

RELOADING GURUS

ERIKA VERZUTTI AND FERNANDA BRENNER
IN CONVERSATION

Erika Verzutti is above all a studio artist. Her work is informed by a meticulous handling of materials and visual references from myriad sources. From the history of art to pop culture, nature, and cosmology, there is no hierarchy, and logic and intuition are never opposed. While finishing the works for her upcoming exhibition, *Ex-Gurus* at Andrew Kreps Gallery in New York, the Brazilian artist spoke with Fernanda Brenner, a curator and the artistic director of Pivô, about ideas and themes that inform the inventory of forms she has been developing, collecting, and reconfiguring for the past fifteen years.

FERNANDA BRENNER

Your work is often described from the perspective of non-definitions, halfway points, and oppositions. Yet I think you do usually take sides; you have clear opinions and take full responsibility for what you do. And there is a lot of definition in there. Beyond a certain predilection for the unfinished, I see a large degree of precision in your practice: a structuring gesture, calculated colors, or even a title or direct reference that ties the work, completing its image. How do you create an artwork?

ERIKA VERZUTTI

I see the creative process as a loop that allows me to start at any given point. I can start from a material that I find attractive and move on to a photo that I come across, then further down the line things end up coming together. Or contrarily, I can start from a drawing, and then move on to the material. I tend to refuse starting from ideas, but they can occasionally be entry points into the “process loop.” For example the bronze relief *The Dress* (2015) was inspired by an image that was circulating on the Internet of a dress that changes color depending on who is looking at it: gold and white, or black and blue. My motivation in this case was not exactly the image—which wasn’t really that interesting—but the idea that there could be a “bug” in the human eye. The thought that two people can see the same thing in two different ways struck me as a sort of proof that colors are not absolute. I used to say that art only exists because of vision, because we have eyes. But this work made me doubt that.

FB

I think regardless of what you choose as a departure point, the work is often more assertive than it seems at first. Its rough making and the visible traces of the gestures that generated the pieces might give the impression that there is more chance involved, or maybe a more intuitive approach.

EY

I guess my work always starts with a “yes,” accepting something, opening up to something. I search for a “yes” in a sea of “nos.”

FB

I see a promiscuous relationship between painting and sculpture in many of your pieces, particularly in the relief works like the one you just described, in which you paint on structures cast in bronze using colors to highlight textures, to define some areas and hide others. Maybe something more like makeup—which is dictated by facial contours—than painting, which departs from a blank canvas and deals with pure virtuality. I am thinking here of the work *Star Without Makeup* (2015), in which you decided not to use paint. It is as if paint was as important to sculpture as makeup is to a film star. How do you see this relationship between genres?

EY

In the exhibition *Two Eyes Two Mouths*, for instance, I felt I was flirting with painting.¹ I wasn’t really thinking about painting but about the possibilities created by placing sculpture on the wall.



The Dress, 2015. Courtesy: the artist; Fortes D’Alcova & Gabriel, São Paulo; Alison Jacques Gallery, London; Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York. Photo: Eduardo Ortega

And the procedures were actually very similar to makeup! The subject is always an excuse to me, an extra prompt: while a collection of makeup tutorials influenced the work, the language used in the exhibition was also related to makeup. It was a fortunate combination between theme and form, and I always celebrate when something like that happens. *Star Without Makeup* is part of that celebration. However, the process has slightly changed in the works I am producing for my next exhibition. I have started to shape things that I can paint on with more premeditated indentations and lumps on the clay, imagining the spaces that can be reached by the brush. And this has resulted in some new problems.

FB

What kinds of problems?

EY

The reliefs became puzzles. I feel that the rules are getting stricter, things like: lighter colors have to go on golden bronze. They reveal the issues I create for myself and this is a deliberate process, an example of how an artist creates rules and follows them or doesn’t. I think these simple decisions build the work’s vitality. I have learned a lot from conceptual art systems in which a proposition is followed through until the end, offering a certain order, a way out of the existential chaos. Today, I believe that these systems are no longer sufficient, that art happens in a place where nothing is predetermined.

FB

Your works have explored the shape of the jackfruit to its limit. Carving geometric shapes out of a jackfruit seems to be an inglorious task. To me, it is the perfect metaphor not only for architecture and the modern ideal behind the construction of Brasília but also for the kind of politics that goes on in the Brazilian capital, which can



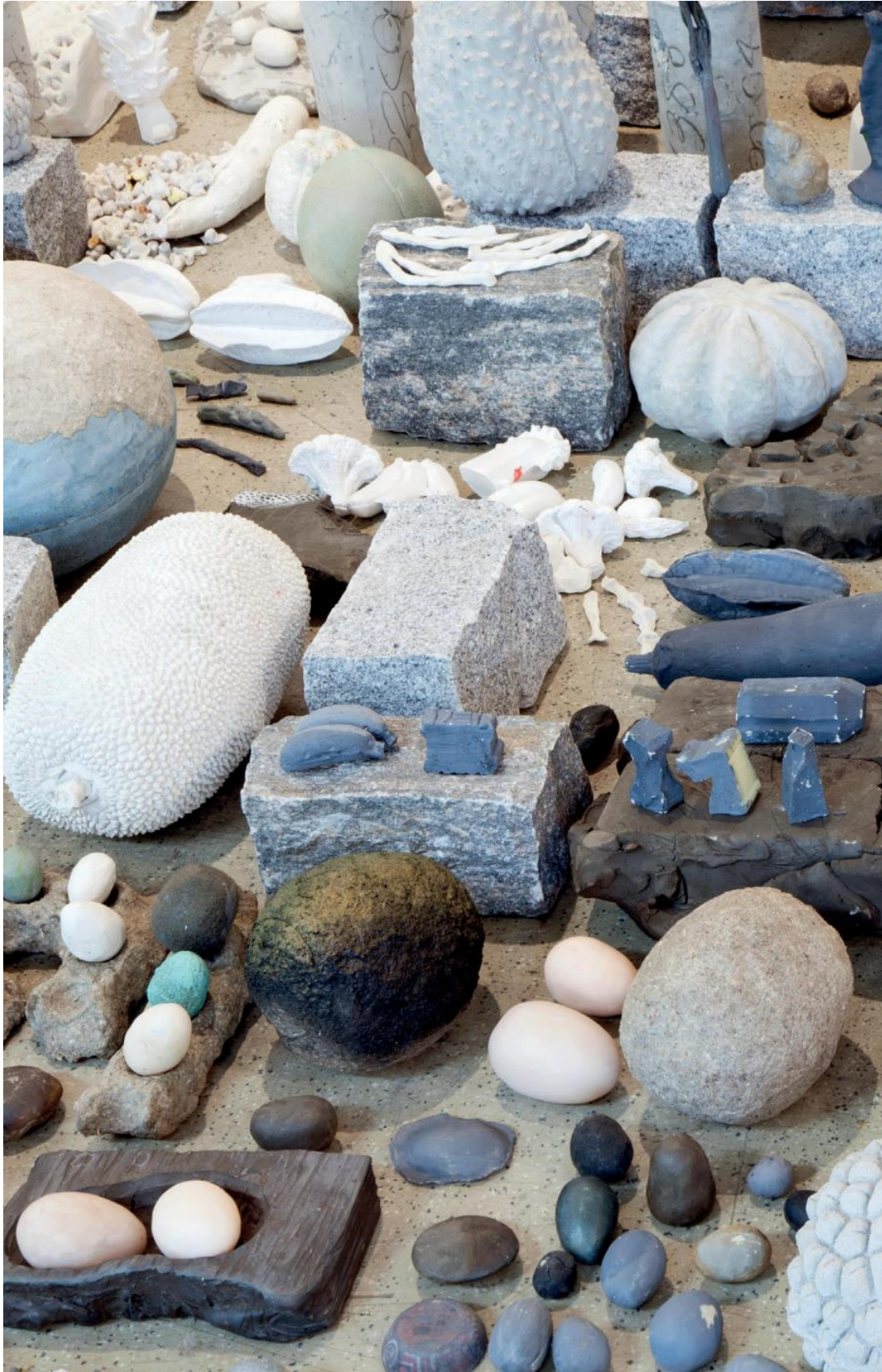


Above - *Floral*, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.
Photo: Everton Ballardín
Opposite - *Star Without Makeup*, 2015. Courtesy: the artist; Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo; Alison Jacques Gallery, London; Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.
Photo: Eduardo Ortega
Previous page - *Saramandaia*, 2006. Courtesy: the artist; Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo; Alison Jacques Gallery, London; Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.
Photo: Eduardo Ortega



Erika Verzutti was born in São Paulo in 1971, where she lives and works. Among her solo exhibitions highlights are *Cisne*, *Pepino Dinossauro* at Pivô, São Paulo (2016), *Swan with Stage*, at Sculpture Center, New York (2015); *Mineral*, at Tang Museum, in New York (2014) and a single panoramic show at the Centro Cultural São Paulo in 2012. She exhibited at *Viva Arte Viva*, 57th Venice Biennale (2017) and at 32nd Bienal de São Paulo (2016). In her work, Erika Verzutti freely juxtaposes dissimilar elements and styles. Although she uses classical materials such as clay and bronze, the artist breaks away from formal practices to expose the structure of the work and to incorporate "accidents" such as paint runs, splatters and scratches. Many of her sculptures reveal a special attention to nature through the use of fruits and vegetables as molds for the bronze.

Fernanda Brenner is an independent curator and artistic director based in São Paulo. In 2012 she founded Pivô, a nonprofit contemporary art space in São Paulo, where she serves as artistic director. Brenner recently curated *Neither* at Mendes Wood DM, Brussels. Her writings have appeared in *Frieze*, *Artreview*, *Terremoto*, and *The Exhibitionist*, where she is also a member of the editorial board.





Above, top - *Nova*, 2016, installation view at *Incerteza Viva*, 32^a Bienal de São Paulo, 2016. Courtesy: the artist; Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo; Alison Jacques Gallery, London; Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York. Photo: Eduardo Ortega
Above, bottom - *Halo*, 2016, installation view at *Incerteza Viva*, 32^a Bienal de São Paulo, 2016. Courtesy: the artist; Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo; Alison Jacques Gallery, London; Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York. Photo: Eduardo Ortega
Opposite - *Cemiterio com Franja (Cemetery with Fringe)* (detail), 2014. Courtesy: the artist; Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo; Alison Jacques Gallery, London; Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York. Photo: Sebastiano Pellion di Persano



Cisne Passarela / Swan Catwalk, 2016. *Cisne, Pepino, Dinossauro* installation view at Pivô, São Paulo, 2016. Courtesy: the artist; Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo; Alison Jacques Gallery, London; Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York. Photo: Everton Ballardin



Cisne Bambole / Swan Hula Hoop, 2016. *Cisne, Pepino, Dinossauro* installation view at Pivô, São Paulo, 2016. Courtesy: the artist; Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo; Alison Jacques Gallery, London; Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York. Photo: Everton Ballardin

Turtle, 2017, installation view at *Viva Arte Viva*, 57th Venice Biennale, 2017. Courtesy: the artist; Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo; Alison Jacques Gallery, London; Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni



have the same slimy, greasy aspect. The jackfruit allows for several possible analogies and meanings that transcend the physical presence of the artwork. Did you think of all these aspects?

EV The jackfruit is a block, a sort of monolith of nature. It is voluminous, just waiting to be sculpted. When I made the first cut, it felt like I was attacking a wild thing. And I thought that this was a very Brazilian image, that modern clean cut! It was as if I was biting into the jackfruit, but my bites were precise cuts. There was a connection to Brazil, the construction of the city, in the sense of pioneering, of building in the middle of nature. Some people see the link with politics or perhaps a derogatory point of view. I wasn't thinking about that, but while I was working I started to notice this possible connection, and felt baffled.



Brasília Rosta, 2012. Courtesy: the artist; Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo; Alison Jacques Gallery, London; Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York. Photo: Eduardo Ortega

FB You told me that you prepared a whole exhibition in a tiny flat in Japan, which made me reflect on the nature of your larger, more recent works at the Bienal de São Paulo (2016) and the Venice Biennale (2017) and your solo show at Pivó (2016). To what extent is the physical space and the environment where these works were produced relevant to you?

EV Actually I don't think I have an appetite for spaces. I am more interested in gestures. I think more about works than places, or the exhibition platform. The project at Pivó, for example, involved a number of people moving blocks of polystyrene, which at a certain point became a mountain of snow and later a sculpture of a swan much larger than a human body. Independently of scale, for me, everything is always a physical relation. When the hand is replaced by any type of tool, a sort of "tactile gaze" takes place and continues the gesture.

FB And there are groups of works; they come in batches, have patterns, recurring characters and forms.

EV When you talk about groups I think about *Saramandaia* (2006), which was my first bronze. It is an arrangement of sculpture clichés (a bust, a geometric form, and so on) as a bouquet of possibilities with a common base. But I'm starting to believe you when you say I think about exhibitions as a whole. I am currently working on a solo exhibition that I have titled *Ex-Gurus*, which started as a digression on synesthesia, on the translation between senses. Sometimes I give sensations colors and forms, for instance, I can imagine a graphic representation of the days of the week in which Tuesday is an orange rectangle. Or when I meditate, I see shapes and colors in my breathing. These exercises led me to think about representing abstract concepts. I have been a believer in many immaterial things: astrology, homeopathy, feng shui, positive thinking. So I started to draw these beliefs.

FB The graphic representation of an idea makes me think of the sort of synthesis that informs the creation of a brand's logo or the

composition of Japanese ideograms, in which the juxtaposition of some visual elements—from the most different origins—forms a concept that is the result of this approximation.

EV Yes, that's interesting! A lot of geometry appeared in the drawings of beliefs, as if they were systems. This led me to think that in fact all beliefs are sets of rules: special days, forbidden foods, and so on. I ended up dealing with my own belief that the current "state of the image" takes me much closer to reliefs than three-dimensional sculptures.

FB Relief as a return to the tactile?

EV Actually, relief as a negotiation between the tactile and the virtual. These works contain a negotiated physicality; they are between the wall and the space, differently from sculptures that share the same space with our bodies. Today, believing in the three-dimensional feels almost anachronistic. The relief is a step backward from sculpture; in the sense they have this Stone Age texture, at the same time relating to the virtuality of mobile phone screens. In some ways, these works also reiterate my predilection for the non-industrial. I think that industrial finishing reduces the fruition time of an artwork, and I am always looking for a longer interaction with an artwork.

FB I recently read an interview with Richard Wentworth in which he talks about how much he likes walking around Frieze Masters.² He mentions the "straight cuts" between a whole gallery of Henri Matisse and Arabian funerary objects that are exhibited together, free from the hierarchies and meanings often induced just by being in a so-called exhibition space. I thought about you when I read it, in particular about the freedom with which you so fluently combine references, objects, characters, and historical periods.

EV To me, the idea of "breaking with hierarchy" is not forceful. I have a certain anxiety in relation to erudition and categorical knowledge. Sometimes I try to give less importance or historical weight to some things in order to be able to deal with them within my practice, so I can combine them freely. The exhibition *Ex-Gurus* will be the first time I have included biographical details in the artworks and for me, using my personal beliefs as references has the same weight as the makeup images I used as references before.

FB I notice that you have a persistent engagement with the making of your works, in a sense that the majority of the answers—both formally and conceptually—come from their handling, from trial and error. I recalled a quote from Tolstoy: The task of art is enormous. Through the influence of real art... that peaceful cooperation of man which is now maintained by external means—by our law-courts, police, charitable institutions, factory inspection, and so forth—should be obtained by man's free and joyous activity. Art should cause violence to be set aside. And it is only art that can accomplish this.³ Today this may sound a bit romantic and outdated, but I suspect that allowing ourselves to think about what is, or still is, the "task of art" is relevant today. Perhaps in search of a more "hands-on" relationship with things. Do you agree?

EV I appreciate the direct link you make between the making of art and the importance of art. I believe in art as something intangible and inherent to human beings, like our sense of vision (as opposed to the idea that art must justify, explain, document, research, alert, serve). Art is a place of freedom; its rules are invented and in constant flux. I think this space exists so we know that someone is continuously exercising their utmost freedom, making decisions and doing things that are not subject to productivity rules. This is a backup system that somehow secures the human place, as if we are saying: someone must be allowed to go crazy. Sometimes we feel that it is necessary to safeguard the place of art, but I think that art is less fragile than it appears to be.

1. The show took place at Alison Jacques Gallery, London, 2015.

2. Richard Wentworth, *The Drawing Room Confessions* (Milan: Mousse, 2015), p. 8.

3. Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art?* (London: Penguin Classics, 1995), p. 140.