



"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"
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Brie Ruais: Some Things I Know About Being in a Body at Albertz Benda



Installation view, Brie Ruais: Some Things I Know About Being In A Body. Courtesy of the artist and Albertz Benda, New York. Photography by Stefan Hagen.

By VITTORIA BENZINE, January 2022

This week marks your last opportunity to see *Some Things I Know About Being in a Body*, the latest solo show by Brooklyn-based sculptor Brie Ruais—her second with Chelsea-based gallery Albertz Benda. The exhibition features fifteen wall-mounted assemblages of glazed stoneware imprinted with the abstract expressions of Ruais’s form, along with three archival prints and two process films from the artist’s experience working with wild clay harvested from an ancestral Puebloan clay mine in the Galisteo Basin of New Mexico last year.

Albertz Benda explains that every sculpture by Ruais starts with the artist's own body weight in clay—approximately 130 pounds. “The work is created by performing a foundational movement Ruais began working with 10 years ago: Spreading Outward from Center, which was cultivated from the idea that the individual's experience of the world is centered in the body.” Over Zoom, Ruais told me her fascination with ceramics began in graduate school, inspired by the ancient medium's connection to the deepest roots, rhythms, and relationships of our collective humanity.

About five years ago, Ruais started road tripping the desert landscapes throughout Utah, Nevada, New Mexico, and Arizona. “It was in seeing these cavernous holes that had been dug through the industrialization and mining extraction practices that I started to think about clay as being just one material of many that are pulled from the ground,” she recounted. Ruais's first visit to one of the largest open pit copper mines in southern New Mexico shocked her. “It's this chasm that is so beautiful, but also so painful,” she said.



Brie Ruais, *Spread Out, Torn Open, Scattershot*, 130 lbs, 2021. Underglaze on stoneware, hardware, 76 x 77 x 3 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Albertz Benda, New York.

In August 2021, Ruais headed out to the ancestral clay quarry in New Mexico at the invitation of a close friend. “I had high expectations of it to be really transformative for my work,” she intimated. “It was different information than I was anticipating.” Ruais learned that wild clay looks like regular dirt. “You taste it in order to figure out if it is clay indeed that you're grabbing,” she said. Taking clay from the ground, adding water, and working with it was an anomaly. While the opportunity spurred spirituality, she added, “The more that I thought about it, the more interesting it was that commercial clay is being processed through equipment and machinery—the very mechanisms that make our society and our way of living possible.”

After stocking a truck bed with hundreds of pounds of clay from the quarry, Ruais set up her drone camera and descended into the pond of clay at the base of the mine, developing and documenting a set of performative gestures relating to the place. That footage appears as *Digging In, Digging Out*, a 12 minute performance central to *Some Things I Know About Being in a Body*—projected on the wall at its entrance, in fact.

“My work was in that performance and video rather than in the sculptural work itself,” Ruais stated. She blasted a hole through the gallery’s pristine winding walls, and two of her own circular sculptures, enabling viewers to watch *Digging In, Digging Out* from the exhibition’s back room, after all the work’s being digested. “I wanted the action, the event, to be brought through the space and resonate around all the work,” Ruais said. Like this, *Some Things I Know About Being in a Body* bridges a critical gap between performance, movement, and Ruais’s resulting stoneware creations by elucidating her gestures.

While Ruais wrestles with the sometimes distracting yet undeniable beauty of her final artworks, she ultimately accepts that ceramics are executor to a long aesthetic legacy. “For the most part, glaze is just beautiful,” she said. “It’s hard to treat [the clay] as something that’s entirely under my control—it already has its own character.” Once the clay’s been fired, Ruais regards it as a document, a dead thing. Making choices about glazes and screws are like reverent last rites. While the clay’s alive, however, its agency helps facilitate Ruais’s explorations in somatic experiencing—an approach that understands bodily sensations as the root of intellectual emotions. “It’s a deeper knowledge of what your body is actually telling you,” Ruais remarked. “I think my practice opens up space for me to have a sense of that kind of embodiment.”



Brie Ruais, *Exiting Wound, 130 lbs (Night Sky)*, 2021. Glazed and pigmented stoneware, hardware, 62 x 65 x 2 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Albertz Benda, New York.

Absent a meditation or yoga practice, this work provides Ruais her portal to the esoteric. In that space of the unknown from which all creation arises, a sense of wonder arises—with a shadow in shades of futility. What’s the point of anything when everything’s everything all at once anyways?

To this end, Ruais told me about a recent work trip sculpting at her remote property in the desert. “It’s always this journey to get there,” she laughed. Ruais flies into Salt Lake City, rents a truck with four-wheel drive, and picks up commercial clay. Then she drives four hours west to pick up groceries before arriving at her spot, entirely isolated.

“I was in the middle of the desert, working under the sun and making this clay piece and I thought, ‘What the fuck am I doing? This is insane.’” Any outsider looking in might have felt the same. “It was funny to have someone else’s questions coming into my own mind,” she continued. “I thought, ‘I don’t really know. But it’s all I want to be doing.’”

“Maybe it doesn't matter,” Ruais concluded. “We can't answer those questions. What's the point? Is it what you want to be doing right now?”

Some Things I Know About Being in a Body builds on the style that's earned Ruais international buzz and a whole bunch of verbiage about ‘stomping, kneading, and bullying’ her materials. Revelations from this series illustrate her movements are no more violent than turning pirouettes beneath the stars—a simple act of abandon. What she knows about being in a body does away with definitions, a refusal to stay concrete that parallels the artist's jagged yet fragile sculptures, sometimes fragmented at the edges because words only go so far. “The things that I know about being in a body are the things that are not verbal,” Ruais concluded. “They come out in the work.”