

## *Incorrect Beauty*

### A dialogue with Erika Verzutti by Ian Berry

A field of bronze, concrete, clay and wax sculptures marks this first solo museum exhibition for São Paulo-based artist Erika Verzutti (b. 1971). Verzutti's works often combine dissimilar elements, such as references to everyday objects like fruits, vegetables, and eggs, with ceremonial forms, such as totems, tablets, and gravestones. Imbued with a sense of mysterious ritual, and mixed with a sly, surrealist humor, Verzutti's works often pay special attention to forms found in nature and life's constant mix of banality and beauty.

Erika Verzutti: I don't feel like I should say anything. I'm curious; I want to hear things. I'm feeling bad and good. The bad feeling is that I'm so common. And the good feeling is I'm so common; it's the same thing. It's okay. I'm alive.

**Ian Berry: I think that's exactly the way to describe the objects you make, and even the ways you make them. The words organic and natural come up a lot, because in your work there are things that look like nature: melons, sticks, rocks. But organic can also mean the way you're talking about it, how we feel when we get up in the morning and what we see when we walk down the street—a more holistic version of organic. You're having a life.**

I like this idea that I'm having a life. I never know when it was that I was working and how that work got done, because I don't have a routine. The perception I have is that I'm never working. Or that I am working all the time. But it's more that I'm never working. I don't know how I manage to get things done.

#### **Do you work by yourself?**

I work with my brother all the time now. I feel powerful working with him and sometimes I end up making bigger pieces than I would make alone. We have also developed some vocabulary within the work, so I can say things like, "Let's make a squared chapel geode with watery texture skin." That keeps things moving.

#### **Your studio is at home?**

My studio is my living room. It's spacious. There is a kitchen in the studio space. And between the kitchen and the studio space, there is a TV and a sofa. All this goes together. It is kind of a twenty-four hour thing. And we work more during the night. That's why it must be at home; otherwise, I cannot organize myself to be in another place in town that I will feel safe to get back to, or be alone in at late hours.

#### **Do you ever feel like you have to get out of the house?**

I do. I stay there for days, sometimes. When I don't know what to do, I go

to the movies, because then I still feel productive somehow.

**How does it feel like you're still working? Because you're seeing somebody else's artwork?**

Yeah. And I relate to movies. They're easy. I feel that I'm being informed, I feel that I'm seeing somebody's work, but in a way that I don't have to commit to. It's also a real life thing, not an art world frame.

**What movies do you remember recently?**

Remember we were talking about [Sacha Baron Cohen's] *The Dictator* yesterday? Comedy is so important to me. I went twice, and I took my nephew and my niece to see it, as if I was educating them [laughs]. Which is a bad thing. It was politically incorrect, but extremely funny because it was allowed to be so incorrect. That's something everybody's looking for, a place for all the junky, incorrect stuff that usually is put away or hidden.

**Some artists find those moments in their artwork. But if you're speaking in public, if you're putting your art or your movie in front of other people, and you're telling a joke about something horrible, it can feel very risky. Do you ever feel that way when you're putting a sculpture out? When you've made it and it feels funny to you, it feels perfect to you in some awkward way, and then, oh, what's the world going to do with these things? Do you worry about how your sculptures will be received?**

I know I felt like that, but I cannot remember a piece doing something risky. The way I quote Brazilian modernists, maybe. Or Picasso. Sometimes I don't know how much of that is a joke. It's probably more of a serious quote, but I'm hiding behind some funny way to put it out; otherwise I wouldn't have the courage. But I know that feeling of being very satisfied, and the next day, when the exhibition opens, feeling the eyes of others and being afraid. I'll think, "Maybe I went too far." If it's too bad, I take it down. I can't deal with being too uncomfortable. But it's a high.

**The high gives you energy for making more sculpture?**

Yeah. There's anxiety to share and it has to be in there.

**Do you think you would make sculpture if you didn't have a place to show it? If there were no one to see it, would you still make it?**

No, I wouldn't make it.

**It's for people?**

Yeah.

**It's for communication.**

Yes.

### **The feedback is important to you.**

It is.

### **Is it hard when a sculpture leaves you and goes away, and you don't know where it is?**

No. No. I am happy for it to be out in the world. I know I will have the image, or the memory of it, or that it's documented somewhere. It's going to be online and I can always find it very quickly. Digital imagery changed the way an artist exists now. I remember the big thing, when I started, was to get slides done. If you had no slides, you were no artist.

### **It's interesting how that's changed so quickly.**

Yeah. And so I feel much closer to the work I make.

### **You say, "when I started"—when was that? In school, after school?**

In the middle of school.

### **It felt like a starting point for you?**

Yeah, because it was not art school. I started going to artists' workshops and summer courses. Then there was the Goldsmiths episode, when I lost everything I made before that. It all disappeared somehow. I don't know where it is. I abandoned everything I was doing.

### **How old were you?**

Not so young—I was twenty-seven. But I was very young in my thinking. I went there because I thought I was good, and I got a place, and I thought, it's going to be so cool after this, going to art school. I thought I was going to be a superhero, that I was good already. Then I looked at what I was doing and said, "Oh, this is not the thing. This is not what I want."

### **So you physically put away your old work?**

It was a lot of paper. I have some of it somewhere. I don't like opening those files. One day I'll have to deal with it. It's a strange feeling. So I decided I wanted to be an artist; it was 1995, I was twenty-four, in São Paulo, taking summer courses with these artists. The scene was like a desert. There was nothing going on. Everything was so quiet.

### **What kind of artists were teaching?**

They were what I call "The Eighties." People like Leda Catunda, who's a friend today, and I still look at her work a lot; and Carlito Carvalhosa, who's also a very important figure for me from the eighties. Painters,

most of them. There was Sergio Romagnolo, who was Leda's husband. And he was a sculptor. I remember I took the sculpture class with him, and I would never be right; he didn't like anything I would do. Because I would be a bit literal and I would play with narrative, and they were very material-based. So I feel that today, I'm doing what I was supposed to do then; I'm a good student of his now.

### **You came around.**

I agree with him now.

### **But you had to get there on your own.**

It was a long way. The first sculptures were in 2003. Or a bit earlier, in 2001, when I made paper vases. The paper vase was me being reborn, after the two years at Goldsmiths, doing things too bad to show anyone.

### **And then you went back to São Paulo?**

Home is São Paulo. Always has been. Sometimes I wish it was not. I always consider escaping, everywhere I go. I come to Saratoga and say, "Maybe that's it."

### **Is it important to have artists around you to visit and talk about what you're making?**

No, that's a bit of a fantasy. I have some fantasies. Like having a studio is a fantasy. Because sometimes I say, "Oh, everything would be so different for me if I would just have a studio. But the artist scene, people don't talk about art in São Paulo. Maybe that's a Latin thing. We talk about the soap operas and relationships. We don't really talk about each other's work. Very little. You always have a small number of friends who you talk about art with. It's a marvelous thing when that expands to younger artists that you meet and click with.

### **When you made Seven-Headed Monster you invited other artists to collaborate.**

That's probably one of those occasions that I went too far with the joke. It was a strange thing to do. I wrote to each one of them saying, "I don't know exactly what this is. Maybe you trust me." And so I created some safe rules for making a risky thing. The goal was to put on an exhibition in one sculpture.

### **An exhibition in one object.**

Yeah. One sculpture, and part of the material of the sculpture would be artworks. Artworks as found objects.

### **And so you told all the artists what you were going to do?**

I said, "We're all going to do this at the same time." I had made a sculpture called *The Seven-Headed Monster* in 2007, and I kind of kept making it. It had more than seven heads. I don't know exactly how I came to that, but it was kind of an apocalypse-y figure, with four paws and many heads. Each head would be made of fruits and vegetables, but composed so it would look like they had ears and noses, made out of vegetables. It actually started with a book for children, how to make your kids' food more interesting. And so I used that structure. It was very simple in the beginning.

### **What was your first bronze?**

*Saramandaia* from 2006. That's the name of a soap opera. I chose this name because it's exotic. It would be like a sound for exotic. That's the first bronze. It's a vase. And where the flowers are, there would be sculpture clichés, like a bust and a bird, or me trying to represent sculpture clichés, coming out of the same pot. So when I invited the artists to participate in one sculpture, I was probably trying to do this again, like a monster containing every possible sculpture.

### **By making a monster it gives you permission to make different things that you want to make?**

Yes.

### **But is it also symbolic of anything, this monster? Is it in any way a symbol of how you're feeling about yourself or the world?**

No. It's more me trying to exorcise or accommodate my own anxiety about all the possibilities that exist in art making. I don't see myself so much as a monster.

### **Bodies are in a lot of your work.**

Are they?

### **You don't think so?**

No, I think that I'm so bad with the human body. That's something that I just can't make. I'm bad at it, so I keep trying.

### **There are bodies in here: round things, holes, appendages, heads, ears....**

I'm trying to disguise it. I'm trying to find my way to the body from the edges. There are lots of edges and outlines in the sculptures. With the *Missionary* sculptures for example, there are a lot of outlines. Because I deal with things as images, I have a favorite point of view for sculptures—*Mineral* is a super-frontal thing.

### **What about the mannequin bodies in your video *It's So Hard*?**

## **Are those photographs from store window displays?**

They are all online. I didn't photograph them; I found the photographs. They vary in a crazy way. I had a lot of fun with that. I wish I could do more stuff with this, but I cannot. They are too good all by themselves.

## **What attracted you to these?**

I don't know—this Brazilian bikini butt image. Also hot pants. That's an image that's in me forever—maybe it's a cultural thing. I just find them beautiful—you know?—making a drawing of this bikini from behind. I have created instructions to do it: one curve, another curve, a diamond in the center. I'm always curious when I see sculptures of butts. Rebecca Warren did one and I was like, "Ooh, she got it." Because it's all round, like a ball with a mark, just a groove in the middle. It's an entire ball. I said, "Ooh, that was smart." Because I don't know where to end—where to cut the body on top.

## **But when you say you have been carrying around this thing about the Brazilian butt, is that a celebration or a burden?**

I don't have a problem celebrating it. I always marveled, since I was a child, at women's bodies. And the way it was exploited in advertising, all the stretch jeans, I remember very well in the eighties—that was super-erotic. It's very much for the erotic appeal, so it's easy for me to connect this to the work I'm doing now. It's very tactile.

## **When you're making sculpture that isn't so specific to a body, is there an erotic edge for those, too?**

Probably. There are fingers everywhere. You have the indication: fingers were here. For me, that's a desperate need to share the experience, in that case, of the clay—the contact with the clay: wet, smooth, firm, cold and so on. They are sensual.

## **Was it meant to capture the immediacy you feel? And try to hold that, so that you can show other people?**

Yeah. Yeah.

## **Do you like people recognizing things in your work, like a tray of makeup in *Call Girl*?**

Well, I like titles. I'm never untitled.

## **Your titles are great.**

Thanks. I think the artist should title things and then shut up. I don't like instructions of how to look at a work. So if people didn't see makeup there, maybe I would be a bit anxious, because that's a very funny one. But it's almost as if the makeup is not really there. That's not makeup.

That's not an image of makeup; that's something else. Like this geometry, that is handmade, and that doesn't really fit.

**How did you come up with the title *Painted Lady*?**

I called that sculpture a woman, because I really wanted it to have breasts and hips,

**Or *Tortoise*? The word is funny.**

Yeah, the word is hilarious. I can barely pronounce it!

**Do you like your titles to be translated?**

It depends. I see them piece-by-piece, each way.

**Do you think of them in one language?**

One language. It could be Portuguese or English. Many times it's English. I don't think in Portuguese and then translate to English.

**How do you choose which vegetables to use for molds?**

That was the early days. I had many molds of vegetables, and I chose them for their texture.

**What makes them good?**

I never made an apple because it's too smooth. The outline is not really definite.

**So you like texture?**

Or outlines.

**Or holes?**

With fruits it was more about skin and protuberances. In the wall works, holes are starting to play an interesting new game. Not complete orifices as in Barbara Hepworth, not just yet. But depressions and craters.

**Talk about *Mineral*, the main work in our exhibition.**

I started painting clay, trying to make it look like amethyst. Then I used bits of the real stone. And then I went back to faking it, because the geodes were too good, or too real. But what I like a lot is that in the final work, we have the fakes, and the realistic castings, and hand made geodes, and clay pedestals...none of the experiences were left out, they were all integrated to create some liberal new nature with contradictory rules.

**Why did you start using geodes? Where did you see them?**

I've seen them all my life.

**Did you have a collection?**

No. I hated them! They were the ugliest things possible. Nobody liked them, really. Now they're everywhere. Now, like everybody else, I feel they're beautiful. I got that wave of the stones and geodes, one year before I started seeing them everywhere.

**So when you started being interested in them, you were investigating something that you thought was ugly? Or something you were attracted to because it was a bit of an attraction-repulsion at the same time?**

No, I felt attracted to them after a lifetime of not liking them. And this happens all the time. We need to see things that our eyes are not tired of. I feel easy about the need for novelty, I see it as some human basic need for expansion. We like something, and then we don't like it anymore because we've had too much. Then we want something new until we feel uninterested again.

**Yeah, you're too full.**

Yeah. Proust talks about that in a beautiful way. A very beautiful way. He tells the story of this opera that he went to see, *Phaedra*. Then, maybe two, four, five years after that, he goes back, with all that expectation of revisiting the memory he had, and that singer he loved, the woman's hair, all these details. And then he goes again through all the details and talks about how much he's not enjoying them now. He's sitting there and saying, "Oh, my God, I'm not enjoying her dress. I'm so sad that I'm not enjoying this. What's happening to me?" And that includes love, people, and literature. It's beautiful.