

RUBY NERI



RUBY NERI

SLAVES
AND
HUMANS

ESSAY BY
JENELLE PORTER

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY
LOS ANGELES

1.

Untitled (Double Woman with Arms Raised)

2016

Ceramic with glaze

22 3/4 × 14 1/4 × 12 inches

57.8 × 36.2 × 30.5 cm





2.

Untitled (Pot)

2016

Ceramic with glaze

46 ¼ × 39 × 38 ½ inches

117.5 × 99.1 × 97.8 cm







3.

Woman with Hand on Head

2016

Ceramic with glaze

24 1/2 × 20 × 13 inches

62.2 × 50.8 × 33 cm





4.

Untitled

2016

Ceramic with glaze

22 1/2 x 7 1/4 x 6 1/4 inches

57.2 x 18.4 x 15.9 cm





5.

Untitled

2016

Ceramic with glaze

32 1/2 x 24 1/4 x 22 inches

82.6 x 61.6 x 55.9 cm





6.

Untitled (Small Double Lady)

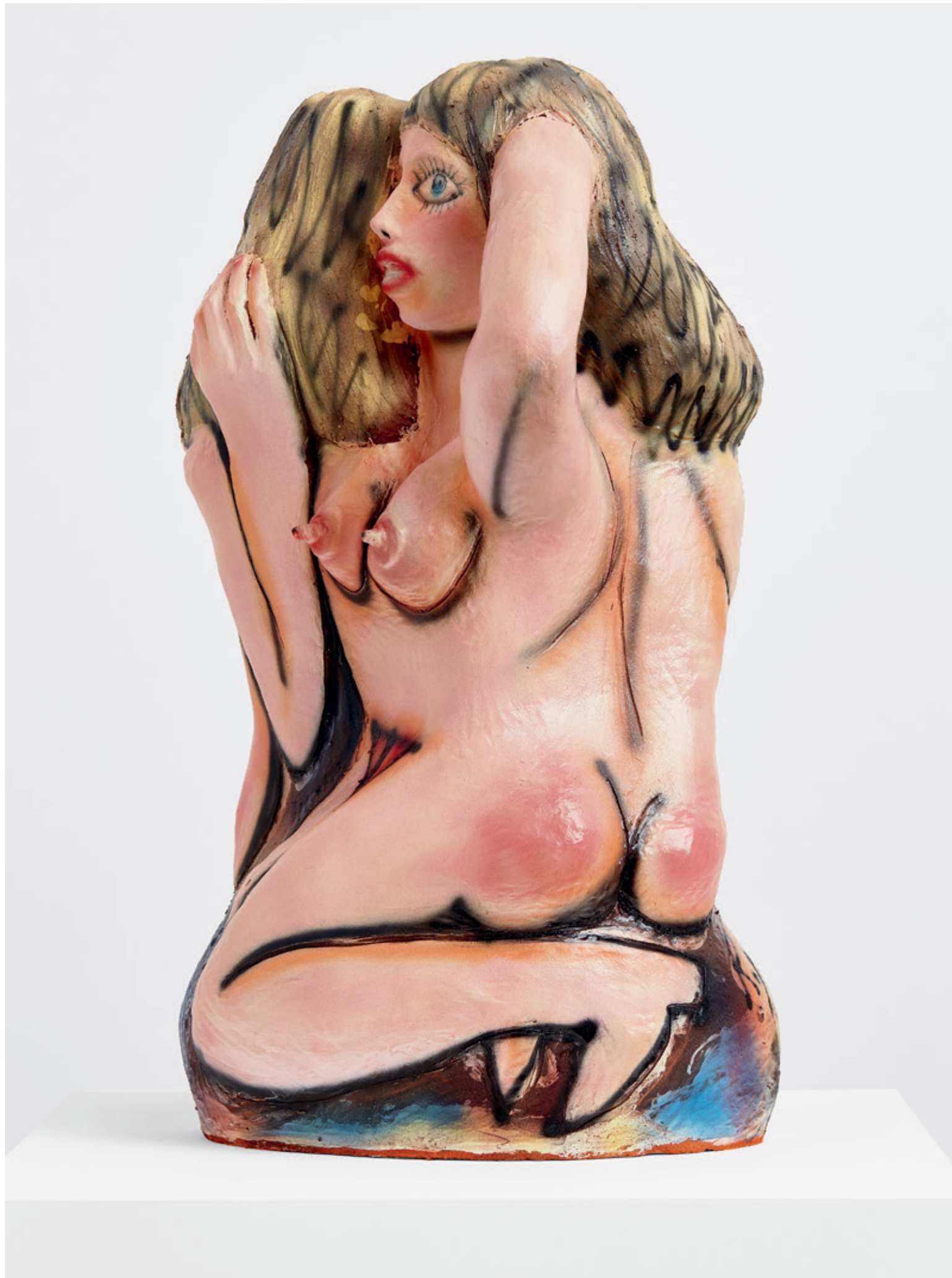
2016

Ceramic with glaze

38 1/2 × 33 × 22 inches

97.8 × 83.8 × 55.9 cm





7.

Untitled

2016

Ceramic with glaze

65 × 35 × 24 inches

165.1 × 88.9 × 61 cm









JENELLE PORTER

THE LADIES, THE LADIES.

Flesh pumps. The words hang like low-hanging fruit over Ruby Neri's recent ceramic sculptures. Splayed feet transformed into pinkish high heels must be called flesh pumps. Outlined in black, the flesh pumps are painted on the foot of a large ceramic pot. Flesh pumps give way to thick legs, a red pudendum (like a mimetic fig leaf), hips, belly, lopsided breasts with preposterously distended nipples. The figure's arms are akimbo; the right hand is missing, sunk into the hip, while the left, with varnished red fingernails, palms her belly. Her face is animated by smiling lips, a straight nose, slightly crossed bright blue eyes, and long blonde hair that coquettishly drapes over one eye. The pot's rim crops the head at eyebrow level. It's all quite exhibitionist. There's more. This flesh-pumped, titty-cupped, empty-headed blonde has a twin, conjoined and identical save for a raised left hand that caresses her own tresses. More than five feet tall, *Untitled (Tall Double Lady)* plants its/their flesh pumps in a patch of thigh-high daisies.

Untitled (Tall Double Lady) (unless noted, all works are from 2016) is one of fourteen ceramic sculptures exhibited at David Kordansky Gallery in 2016. Titled *Slaves and Humans*, Neri's solo exhibition included two types of vessel forms: tapered pots and what can only be called Rubenesque-shaped figurative pots. All ladies. Neri's variously sized sculptures were sited directly on the floor or on individual white pedestals so that the tops of the fourteen works aligned at an approximately similar height. The effect was a kind of lady vista. The one-room exhibition recalled an antiquities gallery—if that gallery were teeming with an unearthly mating of Greek figure pots, clay fertility figures, and R. Crumb's buxom "gurls." Or, to borrow words used by the artist to describe one of her previous exhibitions, it evoked "what it would look like if teenagers had snuck into a museum to defile Classical sculpture."¹

One ample-bottomed lady is a brunette, one of the few in a show top-loaded with blondes. A pointy chin, a toothy smile, and crimson cheeks punctuate her square face. Her eyes are completely obscured by her parted bangs. Her ponytail bows outward and meets her lower back, creating a shape not unlike a teapot. It reminds me of that childhood song "I'm a little teapot," in which one pantomimes the handle and spout with one's arms and mouth. This brunette squeezes her short arms to her body, pushing her breasts together and up, her hands framing her vagina. She's a sexy teapot, because, of course.

In pottery parlance, the parts of the vessel are named for the human body: foot, belly, waist, shoulder, neck, mouth, lip. Neri doubles down on this figurative, female-coded language by shaping and decorating her works to reinforce the correspondence of the two bodies: foot for foot, belly for belly. This match between object and subject characterizes Neri's compulsion to mine the fundamental qualities of her materials. "I don't enjoy controlling the material so much," she has said. "I don't like pushing it very far beyond what it initially is and it's very important to



me that the intuitive use of the material is on par with a controlled one. I'm drawn to the psychological element of raw materials and textures and this applies to paint as well as sculptural elements. I like what each material lends to a piece; each has its own language."²

Neri finds in clay a language that slips effortlessly between complex figurative sculptures and simply shaped pots. The latter, typically thirty to fifty inches tall, bridge the two approaches, possessing less modeling and more surface treatment. These are close to being unassertively handled vessels except for their lumpy protrusions, painted poses, and cartoonish faces. Black outlines give figurative definition to areas of pink, blue, green, and yellow—some of the artist's favorite colors. Breasts are drawn as peaked mountain ranges or paired circles, buttocks are rounded Ws. They are rudimentary in both shape and adornment.

Slaves and Humans included four large, tapered-bottom pots, ranging from thirty-two to fifty inches high, the two smaller displayed on pedestals, the two larger on the floor. Neri used the vertical walls of each to great effect, as if it were a clay canvas. *Untitled (Large Women)* (2015) is encircled by six ladies, drawn in a naïve manner: disjointed limbs emerge from not quite the right places, breasts look like baby bottles, faces are rendered in the most schematic of ways. Their reveling bodies are composed of shapes: leg shape, breast shape, lip shape, foot shape, ass shape, vulva shape. Responses to the pots—which might range from knowing smiles to discomfort—truly depend, I think, on one's sense of humor, which is contingent on aesthetic disposition. Neri's drawing is more superficially naïve than surrealist, but it certainly inclines toward a historically postwar quest for an authentic sensibility, which some artists celebrated in drawings by children and the mentally ill.

Untitled (Pot) is a nearly four-foot-high vessel with two nude blonde women painted on the exterior, head to head, one on her back and one on her knees. They cover almost the entire surface head to foot (and head to foot). Unlike most of the other sculptures, this one is minimally colored, with black outlined figures on a white surface, a bit of red for shading and lips, blue eyes, and pale yellow hair. Its exterior affect is subdued, comparatively speaking. The pot's especially wide rim invites one to peer in and down, where one finds something decidedly less subdued: six hearts shaped with raised edges, glazed shiny red, a row of three on each side. It strikes me as unseemly because they look like holes. Lady holes. (It makes the feminist in me laugh-cringe, the same way I might at a lewd joke.)

Uniting Neri's shapely pots are surface texture and applied color. Both exterior and interior surfaces are deeply grooved by her sculpting hands. They are also marked by sgraffito, wherein the outer layer is incised to reveal a contrasting underlayer, which Neri achieves here using a wooden stick or her fingernail as a drawing implement. The resulting surfaces pulsate with vitality, like flesh. The applied color is pigmented underglaze painted with an air spray gun before firing. Neri's application is rapid, reflecting her past as a graffiti artist. Bodies are marked out in pink, shaded with deep pinks and reds, and delineated in black. Hair is drawn with black squiggles on yellow.

Neri tags her pots with atypically large signatures. "R. Neri" fills the inside of one, cursive "Ruby Neri 2016" tattoos another's back, "2016" is tangled in hair, "R. Neri" is scrawled down a flank. The hurried energy, the use of sprayed underglaze, and the way she tags her surfaces all recall the artist's painting of twenty-five years ago, much of which was executed on walls and buildings in the Bay Area. Neri worked alongside artists who have retrospectively been labeled Mission School,



FIG. 1
RUBY NERI
Black Hole, 2012
Ceramic, plaster, glaze, enamel paint
33 ½ × 25 × 12 ½ inches
85.1 × 63.5 × 31.8 cm

among them Chris Johanson, Margaret Kilgallen, Alicia McCarthy, and Barry McGee. They emerged in the early 1990s and became known for their embrace of an eccentric, folksy aesthetic. They also did graffiti, claiming public and private space with their paintings and names. Neri's signatures today are no different. Hers is a gutsy embellishment, at once signature and nameplate: I made this, this is me.

The authority that a signature carries, as a kind of claiming, perhaps offers a way in which to consider Neri's particular approach to sculptural space. I submit that I've more questions than conclusions, especially when confronted by work that embraces and dodges caricature simultaneously. When immersed in a roomful of like forms, how are viewers to prioritize one over another? Are we to privilege the gestalt of the room over the singularity of the object? Is there a prescribed hierarchy of forms? What is the relationship among the sculptures, and how is it transformed when another body—a viewer—enters the room? Where are we in relation to the object or objects? Does the object move us, physically—i.e., do we move close or maintain a respectful (or even repulsed) distance? How does the sculpture make, or unmake, its own space and the space between other sculptures and the room? What are we to make of a human form presented as both internalized and externalized, especially a female form, which historically has seldom been allowed internalization?

Writing on the sculptures of Auguste Rodin and Constantin Brancusi, Rosalind Krauss described “a relocation of the point of origin of the body's meaning—from its inner core to its surface—a radical act of decentering that would include the space to which the body appeared and the time of its appearing.” Minimalism continued this trajectory of decentering, she went on, through a “vocabulary of form that is radically abstract,” and though this vocabulary made it “less easy to project ourselves into the space of that sculpture with all of our settled prejudices left intact ... our bodies and our experience of our bodies continue to be the subject of this sculpture.”³ Since minimalism, and to counter it, sculptors such as Charles Ray and Robert Gober have used the figure as a means to explore object and subject, sculptural space and “real” space.⁴ Neri's work follows suit, claiming real space and a subject position that is furthered by the intrinsic qualities of clay—a material that allows for an unmediated experience, one that records and externalizes every gesture and thought. In Neri's hands, clay is the object from which the subject emerges.

What impelled Neri to make really big pots? Although she has long used clay, typically to make wheel-thrown vessels that she incorporates into mixed-media sculptures (fig. 1), the works in *Slaves and Humans* were the outcome of a summer residency in 2015 at California State University, Long Beach.⁵ Neri's months there were auspicious. Inspired in part by the enormous kilns, Neri began to work at a scale she couldn't previously have imagined. Ceramic has inherent limitations. While clay is a readily available material, firing and glazing require specialized skill, equipment, and materials. Many visual artists who use clay, in contrast to trained ceramists, are self-taught, relying as needed on skilled technicians and the logic of trial (by fire) and error. In fact, it is this kind of deliberate ignorance that has helped to propel ceramic into the contemporary art milieu. The novice may make the object you aren't supposed to make: too big, too crooked, too lumpy, too cracked.

Neri is no stranger to assertively crude facture, to works that come together at a rapid clip. So when allowed unfettered access in Long Beach, she thinks, “I'm going to make the largest pot I can.” The physical energy required to work so large generated its own kind of logic, and the forms emerged. She worked hard, exhausted herself on building and shaping huge works, on long firings, on failed

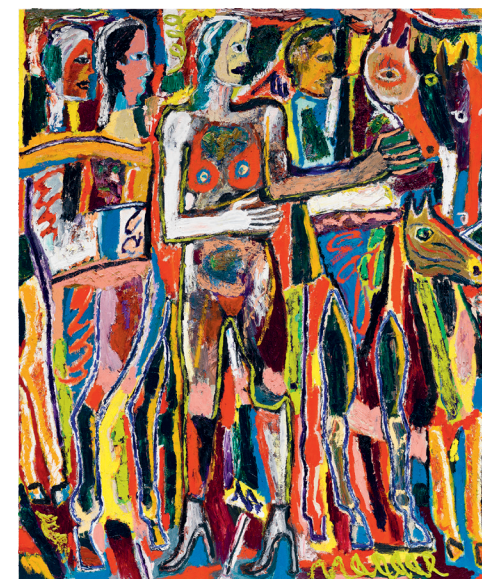


FIG. 2
RUBY NERI
Untitled (People with Horses), 2010
Oil on panel
72 × 60 × 1 1/2 inches
182.9 × 152.4 × 3.8 cm

FIG. 3
MANUEL NERI
Seated Girl (Bather) II, 1963
Plaster, oil-based pigments, wood armature, wood base
44 × 29 1/2 × 27 1/4 inches
111.8 × 74.9 × 69.2 cm
COLLECTION OF THE FINE ARTS MUSEUM OF SAN FRANCISCO



firings. She described her working approach as one of desperation, of putting everything she had into it. Making big works requires stamina—it's sometimes the only operating principle.

It's not the construction of the pot or its form that compels Neri so much as its resulting surface. She works swiftly toward her end game: a clay "canvas." For many years Neri has made expressive oil paintings characterized by thickly painted areas of clashing color ordered by deep blacks and bright whites that depict figures, typically women, crowded by the frame's edges. *Untitled (People with Horses)* (2010; fig. 2) is six feet tall, the figures arranged in profile as if a sculpted frieze or the painted band of an ancient Greek pot. Neri's paint handling and subjects recall art brut and German expressionism, both movements that portrayed everyday realities in a pitched emotional key using faux-naïve or rough facture.

In addition to pre- and postwar European precedents, Neri's work also looks to the mid-twentieth-century art movements that galvanized artists in Northern California. In the 1950s, Bay Area Figurative Movement artists renewed traditions of figuration as a counter to abstract expressionism and, more generally, to modernism's forced march to pure painting. Elmer Bischoff, Richard Diebenkorn, and David Park were among the movement's first generation to adapt a gestural approach to figures and landscapes—to a subject. The second generation included artists such as Joan Brown and Manuel Neri, Ruby's father, who capitalized on plaster's wet-to-hard-in-minutes property to make life-size figurative sculptures augmented by applied, gestural color (fig. 3). Brown's paintings of the early 1960s focused on what she considered to be the timelessness of the figure, using bright colors, dramatic light, and paint applied with robust brushstrokes, trowel, and palette knife. Her quirky aesthetic was applied most often to self-portraits and portraits of her family members and her dog, Bob.⁶

Both Brown's and Manuel Neri's work anticipated what would come to be called Funk, a short-lived but revelatory art movement that was celebrated by a legendary exhibition of the same name at the University Art Museum in Berkeley in 1967. As curator Peter Selz wrote in the exhibition's catalogue, "Funk is hot rather than cool; it is committed rather than disengaged; it is bizarre rather than formal; it is sensuous; and frequently it is quite ugly and ungainly."⁷ Twenty-six artists exhibited under the umbrella of Funk, though most in fact did not align themselves with any particular style or movement. Still, after the dominance of abstraction, Funk signaled a turn to expressive, figurative, and narrative modes. Puns and humor, the grotesque and bawdy, and a folksy, ham-handed touch were its attributes. Artists associated with Funk might best be described as assemblagists who used, for that era, some pretty funky materials: found objects, ceramic, plastic, and Styrofoam, to name a few. The use of everyday objects to make assemblage sculpture reflected artists' lived experiences as well as, in the case of Funk, the collaborative ethos of western cities, where, without much of an established art market, artists opened their own galleries and made their own movements.

The alleged origins of Funk are many, including European dada and surrealism, but Selz's exhibition originates with San Francisco artist Bruce Conner, who already in 1951 had developed an approach to making sculpture defined by "ephemeral conglomerations combining all kinds of uncombinable things."⁸ This underground Funk movement continued through the 1950s, and was adopted by Robert Arneson in the 1960s as an alternative to the "hot" abstract expressionist ceramics and the "cool" Pop mannerisms. At the time, Arneson was making



FIG. 4
 VIOLA FREY
Weeping Woman, 1990–91
 Ceramic with glaze
 76 × 58 × 80 inches
 193 × 147.3 × 203.2 cm
 COLLECTION OF NORTON MUSEUM OF ART, WEST PALM BEACH,
 FLORIDA, PURCHASE, THE ROSE L. KRAFT FUND, 92.2
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outlandish sculpture and teaching at the University of California, Davis, then a small agricultural town situated eighty miles northeast of San Francisco. Despite its geographical isolation, in the 1960s it counted among its faculty such influential artists as Manuel Neri, Wayne Thiebaud, and William T. Wiley, and drew numerous students who would become well known for their work, including Deborah Butterfield, David Gilhooly, Bruce Nauman, and Richard Shaw.⁹

Some Funk artists, among them Jim Melchert, Kenneth Price, and Patti Warashina, worked with clay. Many had studied with or been influenced by Peter Voulkos, who taught both in Los Angeles and later at Berkeley. His work was part of a larger artistic crusade to transform ceramic's conventional associations by making really, really big ceramics. He was joined by Arneson, Viola Frey, John Mason, and others (not exclusively Californians, but the historical arc, in America, leans westward) who addressed their work to sculptural traditions and requirements. Ruby grew up with their art, literally—their works filled her father's home and studio, and his contemporaries taught her at the San Francisco Art Institute. With this exposure, she became keenly aware of the relative absence of women among this big clay cohort.

Frey was something of an outlier, and though a contemporary of Arneson and Manuel Neri, was seldom exhibited until well into the 1970s. Frey's Pop-influenced work was motivated in part by collectible, flea-market figurines, which she transformed into assemblage populations or radically scaled-up (exceeding twelve feet) male and female figures. She is most known for the latter: solemn figures dressed in generic 1950s white middle-class garb: blue suit and tie for men, dresses for women. Others were nudes glazed in brash colors and outlined in deep blue, standing and sitting, with large, staring eyes (fig. 4). Their surfaces were roughly textured, pocked like they were recovered in the distant future from a mid-twentieth-century archaeological site.

Despite the ostensible connection in the two artists' subject matter, Neri says she was inspired less by Frey's sculptures than by the physicality and sheer force of will required to make such massive objects. Though both share the influence of Bay Area figurative painting, Neri uses figurative elements not as a subject, but as a structure within which to work—the structure of her women allows Neri to neutralize the cliché of woman as vessel, a notion intrinsic not only to ceramic history but to human history. Yes, a woman is during pregnancy quite literally a vessel. But we can defy destructive notions of woman as a vessel for societal conventions, for male inadequacy, for religious conflict, for trafficking. Perhaps Neri's sculptures allow a place for such conversations to take hold.

What are the implications of a female artist making sexpots? Is Neri's work acceptable because she's a woman?¹⁰ At what point did the rules change about images of nudity and sexuality? When women began to control their own representation? Certainly, the work of women artists during the past fifty years has altered depictions of the female body, as well as who has the right to portray it. Consider Dorothy Iannone, Maria Lassnig, Ana Mendieta, Alice Neel, Adrian Piper, Carolee Schneemann, Joan Semmel, Kara Walker, Hannah Wilke. These artists moved deliberately from objectified subject submissive to the male gaze to chronicler, interpreter, and even object of the gaze—her own. Neri's work continues and extends this trajectory, though her work is not overtly feminist. Its imagery complicates easy conclusions. We're talking about naked ladies here. What is clear is her devotion to the unswerving directives of her own desire around the materiality of clay, its sensuousness, its bodily yielding to the pressure of the hand.



Still, I find very few artistic precedents, or even contemporaries, for Neri's bawdy mob. She concedes no simple associations and maintains that her sculptures, though influenced by a range of sources from Venus figures to Funk, are the product of the clay itself. As in, they want to emerge from the clay, which brings us to the title of the exhibition. *Slaves and Humans* provides a kind of lens through which to expose circumscribed roles. Neri refers to Michelangelo's so-called slaves, or prisoners—four carved marbles housed at the Accademia in Florence. Scholars disagree whether the sixteenth-century works were unfinished or intentionally carved to look so. Michelangelo may have carved them to demonstrate his labor and sculptural prowess, or to underscore his belief that the sculptor was merely a tool of God who revealed the figure trapped in stone, or both. As I've already described, when Neri approached clay, the clay "told" her what it wanted to be: a possibly hysterical sexpot at once amusing and unsettling. Neri's handling is intentionally awkward, squeezed into shape, rough and lumpy, some might say unfinished.

Neri navigates her own simultaneous states of existence as artist-wife-mother-daughter-friend-human by creating sculptures that present conditions that, while certainly not shared universally, are shared among many women. Among many humans. Her work is not neutral, just as humans are not neutral—we are all subjective, all the time. Even so, there exists a desire for universality. In such a new and different body of work, at this point in her career, Neri takes just one among many archetypes/caricatures and asks us to revel, with her, in the ladies. Or, whatever it means, right now, to be a lady. "Okay ladies, now let's get in formation."¹¹

NOTES

1. Paul Soto, "Ruby Neri's Primordial Visions," *Art in America* (August 3, 2012). Accessed online April 2017.
2. "Artist Portfolio: Ruby Neri," *Los Angeles Review of Books* (Spring 2014): 59.
3. Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 279.
4. It is worth noting that Neri studied with, and worked for, Charles Ray while she was a graduate student at the University of California, Los Angeles.
5. Although Neri's residency lasted only throughout the summer recess, the team at CSULB has generously allowed her to continue, as of this writing, to fire her sculptures in their kilns.
6. Joan Brown and Manuel Neri were married from 1962 to 1966. Many of Brown's portraits depict Ruby Neri's relatives, for example, her paternal grandmother and her half-brother Noel Neri.
7. Peter Selz, "Notes on Funk," in *Funk* (Berkeley: University Art Museum, 1967), 3.
8. Garth Clark and Margie Hughto, *A Century of Ceramics in the United States, 1878–1978* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979), 160.
9. See Jenelle Porter, "Letter from California: Men of the Golden West, 1954–1967," in *Ceramics: From Rodin to Schütte*, ed. Camille Morineau and Lucia Pesapane (Ghent: Snoeck, 2016), 49–54. Though it midwifed several influential artists, the art that emerged from UC Davis is, if anything, characterized by the absence of an identifiable aesthetic.
10. I don't know if similar work made by a male artist, in 2017, would be spun, shamed, or celebrated. John Currin's market feats come to mind, to consider just one instance of how twenty-first-century male artists continue, unabashed, to paint female nudes. But are Lisa Yuskavage's bulbous nudes any less paradoxical?
11. Beyoncé, "Formation," on *Lemonade* (Columbia Records, 2016).

JENELLE PORTER is an independent curator in Los Angeles. From 2011 to 2015 she was the Mannion Family Senior Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston where she organized the acclaimed "Fiber: Sculpture 1960–present," as well as monographic exhibitions of Arlene Shechet, Erin Shirreff, Mary Reid Kelley, Jeffrey Gibson, Jessica Jackson Hutchins, Dianna Molzan, Christina Ramberg, and others. Porter has worked as a curator for over twenty years, including positions at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, Artists Space, Walker Art Center, and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

8.

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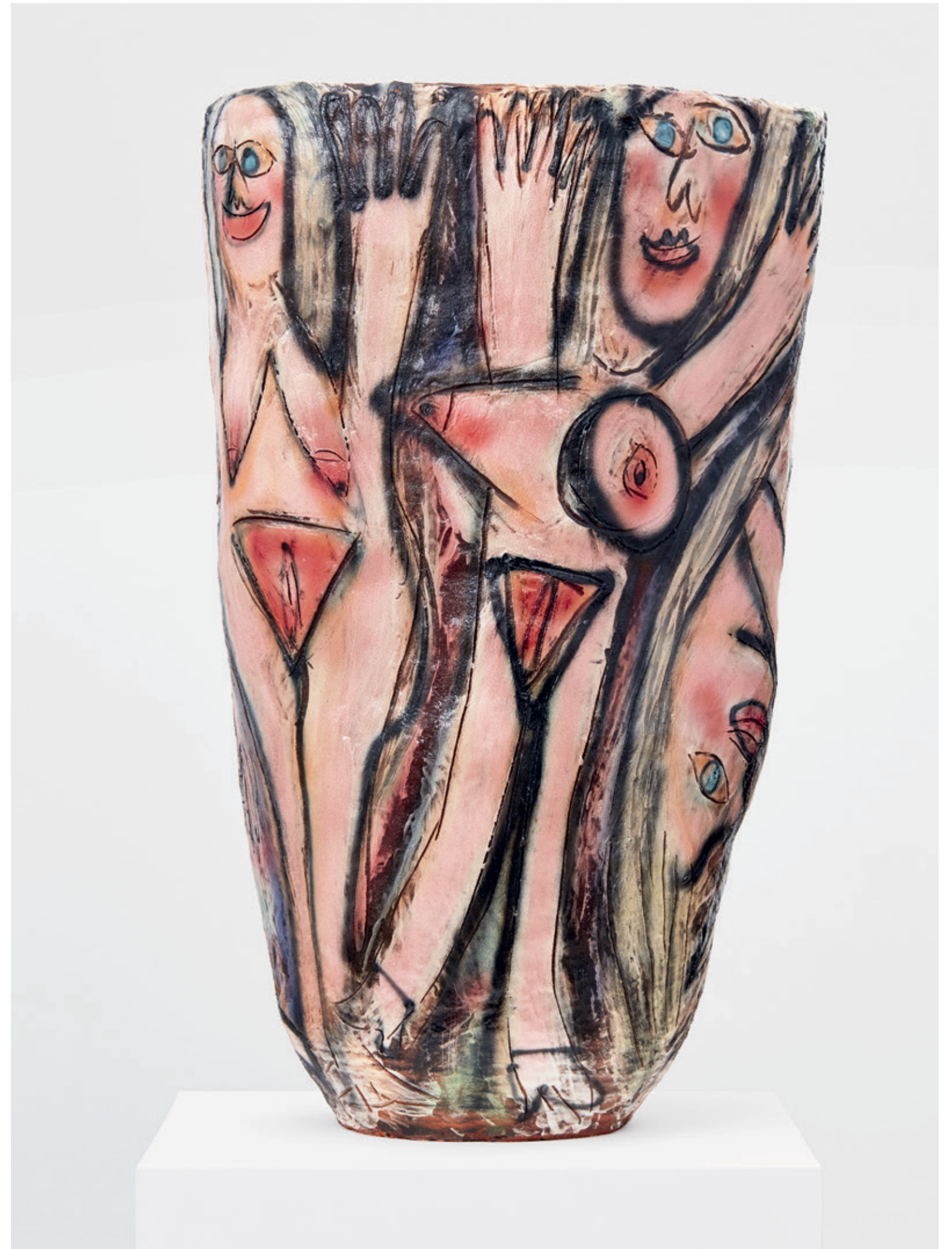
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Ceramic with glaze

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86.4 × 54 × 51.4 cm





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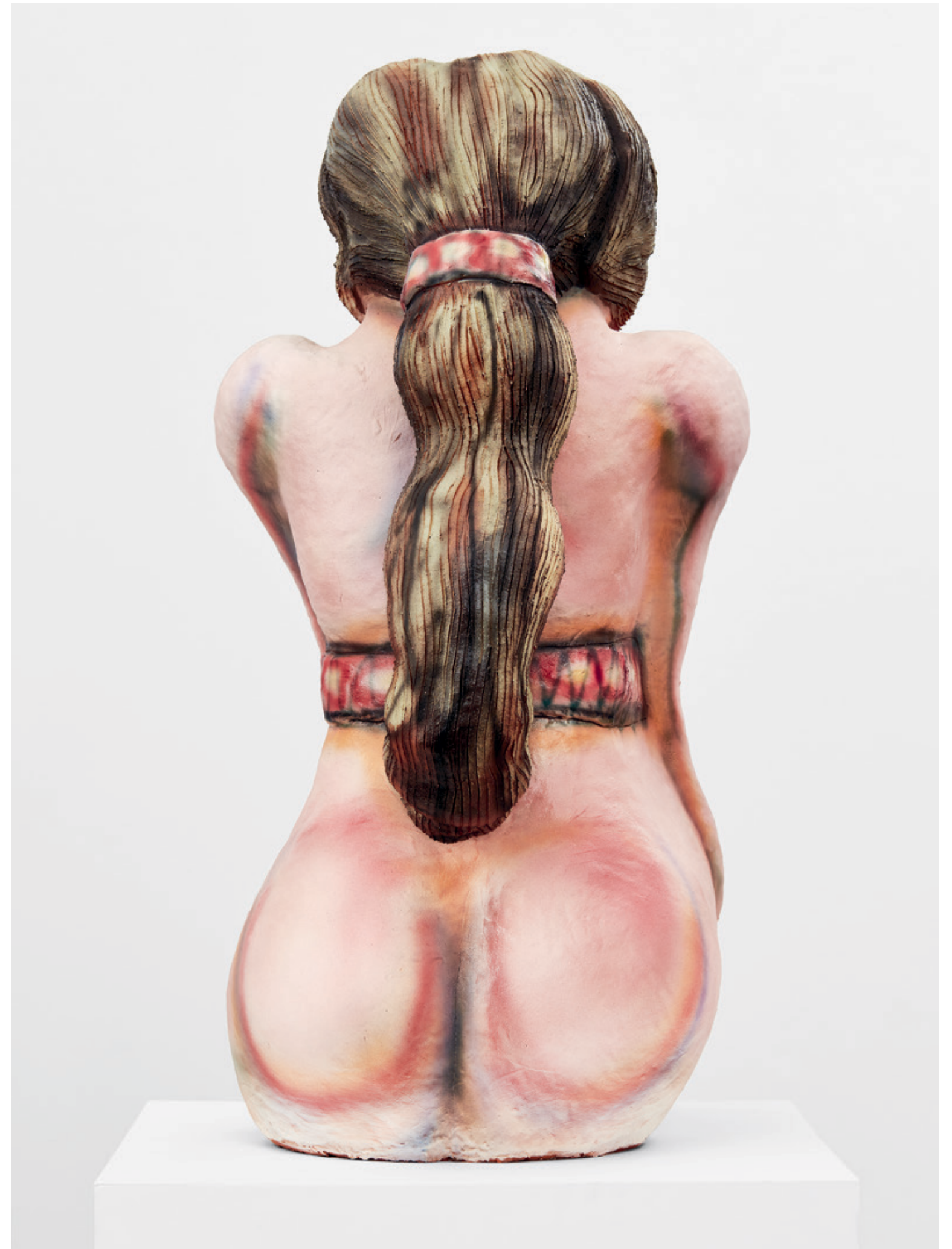
2016

Ceramic with glaze

32 × 21 × 15 ½ inches

81.3 × 53.3 × 39.4 cm





10.

Untitled (Double Girl with Braid)

2016

Ceramic with glaze

20 ³/₄ × 28 ¹/₂ × 9 ¹/₂ inches

52.7 × 72.4 × 24.1 cm





11.
Untitled (Large Women)
2015
Ceramic with glaze
50 × 39 × 37 inches
127 × 99.1 × 94 cm





12.

Untitled

2016

Ceramic with glaze

19 3/4 × 18 3/4 × 10 inches

50.2 × 47.6 × 25.4 cm





13.

Untitled

2016

Ceramic with glaze

23 1/4 x 19 1/2 x 8 3/4 inches

59.1 x 49.5 x 22.2 cm





14.

Untitled (Tall Double Lady)

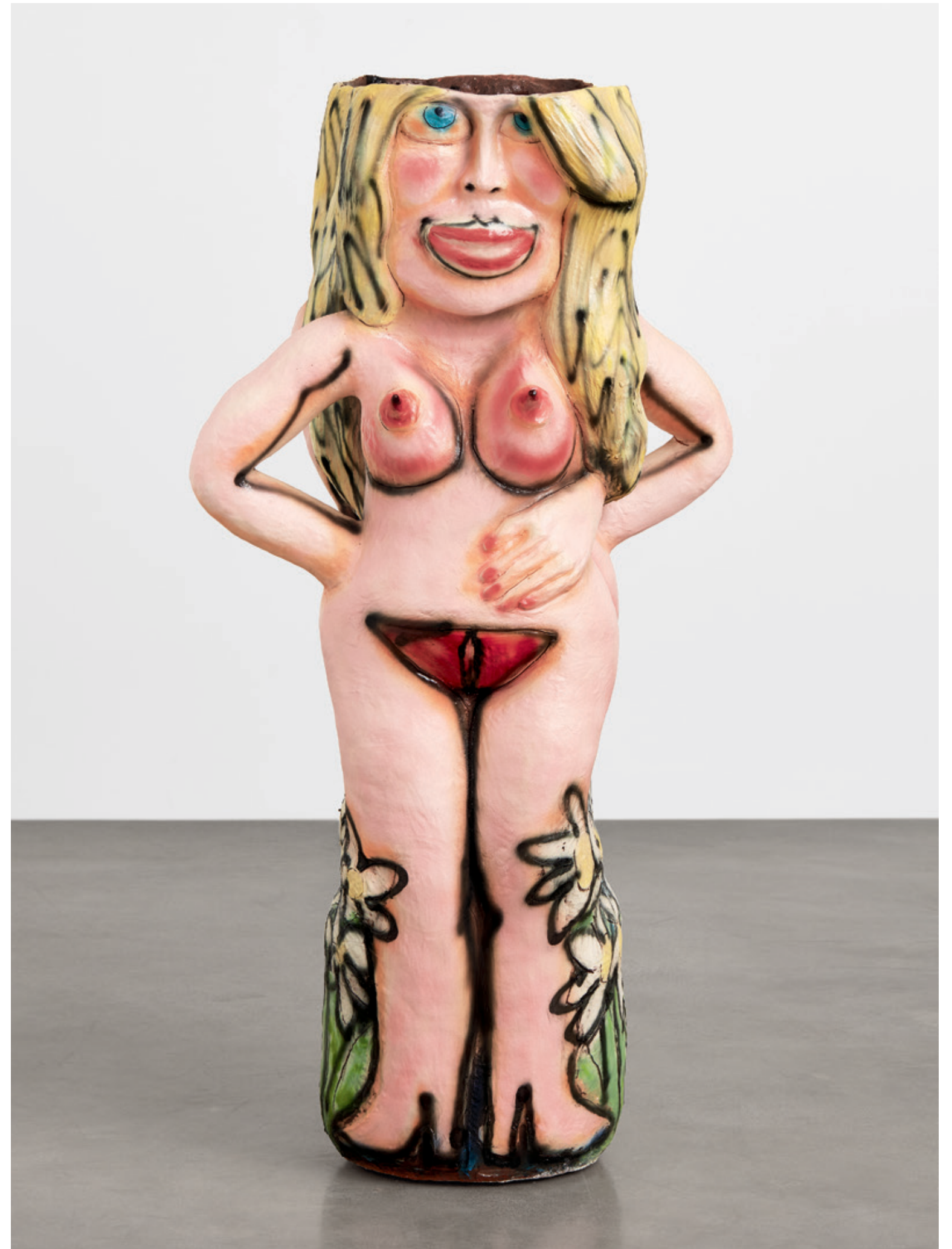
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63 1/4 x 33 x 28 inches

160.7 x 83.8 x 71.1 cm

















EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

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This catalogue is published on the occasion of the exhibition *Slaves and Humans* at David Kordansky Gallery, July 23–August 27, 2016.

David Kordansky Gallery
5130 W. Edgewood Pl.
Los Angeles, CA 90019
www.davidkordanskygallery.com

DESIGN: Purtil Family Business
COLOR SEPARATIONS: Echelon, Santa Monica, CA
PRINTING: Conti Tipocolor, S.p.A., Italy
PHOTOGRAPHY: Lee Thompson: 2–42, 44, 46, 48–77; Fredrik Nilsen: 43, 45;
Brian Forrest: 78–88

ISBN: 978-0-9891598-7-6

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COVER: *Untitled* (detail), 2016, ceramic with glaze, 65 × 35 × 24 inches, 165.1 × 88.9 × 61 cm