

Collecting

Erika Verzutti | The

Brazilian artist tells *Oliver*

Basciano why she's checking

her curvaceous sculptures

into Paris's Hotel Balzac

Oversized fruits can be found everywhere in Erika Verzutti's downtown São Paulo studio. Rendered in clay, bronze, concrete and papier-mâché, the sculptures – finished and work-in-progress – sit on the workbench and floor.

For two decades the Brazilian artist has made works that are globular, totemic and delight in quoting art history. These sculptures, often casts of bananas, gourds and melons, are also suggestively anthropomorphic.

"I don't cook so much, but there was a moment around 2007 I felt this free association of various things that were on the kitchen table," the 54-year-old artist says, pouring coffee. "It felt like their imperfect forms might provide a new geometry that I could use. When this happened, it was a revelation, a form of salvation. I was going to become a fruit sculptor! This would be my thing that I could use forever."

If there is a touch of absurdity to this, then it's one Verzutti leans into. In a 2011 show at her Brazilian gallery Fortes Vilaça she debuted this new turn with a series of sculptures in which bronze gourds leered suggestively at partnering blocks of concrete. A cast of a jackfruit stood on a plinth with a hole bored into its spiky skin and a totem of two dozen star fruit fused together reached up to the ceiling.

They freely referenced Picasso's surrealist sculpture, Brancusi's columns and the amorphous bodies of Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth. In a recent exhibition at the same gallery in São Paulo, since renamed Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, the assemblages are complex and odder still but have an additional loucheness: in one work a totem of multiple chayote fruits rests horizontally, like a labourer taking a snooze, one end



Erika Verzutti in her São Paulo studio, taken by Luisa Dorr for the FT

'It was a revelation – I had become a fruit sculptor!'

propped up on a block of newspapers.

Brancusi's columns "can be phallic symbols", Verzutti says. "They are modernist, but maybe they are too assertive for the times we are living through. I decided, OK, everybody's gonna take a break, and I ended up with these horizontal sculptures."

Verzutti says she doesn't cast from

Right: part of Verzutti's 'Venus' series, inspired by the 25,000-year-old Venus of Willendorf artefact

Stuart Whips, courtesy of the Nottingham Contemporary

real life so much now, and has gone back to moulding her pieces in clay by hand, allowing the size of her fruit to grow to sometimes monstrous dimensions. She puts the roughly fingerpocked elements into a single form on the workbench at which we are both sat. She then covers the sculptures in a layer of coloured wax or paints them with acrylic.

The studio is located on the first floor of a residential block in the frenetic downtown of Brazil's largest city. There's a street market a couple of blocks away in which real melons and guava are piled high. From her São Paulo base, Verzutti's works have gone out into the world, including shows at the Centre Pompidou in 2019 and Nottingham Contemporary in 2021, with a home gig at the Museum of Art of São Paulo the same year.

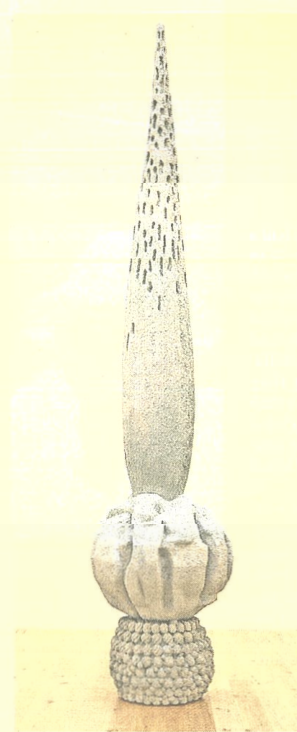
She speaks of her work as a mother might her children. "The sculptures have their own lives when they leave the studio, in museums, people's houses, in bedrooms. Sometimes people show you your work, in a collector's house, and it can be positive or negative. It's like seeing your baby out in the world. Sometimes they are there stuffed between lots of things or in a bad situation."

But there's one work which now belongs to the Littlewoods heir and collector James Moores. "It's a small sculpture that sits in his kitchen in Shropshire," Verzutti says, "next to a garden gnome, and the salt and pepper. And I think that my sculpture is happy there. It's got a friend, it gets plenty of attention."

Earlier this year Verzutti had an exhibition at LUMA Arles, and this month she returns to France in time for *Sculptures Last Night* – the latest edition of curator Julie Boukobza's annual exhibition series *Pourquoi Paris?* – coinciding with Art Basel in Paris. But this time the venue is a far smaller affair: room 103 at the Hotel Balzac in Paris's eighth arrondissement.

"I'm not making work for the hotel, a sculpture that is a bedside lamp or something," she says. "No, the sculptures are guests of the hotel, they've checked into a hotel room that will otherwise remain the same."

There are all sorts of guests at hotels – what kind will her sculptures be? She explains that among the



dozen shown there will be a column, composed of bronze oversized eggs, which will lie on the bed, the duvet thrown asunder, while one of her so-called "painted ladies", bronze and pigmented wax works that assemble fruits into a roughly feminine form, gently entangles the larger work. They are amorous guests? "They are, I think, on the verge of breaking everything," she says. "I think it's the day after the night before. The room is messy. There's only a certain amount of time you can stay



Right: some of Verzutti's small pieces in bronze and concrete which will be on display at Hotel Balzac

Above: stones, clay and nascent fruit and vegetable sculptures on the floor of Verzutti's studio

Courtesy of the artist and Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo/Rio de Janeiro; Luisa Dorr for the FT



in a hotel before feeling nauseous, regardless of how nice it is."

The Parisian "painted lady" is the latest of many: the Guggenheim in New York owns a leaner version, over two metres in height, formed of bronze-cast pomegranates and other fruit resting on a precarious base of bunched bananas; a 2011 version is more obviously feminine, a cast pomegranate and coconut fashioned for breasts. The newest will be curved, as if restfully spooning its partner.

Verzutti reveals an unexpected inspiration. Not just the sensual modernism of Moore's reclining nudes or the ancient fertility statues of Venus, but a segment on L!VE TV, the short-lived British tabloid TV channel from the 1990s. "This was my first time in Britain and very late at night I came across a programme – super trashy – in which two girls in bikinis splashed each other with a random mix of col-

'The sculptures have their own lives when they leave the studio. It's like seeing your baby out in the world'

oured paints. It was absurd. It came to mind as I came to paint these sculptures a mix of blues and green."

On the hotel television a film will play on a loop. While only eight minutes long, "The Life of Sculptures" has been years in the making. It was initiated during her 2016 solo show at Pivo, an arts space in São Paulo a few blocks from where we are talking.

"I had an actress walking through the sculptures like a muse, and it was this super big production. We had lights and a snow machine, catering. It felt amazing, but when the images came I got scared. What was I going to do with all this? I didn't like it, the quality was too high. But I kept filming."

She hired the actress again when she installed a series of animalistic modernist-tinged sculptures in the gardens of the Venice Biennale in 2017. But by the time she had resumed shooting in Switzerland a few years later she had decided against the actress's presence altogether. "After seven years of making this film I realised the human character didn't make any sense. So I cut all of that."

Instead, it is the sculptures that are shown in changing weather and light; strange alien children, out in the world, on their own. "I wanted to show the sculptures living through time, showing them as time passes around them," Verzutti says. "The sculptures are the characters, they didn't need anything else."

'Erika Verzutti: Sculptures Last Night' is at the Hotel Balzac, Paris, October 20-26, fdag.com.br; Booth B48, Art Basel Paris, October 24-26, artbasel.com

