

ArtReview

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Ser Serpas Animates Our Late-Capitalist Epoch
By Cassie Packard



Rafik Greiss and Ser Serpas, *Untitled*, 2022. Courtesy the artist.

A new show at Swiss Institute, New York asks philosophical questions of fleshy bodies – and foils any inclination to pigeonhole the artist’s evolving practice.

Ser Serpas first garnered attention for her sculptures wrought from urban detritus in 2017, when they featured in her solo show at Miami’s Quinn Harrelson / Current Projects. Operating at the nexus of the *dérive* and the dumpster dive, the Los Angeles-born artist-poet scours the streets of those metropolises where she has upcoming exhibitions in search of suitable castoffs: mattresses, strollers, bathtubs. She proceeds to transmogrify the junk in performances that no one sees, twisting, stripping and stacking it into sculptures whose pathos and presence draw out the animacy and affect of such objects in our late-capitalist epoch.



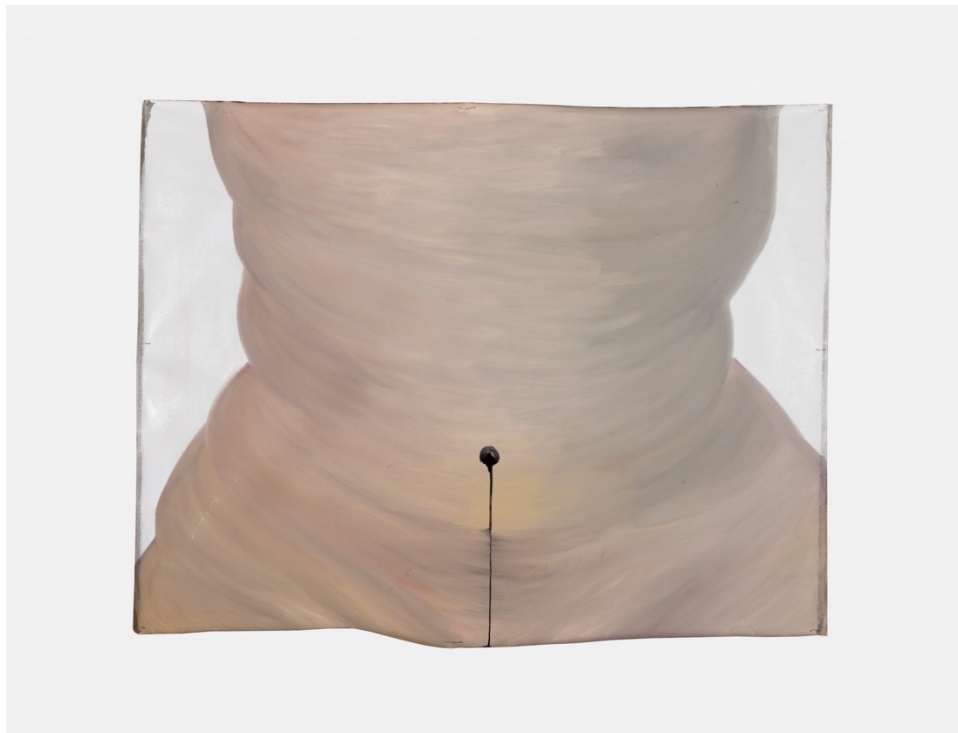
Hall, 2023. Installation view.

Serpas's latest exhibition foils any inclination to pigeonhole the twenty-eight-year-old's evolving practice: here are dozens of photographs of the choreographies behind her sculptures; seven heroically scaled paintings of bodies; and four vitrines containing old journal entries. Though sculpture is omnipresent through the photos, the lone sculpture onsite is a crimson floor installation, *Partition Play* (2023), which repurposes the museum's own architecture. Serpas has sourced a wall from the last exhibition in the space (a survey of Colombian-American artist Karen Lamassonne), smashed it up and laid it flat. This ersatz red carpet takes up questions that range from philosophical – does architecture remember? – to pragmatic – what happens to temporary gallery infrastructure after a show's run?



Hall, 2023. Installation view.

Photographs, made by Serpas and artist Rafik Greiss in Paris, open a window onto Serpas's sculptural process as it unfolds in the street, in the woods and in warehouse-like interiors. *By the Highway (VHS Stills)* (2023), an intermittently glitchy 31-image series, captures the jumpsuit-clad artist wrestling with a detached car door as the heavy steel resists her, or standing on two wooden slats atop a folded mattress, pushing the bulky object to adopt a new posture. While *Partition Play* riffs on Minimalist floor pieces, Serpas's dances with everyday objects recall Minimalist choreographies built around banal props like mattresses and ramps – though Serpas's choice of discarded items suggests interest in the objects' psychic residues and places in chains of consumption.



Ser Serpas, *Untitled*, 2022. Oil on canvas.

In oil paintings executed on large uneven cuts of jute, Serpas renders fleshy bodies with thick, vigorous strokes that chime with the physicality of her sculptures. Images lurch towards abstraction as cropped, anonymised body parts overtake the frame: two untitled paintings from 2022 depict a woman's torso marked by smears of pink, and a soft belly with a drippy black navel, respectively. Serpas bases her paintings on old cell-phone photos – of lovers, friends and herself – as well as pre-op photos sourced online, which sometimes relate to her own experience of transitioning. Treating these images as found objects, she transforms intimate material from her own life into pictures that skew opaque and impassive. Likewise, her dismembered college Moleskine notebooks – full of plans for performances, doodles resembling breasts and eyelashes, song lyrics and confessional texts – use old memories and emotions as the basis for deadpan readymades: a project that is at once profoundly personal and a subversion of the vulnerability and transparency routinely demanded from artists, perhaps particularly those from marginalised groups, whom the artworld often presses to make legible, biographical work. It's a pressure I hope she keeps applying.

Hall at Swiss Institute, New York, through 23 April.