

Brie Ruais: Inside her Process & Partnership with Clay

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BARBARA A. MACADAM



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ALBERTZ BENDA, NEW YORK. PHOTO: STEFAN HAGEN.

Brie Ruais: Some Things I Know About Being In A Body. December 9, 2021 - January 22, 2022. albertz benda, New York.

At 130 pounds, Brie Ruais is equal in weight and material substance to her collaborator: clay. Each work they embark on involves pulling out the partner's guts and pushing them into a shape.

Ruais is generous in ascribing authorship: "I let the body and clay lead," she has said. Her most recent show, at albertz benda gallery in New York titled *Some Things I Know About Being in a Body*, testifies to the strength of this relationship.

The forty-year-old L.A.-raised sculptor-ceramist has felt her way ahead through ritualistic spinning and digging, creating circles and spirals, always starting from the center.

Ruais began by working in craft, embroidery, and textiles and moved to New York, where she studied first at New York University, earning a BFA in 2004, and then an MFA from Columbia University, in 2011, where she studied with conceptual sculptor Jon Kessler. "I seized upon clay as a material I could relate to. It was a kind of collaboration with ideas and materials," she says. "You've got to begin somewhere."

She soon had exhibitions at galleries ranging from Philadelphia's Vox Popoli (2012) and Halsey McKay in East Hampton, N.Y. (2013) and Nicole Klagsbrun in Chelsea (2013), followed by shows in Toronto, Paris, and Detroit, and last June, at the Moody Center for the Arts at Rice University.



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ALBERTZ BENDA, NEW YORK. PRODUCTION SUPPORT BY STUDIO SCALA, SANTA FE, AND DENISE LYNCH, STEWARD OF THE TANUGE CLAY QUARRY.

Brie Ruais [b. 1982] *Digging In, Digging Out*, 2021. Video, 12 minutes.

Melding performance and craft have been her métier. Ruais performs naked, throwing herself into the clay, and then pushing it, stretching it, stomping on it, and spinning around in it, as if to burrow her way down beneath the earth. And she uses drones to video record the process.

Last summer, working with ceramist Ralph Scala, she harvested raw clay from an ancestral Puebloan mine in the Galisteo Basin of New Mexico. The video of her performance there, *Digging In, Digging Out* (2021), which had just been on view at albertz benda gallery, allowed mesmerized viewers to feel they were collaborating over the course of its twelve minutes. They witnessed Ruais burrowing in to the sound of wind, the whirring of a drone, and her scraping of the clay. In the gallery, the video could also be viewed through a smashed hole in the wall of an adjacent gallery with debris scattered on the floor beneath it. On the opposite wall hung a circular construction *Letting the Fire In* (2021) composed of fragments of pit-fired stoneware and random bits.

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albertz benda

515 w 26th st | new york, ny | 10001
tel 212.244.2579 | www.albertzbenda.com



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Ruais, who lives in Brooklyn and has property in Nevada says, "I went to New Mexico to be close to the land. to learn how to harvest and process wild clay at an ancient Pueblo clay mine that is stewarded by local artist Denise Lynch."

"I'm interested," Ruais says, "in rituals of all kinds. . . . I think that because our society and culture are so secular, ritual and spirituality have become something to develop on a very personal, individual scale. Some parts of the definition of 'ritual' are certainly true about my practice: 'a religious or solemn ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order (Wikipedia).' The ritual for me allows for a presence of mind and body."

Ruais sees her relationship with her material as physical rather than psychological. She is dealing with scale—height and weight—and representing her body in relation to the environment. Where does it (she) fit, in both the intimate and grand scheme of things—of nature, the landscape, the cosmos, history, and art history?

Ruais presents performance with product, demonstrating creation, energized by motion and emotion. She could be seen as mating with her partner and, in so doing, shaping their progeny. In a 2012 video-recorded performance *How to Corner Yourself* she seems to mimic Richard Serra's pugilistic tackling of his sculptural medium, punching and grabbing her way up.

Many of Ruais's circular wall pieces evoke Native American head-dresses, where the skin of dried clay resembles feathers. In contrast to her natural-colored earthworks (with whitish being the color of clay, and black the product of smoke from the firing), Ruais's bright colored wall and floor pieces are active, playful, and rhythmic, and allow spaces for the speculative and the spontaneous.

"The fragments allow the work to be anti-monumental," Ruais explains, "small parts that come together to create a whole. I think about how this can be a metaphor for many different kinds of systems—social, natural, etc."

One senses the many sources of inspiration in her work and thought. There's poetry in her titles and associations—"An early inspiration for me," she says, "was Nauman's writing —'Flayed Earth / Flayed Self (Skin / Sink).' I was very influenced by his instructional voice. I think of this active voice when I title my works; they are, for the most part, all still in a state of happening: 'spreading,' 'tearing.'"

She also loves the poetry of Ursula LeGuin and Mary Oliver, "for the way they both honor and make space for the natural world to emerge through their work," and she listens to folk music—"I've always loved *The Circle Game* by Joni Mitchell; I made a piece titled *Circle Game* in 2013!"

She thinks of the voids in the center of her works, she explains, "as in *Letting the Fire In*, as openings or chasms that have a depth that is metaphysical more than it is physical. I think of Lee Bontecou's voids or Jay DeFeo's *The Rose*—these holes or vortexes have an undetermined, or unknown, source or depth. The central void is also usually where I kneel to make the work, so I think of it as the space where my body wears through the clay, the negative space that represents the absence of the body."

"There's raw emotion of all kinds—anger, frustration, sorrow, desire, joy," she says. "I am appreciative of Richard Serra and Robert Smithson and Bruce Nauman—I express my feminism by demonstrating that a woman, or a non cis-man, also has Sisyphian strength, power, and agency in their bodies (I'm reminded of contemporary artists like Cassils and Kate Gilmore, whose work I admire a lot)."

"The interventions," Ruais explains, in her more asymmetrical construction *Spread Out, Torn, Scattershot 130lbs* "were actions that could be made upon a body or skin, the cut openings, the peeled and torn back swaths, the finger-pokes that also read like bullet holes. Here, I see the voids and openings as wounds."

Recently, Ruais has considered print-making, in the sense that she regards imprinting her body—the plate—into the clay as creating a kind of monoprint.

"Her body is her signature," Klagsbrun says. She tells how Ruais came out to her home on Long Island and brought her own and Klagsbrun's weight in clay. She dug holes in the center of the mounds laid out on the floor, and then they each performed a piece.

"Nobody else does what she does," says Klagsbrun. "She lives the way she works, living in the desert. It had so much to do with her body. It's so personal, linked to time and place."