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Art & Culture

Ruby Neri

A Cycle Around the Sun

Interview by Evan Pricco // Portrait by Elon Schoenholz

At the time of this interview with Ruby Neri, it was November 2024. Her solo show at David Kordansky in Los Angeles had just opened, a solo show was set to open at Massimodecarlo in London in January 2025, and her first solo institutional show, Deep Dive at the Manetti Shrem Museum of Art, was in the final stages of preparation. For Neri, who was quite relaxed in her Frogtown studio during my afternoon visit, it was the end of one chapter and the beginning of another. A career milestone with a sense of something fresh on the horizon—a chapter’s end, rather than the end of the novel.

Then, the fires. Neri lost her home in Altadena, and this conversation felt both futile and almost prophetic. Discussions about the rush to fill three galleries with her work, chapters ending, and contemplating the legacy of her late father, Manuel Neri, along with the unique identity of being a Californian artist, weighed particularly heavy in this hindsight. Her enthusiastic reflections on the Mission

School and her friends and time in San Francisco suggested she was simultaneously looking back while moving forward. She spoke of cycles in an artist’s life, finding herself in the midst of a new creative phase. Perhaps this conversation holds different insights now—I do not know—but the meaning feels heightened after such dramatic changes in her life. Her exhibitions in London and at the Manetti Shrem Museum are now significant markers in her career timeline.

In this conversation, we discuss the legacy of UC Davis, the approach to her museum show, and how clay, graffiti, and now painting have entered her life at precisely the right moments. Her reverence for her past is palpable, her admiration for her father’s career is profound, and there is a genuine curiosity in her voice as she begins to envision her own future.

Cat Food, 2023. Ceramic with glaze, 74 ½ x 49 ½ x 38 ½ in. Photo: Jeff McLane. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery. Via Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art.

Evan Pricco: So here’s a positive start.
Ruby Neri: Okay, good.

When you have a confluence of shows all happening back to back to back—Los Angeles, London, and then the museum show at the Manetti Shrem Museum on the UC Davis campus—there’s a particular energy that, for you, probably feels like a relief. It’s good, and I imagine you’re glad to have it all happen like this.
It’s kind of this weird clusterfuck of stuff going on. It all sort of happened at the same time, which is amazing. I’m super grateful it was like this; it could have been spread out more, maybe, but this is good too.

The Manetti Shrem Museum exhibition is amazing because I’ve never had a solo institutional show before. I’ve barely had any institutional experience, period, so I’m very grateful for this opportunity. It feels fantastic to be doing it. It’s crazy to have gallery shows like this, with Kordansky in LA and Massimodecarlo in London, but working in a public institutional space is a completely different animal. It’s already giving me a lot of positive energy for creating new things and what comes next.

Creating new things?
Yeah, almost like a new chapter in my life. Maybe this show at the Manetti Shrem Museum signifies the end of something and the beginning of something new as well.

As an artist, you have that backlog of work, things no one has ever seen. It’s super fun to think of unveiling and showcasing aspects of your work that haven’t been widely viewed. It’s an opportunity to tie up loose ends and complete the circle, which excites me.

Does all of this make you feel nostalgic, especially with the milestone of a museum show marking the end of a chapter and the beginning of another?
I do get sentimental. My dad taught at UC Davis, so the university has been a part of my family. It feels like coming home for me in a sense. I love the space and the campus.

I have strong feelings because my dad was so influential in my life, in how and why I became an artist. I love his work deeply, so this means a lot to me on many levels. I’m definitely feeling sentimental about it, but I’m also hoping it helps me see my work in a different context.

Your father, Manuel Neri, was at Davis, as were phenomenal artists like Wayne Thiebaud, Robert Arneson, and Roy de Forest.
It does have a really intense, incredible history. My dad taught there for a long time and was a part of that Funk group. It had a real pulse for quite a while, and it still does.

My dad always talked about it as being a school where they had a freedom to develop their own thing, their own ways of working, because it was California, yes, but it was away from other capitals of art. So these artists and professors developed their own sort of vision and their own sort of circle of artists.

And now, whether it is the UC Davis group or that Bay Area time period, the Funk Artists in the 1960s, there’s definitely people that are collecting from that time period. Just a lot of pockets of super intense, super creative people are being remembered, and I think a lot of people now are looking back at those moments in those different places and sort of enjoying it. It was amazing work.

Installation view courtesy of the Manetti Shrem Museum

Do you see yourself in this sort of canon? Or continuing this canon as a California artist?
It’s funny because I’ve never wanted to live outside of California. I’m from the Bay Area, and I came to Los Angeles and that was kind of as far as I needed to go.

I feel like California is always this sort of sleepy sort of dreamer place. But it has definitely gone through immense changes in terms of art. It’s a total destination now, and it has its own sort of life as an artist. When I moved to LA in 1996, it was like a village, nothing was happening here. Even with all the artists that were here taught at the institutions around town, it was just super sleepy. The students worked for those artists. I worked for Charles Ray, I worked for Mike Kelley. But there weren’t a lot of people coming here to be artists. But space was super cheap,

and I feel like people could explore a lot of stuff with their work, especially sculpture. There’s a lot of people doing sculpture here.

But I mean, in terms of being a California artist, I feel like I have a different perspective maybe because my dad was so prominent in California movements. It’s just so strongly in my roots and in my DNA, in terms of the people I grew up with and what my parents were doing. All of my creative sources and blood comes from the Bay Area, so to speak, and basically California. But I mean, in the bigger picture, I don’t know. Who knows?

From this, does it resonate with you to be a member of a group of artists that changed a lot of people’s lives, and then years later, all of you are still making a lot of work? Like your dad, there is a legacy you are part of.
Wait, what movement are you talking about?

We would be talking about the Mission School.
Oh, the Mission School (laughs).

Installation view courtesy of the Manetti Shrem Museum

No matter where I go in the world, at my age, working in the arts, when I say I’m from the Bay Area, the Mission School is brought up in an almost mythical, mystical reverence. It makes me proud to have seen it and still feel connected to it.
From my experience, I left the Bay Area four years before that term was even

brought into existence. But, absolutely, it was super fun during that time and making work there and then. It was the best time in my life being at SFAI. It was so much fun; it was just so wild and so emotional, and it was just like, you’re just so pumped. You’re in your early twenties, making art, with your friends. It was a blast. I cannot deny it.

San Francisco was still kind of weird and cool in its own way; rich and diverse in terms of making and all the different communities overlapping. There was poetry, the queer scene, art on the streets, bike messengers, critical mass… and it was just so much fun. Everything was so much fun. Of course, I’m glossing over the pain and heartache, but I remember the fun of it.

There was Craig Costello, who I was dating for a bit and he went on to make KRINK; there was Barry MGee and Margaret Kilgallen, and of course Alicia McCarthy. Craig and I were bombing every fucking night, and it was a total blast. Barry was doing his thing, and we were always meeting on the street, and we all had studios and our flats, and it was just really fun and super rich for sure.

I feel like the people that were a part of that group are the ones that really poo poo at the name the the most, perhaps. But I feel like, it’s true, we did have something in common. We did work in a weird way that had a strain of common ground for sure. I feel like I’m still super close with Barry, and Alicia’s my best friend forever. And it’s like there’s something about us that I feel…, there was something specific that was a coming together of souls during that time.

I think there is something about the spirit, this idea that making was possible, whatever that making meant. It was really poetic, raw, just energy. Free, just not constrained to certain, “this is how artists do things, in this order,” type of creativity. But it also fit the city so perfectly for that time.

Graffiti was a social thing for me because we were doing it together, and it was sort of a real freedom in the sense that I didn’t want it to be for sale or in my gallery spaces.

It’s also because it was pre-Internet. You couldn’t do it now, not with social media. It was just like we had so much energy and it just all went into making little things. I was super into photography, and so we would go to the dark room and print all night, and then the next day we’d go to the printmaking department and make an etching plate with the writing backwards so that we would print on the back of the photo… and those would be our invites for our student shows. When you think of the amount of work that we were putting into things, it’s amazing. And we weren’t even on drugs or anything like that. We were just pumped. We just wanted to make shit. SFAI was just something we took mass advantage of. It was open 24 hours a day. You could go there, all the departments were open and accessible. You could go to the photo department and print all night, You had the Gulf War going on, too, so there was a lot of political activity, so it was sort of spilling out onto the street with protests.. .

Taking the Deep Dive, 2024. Ceramic with glaze, 81 x 74 x 13 in. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

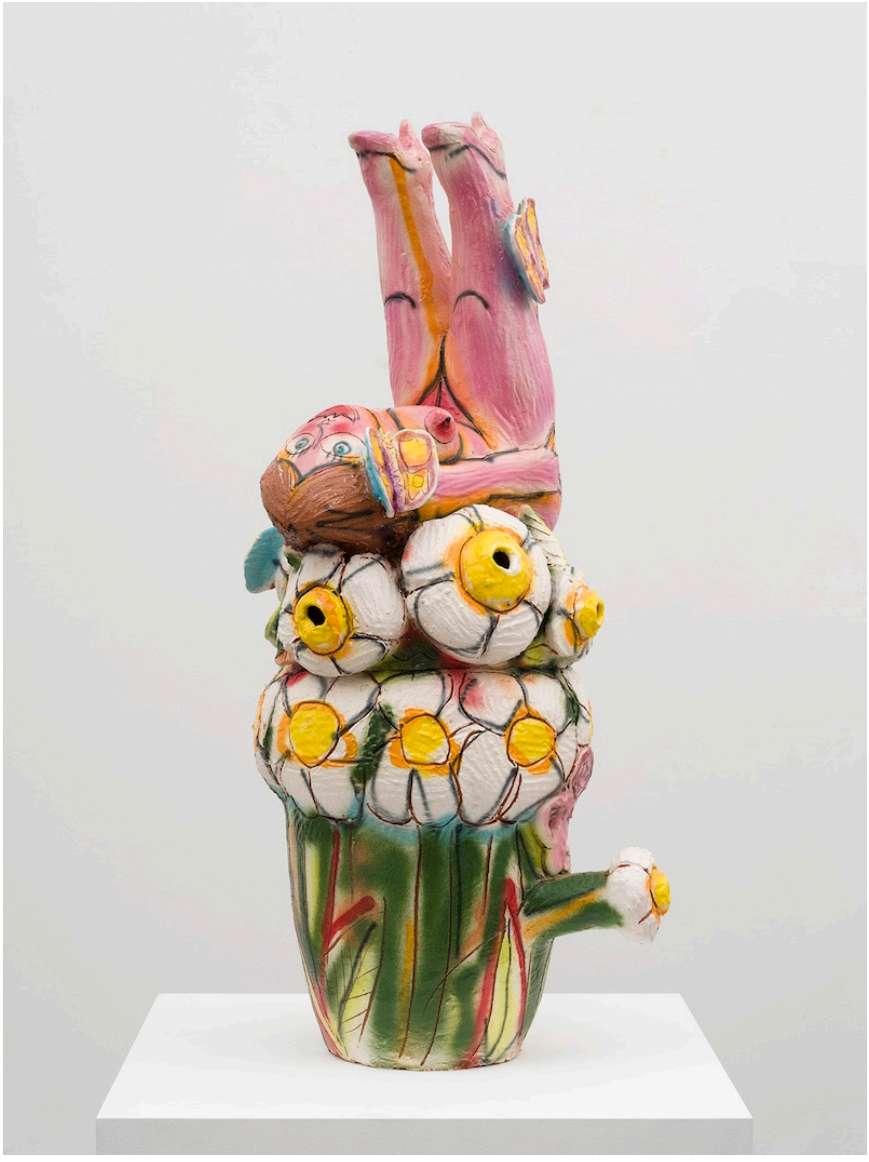
The horses were iconic, and you had the tag REMINISCE. What did graffiti mean to you then?
I didn’t even know that you had to have a tag. I didn’t even know what a tag was when I started. I think I started with RECLAIM, and then I would write REMINISCE, which was so long… so long.

Also a slightly difficult word.
Yeah, I would misspell it all the time. I was super happy to do graffiti because I had a hard time at SFAI. My dad had taught there, he went there, and his whole generation was all about SFAI institute. A lot of his students at Davis were my teachers at SFAI. So it encroached upon me quite a bit…

So you needed an outlet.

Graffiti was a major outlet. It was a really creative way to find my own path away from that. So I think that that was a big reason why I sort of started doing it. It was definitely something that neither of my parents did, you know what I mean? That I was sort of happy to take on. There’s still a lot of those elements of graffiti in what I do now when I am making ceramic. I’m still spraying my glaze, and I don’t think I would’ve thought of that unless I’d done graffiti.

So there’s all these things that are a part of me that overlap and cycle back through; it’s very cyclical. There’s all these different influences on and in my life. A lot of the artists that I grew up with influenced me quite a bit, you know what I mean? There’s my dad’s generation that was a big part of my life as a kid. But those early years at SFAI, getting involved with that group of friends, that is where I sort of found my own voice. It took me a long time, but now I see that time as really important to me.



Woman Reclining in Landscape, 2023. Ceramic with glaze, 44 1/2 x 22 x 19 in. Photo: Jeff McLane. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

So why clay?
Well, you know what? It’s really easy to use. It answered a lot of needs for me.I think that’s one of the reasons why I did graffiti was because I’m so impatient. I need to be able to pick something up and use it right away. The fact that you can just open up a bag of clay and start building something right away, I love how very immediate this material is. Aside from the firing, which is after the fact, though.

They appear so strong, so stable.
And you can put them outside. I mean, unless something falls on them or someone throws a rock at it, it’s going to last a long time. It doesn’t fade. It’s so resilient, really. It’s also very reactive, emotionally, and so I really wanted a material that would sort of respond back to me. It holds a lot of emotional content just in its makeup. I feel like the clay itself has a real sort of presence of its own.

Are you a good self editor?
Yes and no. It’s like I am kind of happy to let the work go and exist somewhere else. I’m not so precious about my work.

Installation view courtesy of the Manetti Shrem Museum

“So there’s all these things that are a part of me that overlap and cycle back through; it’s very cyclical…”

That's probably how I should have worded it. Are you precious?
No, the way you worded it was fine. I just feel like, as the maker of my work, I'm so embedded in it and so within it that it's hard to step back and be more objective. I actually really enjoy different eyes and different opinions, different perspectives. I mean, their perspective or other people. These are the different things that keep this sort of creative juices, so to speak.

It's funny, I want to go back to something you said earlier, like me as a California artist. I don't think of myself like that…

Oh, that's interesting.
I guess obviously, I am, as I've never lived outside of California my entire life. And it's also something I do talk about quite a bit is being all my sources are from California.

I'm kind of sensitive about it for sure right now because when my dad passed away in 2021, I became co-trustee of his work and his life. That's really a lot of pressure. I've been thinking about that a lot, like him, his generation and his work. So there is definitely a lot on my plate right now in terms of stuff about California.

I don't think I need my work talked about within that framework. I haven't had shows outside of the States so much, but it's really fun to see the work in this context. I feel like it definitely holds its own, and doesn't need the reference of the source at all. I definitely see it as acting and living outside of California without a problem, for sure.

I'm thinking about time and the cycle of an artist's life a lot right now. It was less than 10 years ago that I actually started making these larger scale ceramics. I love to think about the richness of an artist's life and the things that they are doing within that. And I think about my dad's career, and there is a lot of work you can do in a lifetime. That has been on my mind.

I feel like there is time and I'm hoping to be painting more and more. I haven't given enough time to that over the years. I have been making ceramics at a rate that just took up all the time, and it consumed my mental and physical curiosity. But it's like I just really wanted to get that work out and then I can sort of branch off from there. I feel like when you find something that works and that you feel really good about, you really want to focus on that for a while. Then other things can come and go…

Ruby Neri: Taking the Deep Dive is now on view at the Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at UC Davis though May 5, 2025. Her solo show, Chorus, is on view at Massimodecarlo in London through February 22, 2025. Thank you to David Kordansky Gallery for their support and arrangement of this interview.