a really fluid relationship, and we're really good at balancing childcare. Maybe because he's Swedish. But I was crazy when our daughter was born. I was like, 'There's no way I'm giving up being primary caregiver'. I love taking my daughter to school and picking her up. Time with her is down time for me. But it took quite a few years to reach this point. When she was little, I was making

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work in Long Beach, and I would take her to school in the morning, drive to Long Beach to work for like five hours, come back to LA, pick her up from school, take her home, go to the store, make her dinner. My husband would come from work, and I would drive back to Long Beach and work late. This was the routine. It was crazy. The older she got, the more difficult this became, and then I had to make a decision not to work at night and not work on the weekends. I have balance now, and it's better for me to make less but better work. I think people look at my work and think, 'Oh, that's pretty'. They don't understand how much physical work and time is required to make such large-scale pieces.

Who made that dollhouse?
My dad made that for me, but I was super annoyed because none of my Barbies would fit inside. My mom's 90-year-old neighbour made my daughter's dollhouse, which is basically a kit, but all the dolls and furniture are to scale and fit.

Are you grateful that your home is a 20-minute drive from your studio, that there's some separation between life and work?
Yes, in a way. Gardening is downtime for me. I like to grow a lot of flowers and allow for a lot of plant overgrowth. I'm trying to create an insane chaos. I also like to watch birds, and I'm grateful for the habitat. Once we started planting native plants, we realised we were providing a habitat for all these animals. We have pomegranate, apple, grapefruit, and fig trees. The fig tree is from a clipping of the fig tree from my dad's garden in Benicia.

What artists were around when you were growing up?
I remember Bob Arneson, Judy Chicago, Richard Shaw, Clayton Bailey, Jay DeFeo, the whole UC Davis scene. In 2014, I went to visit the UC Davis archives and immerse myself in that world. One of the professors had made a bureau, and each drawer was for a faculty member. There were something like 12 drawers, and each one was a white man, no women, and my dad was the only Mexican American. It was a shock to me because I grew up romanticising that lifestyle, the parties, and the creativity, but actually, it was really exclusive and sexist. I can completely relate. My father's scene was also dominated by white males. I recently had a show of Patty and Jack Wright's work—they were friends and patrons of my dad. Jack was a painter; he was the artist; he exhibited his work and hosted studio visits. Patty was also an artist, but her work was overshadowed by her labour raising their four sons and managing the house. Same thing for Luchita Hurtado and Lee Mullican, who were also friends with my family, but at least Luchita is finally receiving the attention she deserves. I struggle at times living in Inverness, in the Blunk house, because there's no separation between life and work for me. I have to find my own voice in all this history as a woman and as his daughter.
It's interesting because I've always been drawn to that immersive lifestyle, and it's what I grew up in. Even though my dad was supportive, he also told me not to be an artist. There wasn't ever the opportunity to get involved with his work or manage it. Another person was already doing that years ago. I think that's what people miss when they take on other people's lives and manage other artists' estates—living their own life.

You had the freedom to do your own thing, even if your father was at times dissuading you.
I had to have complete faith in myself as an artist, especially when I started working with clay. But I didn't really have a choice. Making art is the only thing I can do.