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Jordan Richman Interviews Ser Serpas

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Ser Serpas

A modern-day alchemist stoked on ambition and Veuve, SER SERPAS is transforming trash into treasure. Knowing her bedbugs from her termites, she usually doesn't touch mattresses for good reasons. Here, in a conversation with *Jordan Richman*, the former fashion intern turned Bourse de Commerce headliner spoils a show or two

At 27, Ser Serpas has come a long way fast. Having grown up in Los Angeles, the sculptor, painter, and aspiring filmmaker landed her first European show—in 2018 at Zurich's Luma Westbau—before she'd even had the chance to visit the continent. Exhibitions at New York's Swiss Institute and LA's Hammer Museum soon followed, further validating the artist's reputation as the world's preeminent savant of debris.

It's no surprise, then, that Serpas was entirely unperturbed by the garbage crisis in Paris, where she's currently preparing for her upcoming show at François Pinault's Bourse de Commerce. Never one to stay put for long, she is eager to return to the US, to begin the next act in her charmed career.

JORDAN RICHMAN: I love that you suggested to meet here, at this taqueria in Pigalle. It's a throw-back to our days in Los Angeles.

—SER SERPAS: No, absolutely. I was like, "Oh my God, really?" It's a dream.

These tacos are delicious. I remember 10 years ago when there was no decent Mexican food in this city. But we met in LA around 2017, after you'd been living in New York. What brought you back there?

—I came back after a breakup. It was the end of college, and I was kind of freewheeling in LA.

Now I just feel so lazy whenever I'm there, because I don't drive, and I'm always at my mom's. I'm just going to get a proper Airbnb next time. It'll break my mom's heart, but I need to experience being there by myself in an apartment.

I've always gone back and forth from LA for different plastic surgery things. I definitely see it as a place where I can rest and relax. My family's super important to me, so I'll always be back and forth. I'm sure later on in life when my mom gets older, I'll spend not a majority, but a lot of time there, more than I can imagine spending now. It's definitely in my future.

I feel the same, when I'm old and retired-ish—at 60 or something, LA will be perfect. Just seeing you in LA a few weeks ago was bringing me back to the time when you lived on Heliotrope with Carlye Packer and Athena Denos.

—I miss that house. I remember every single day there somehow. It was right after that breakup, and these friends really nursed me baby-bird style.

Artists just have so much room in LA to work, and to space out when they need to. Every time I go back it's inviting the malingering feeling of, "Oh, I should actually commit six months to a year to feel it out." Then I know that probably I would go, and then be out of town half the time, as usual.





We're similar. It's also impossible for me to stay put.

—Sometimes I think I'm working with so much discarded shit just because I haven't let myself hone-in on one place to stay for periods at a time, and maybe I've never really felt that grounded in my own space. I've never had a lease. I've always just been on other people's sublets. All those things are coming to a change. I guess I'm in my Saturn return almost, and I'm just feeling all of it. I'm like, "OK, I have to sit down and start buying weird furniture, and just settle into something real."

One of your first exhibitions, *Dust Patterns* (2016), was at Quinn Harrelson's gallery in Miami.

—My first solo. It was a breakthrough.

You discovered your whole practice working on that show?

—Basically, I went to Miami, and Quinn wanted me to make a fabric show from my bags of stuff. I had three or four garbage bags full of garments, and I did bring one. But then I ended up not using that, because I was like, "Oh, I'm going to actually do a painting show." I wanted to teach myself because I had just graduated from school the spring before.

It was the winter after my graduation—and I was never that good at painting in college. And so, two weeks before my first solo show, I was going to learn how to paint. I guess that's the type of person I've always been.

With the paintings, it's not like they weren't fine and good. They actually all sold and people liked them. But we didn't end up showing them because Quinn freaked out and was like, "You can't have your first solo show be something that you've never done before and that you're unsure about." I was like, "Shit."

How old was Quinn at the time?

—He was 16.

But he had already curated a few blockbuster exhibitions by then.

—He'd done some cool stuff. When he messaged me in my senior year of school, he was like, "I'm a 15-year-old curator in Miami, and I'm interested in your practice. Can we talk about it?" I was like, "So?" But then I met him and thought he was cool.



UNTITLED, 2019
Oil on canvas, 54 × 46 cm

You're in Miami...

—Quinn was like, "There's something around the corner from my house that maybe is interesting for you." It was all this furniture out in front of a house that went into foreclosure, a pile of stuff, all color-coordinated, all from one living room. I had been working with chairs and fabric, a lamp and fabric, different pieces of furniture, but it was always held down by this fabric work that I knew how to do.

This was the first time that it was all furniture. I was like, "This all just fits. Let's get a U-Haul and bring it into the gallery space and see what I can do." That night, I just had a Monster or two and played loud music in the gallery, where I had sequestered myself hardcore, sleeping there as well. I could have slept at Quinn's nice house on South Beach, but I needed to just be with all the work that I was making.

I was so agoraphobic and dysphoric at the time that I just didn't leave the space other than to get delivery Domino's. I had Dominoes 10 times over a two-week period and drank all the champagne in the gallery space. It was really a dark period for me, but I just got to work. I knew the space well enough, and made nine sculptures overnight. Then I remember Quinn and his dad coming in and just being shocked at the work.

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“Most of my family cleaned houses or did contracting to support themselves, and now I am moving furniture, but in a museum”



The art world was shook.

—The show got an *Artforum* review, and I was like, “Wow, that’s crazy.” I just got hooked on the process, like: “You just have to trust me. It’s going to be a magic trick and it’s going to happen quickly.”

That working process has become a way that I can perform for myself and then share something with others. I look at what I’ve done in my life—athletics, school, modeling, shared writing. It can be transformational to do things for yourself, and then when you share them, you realize the impact beyond yourself. That’s what I’m always after. It’s an adrenaline rush.

We’re walking through Pigalle, near your new apartment. There is so much garbage everywhere because of the workers’ strike. How do you choose if an item on the street will potentially become part of a sculpture?

—It has to be big enough for me to be able to grapple with it, wrestle it. I was a wrestler in high school, and I feel like I employ a lot of those movements, in the sense that I have to keep my composure and balance with the items, so I don’t hurt myself in the process. That’s something I

learned freshman year of high school, and it’s still serves me well. I’ve never hurt myself working like this. However, I do get a massage before and after.

Then I start to think in terms of the physicality of it, like, “Oh, I come from an immigrant family, first generation in the States.” Most of my family cleaned houses or did contracting, things like that, to support themselves, and now I am moving furniture, but in a museum.

It all still feels connected to the physicality that I lost, tied to things that maybe I don’t feel as comfortable doing anymore in the fields of exercise and sport. Because once I started transitioning and my body started changing—even to this day, I’m not in a gym, I don’t take public pilates or yoga classes. It’s not that I’m uncomfortable with my body, but I just don’t want to get any reactions, ever. I don’t want to cut myself off completely, but I don’t even want to think about what it would mean to sign up at a gym in a language I don’t speak.

Are there certain common objects that you see everywhere? An Ikea side table or something you come across no matter the country.

—I would say it's random Ikea shelving and cabinets. I just don't touch those unless they're fucked up enough, or broken in the right way. Obviously, I don't usually touch mattresses for important reasons, like bedbugs. But that type of Ikea stuff, it's everywhere that I've been. Insane.

Bedbugs... Do the institutions have a lot of concerns about the provenance of the pieces coming in to the institution?

—Yeah. I've had institutions, in a very last-minute way, say that I can't bring certain things in. I'd prefer to be given that message from the start. That should be the first question, "Well, would you mind if we have to fumigate a few things?" For the most part I'm like, "That's fine, you just have to tell me in advance so I can collect it earlier."

They literally want to sanitize the work.

—Sometimes I think about it, and I'm like: "Well, what? Should I cast some of this in bronze? What do you want me to do?" I would never—probably—never do that.

I remember having dinner with you and Carlye in New York before you were about to travel to Europe for the first time, and you feeling ambivalent about going and all the effort involved. We were like: "No, you have a solo show at Luma Westbau. You have to go."

—For a period, I felt very euphoric about it. But toward the departure, I rode the ferry to the Rockaways for the first time ever and started crying on the boat. I was like, "Why have I never done this?" I realized there was so much that I had cut myself off from. And I definitely had a full personality shift the first time I went to Europe.

Coming up in LA, I was always in my neighborhood. But then going to New York and being on the subway and nobody making eye contact, everybody always looking down and trying not to engage so they don't get into a fight... Transitioning in this period made me shut off from what felt like the rest of the world.

Then going into very white Europe—they stare and they make direct eye contact, and they want to engage. It's a different society than the subway in New York. You can face things head-on and have conversations. This whole time abroad has changed things for me because I learned a different way of engaging, and because of that, it's also changed the work.

Imagine if you had been the girl who didn't go to Zurich.

—There's the green-line test, to be open dick to the rest of the world, splayed out, and not necessarily confrontational, but able to have that forward engagement. My life would be so different if I just stayed in this mental bubble of who I was in New York.

I love the new apartment. Living in Paris as an American expat, do you ever feel like an "Emily"?

—I really want to learn French in a way that I didn't. I wasn't trying so hard in other places to learn the language. But I want to learn French, and be involved in casual café conversation about what art is, and with random people when I get a little tipsy.

In a way, leaving Paris now feels like I'm admitting a failure to do something so basic.

How long have you been here?

—Since September of 2022. But I was really flirting with New York the whole time.

So you're getting back with your ex?

—It's definitely going back to an abusive ex, and I'm just like, "Oh my God, I can't." But also I want to be in a relationship again, and I'm not very convinced in the French scene. I don't think I'm going to meet someone out here right now.

But otherwise, Paris has been great. I've been able to work here really well, because when you want to unplug, there's not a lot of social pressure to come out of a studio hole. I feel that for any type of expat person here, you get left alone. And anyway, among groups of other artists, I'm a bit socially awkward. I'm better with fashion girls.

Because you originally were...

—My first job in New York was interning for Susanne Bartsch, archiving her collection of couture for an exhibition at FIT. Then I was at the Whitney, but right after that I was at Milk Studios doing PR for Fashion Week events. I then interned for a stylist. And the whole time I was helping friends with their fashion shows, and I would model sometimes. Somehow, because I didn't go to art school right away, that kind of experience shifts your perspective on how to engage with art.

I don't have a working knowledge of art history past a certain extent, in the way that other artists do. When looking at work, and getting descriptors

Exhibition view, POTENTIAL INDEFINITE PERFORMANCE, THIS THAT AND NOW AGAIN, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2020





of my work that relate to other artists, I'd say 70 percent of the time I don't have that point of reference. I don't know if I could really go back and get it, unless I were to go take a few levels of history courses at a community college somewhere.

How did you transition from fashion into making artwork?

—Unlike the fashion girls that were posting every single thing that they were doing on Instagram, I saw artists posting a photo of a gutter, a weird hat from far away, a weird meal. That was the first iconography that I saw that I was like, "Oh yeah, these are artists."

But basically it was through one fashion show, the Women's History Museum's first runway show, where Donna Huanca was doing the footwear, painting on shoes. A few months after that, I took my first sculpture class. Then Donna saw that I was doing sculpture, and, after she had me model for one of her activated performances, she brought me in to her studio to collaborate. That was the first invitation from somebody that I knew.

Donna showed me her method of working with hoarded objects that she would collect over time, and I saw semblances of that in what I was doing with little garment sculptures in sculpture class. That helped me zone in, like, "OK, this is what I'm going to keep doing, looking at it as a product."

When you started making art, the works more directly referenced fashion, using garments and fabrics.

—They were referencing. They consisted of fashion objects, but, usually without that much intention, as a result of me messing with them so much, they would come to look more visceral. Almost like body parts, organs—things would happen with these fashion objects.

And how did you meet Hari Nef?

—On Twitter, before school—a year and a half before I even got to Columbia, where she was going as well. She ended up being the reason that I went, because I met her and was like, "Oh, you're going here? How is it?"

She really took you under her wing.

—Yeah, she showed me around, introduced me to a lot of people that I respected and admired

from afar, like Juliana Huxtable, Dese [Escobar], and other artists that I didn't even know but that I would come to admire. I just saw them around at different parties, mostly on Tumblr—party photography.

I love that Butt, Dick, and Pussy, the party photo Tumblr, has returned as an Instagram.

—That's why I need to be in New York more, to get more of those photos, and to serve as that template for other girls who are not on Tumblr anymore.

Last year we had dinner at that eel restaurant to celebrate you getting the upcoming exhibition at Bourse de Commerce. It's been about six months. Do you have an idea for the show?

—When I think about shows, I'm usually creating not so much a narrative, but a setting for where something has taken place, or is taking place. For Bourse, I'm going to do sculpture, but I'm going to hide it a bit and create an environment that would most likely be an attic, where things are a bit hidden, protected from dust. It's going to be low light. I have the attic from *The Others* with Nicole Kidman in mind. You're running around and trying to uncover this furniture as if a presence is there, and then it's not. I'm also going to do some sound programming and sound installation. I'm thinking of who to invite to contribute an atmospheric score.

What I really I want to do very soon is make film in some capacity. I keep thinking about things in that way, chopping up different aspects of what I want to do into things that I know I could fully flesh out. And then those parts could become something that I could later combine into a more finished product.

I have ADHD like crazy, so I'm going to need a team. But I do have a working screenplay that needs some editing. I just need to just have my lease in New York and my studio, and a part-time assistant and two or three collaborators. I'm like, "OK, I need to get this Bourse show done so that I can move back and start figuring out something that demands my attention and my forethought for years at a time."

When did you first see *The Others*?

—My mom showed it to me. We had it on DVD, and it really impacted me then. I just thought it was great.

I don't really remember the film.

—Basically, Nicole Kidman's husband goes off to war and leaves her alone in this manor with their two kids and some three caretakers. And then—I mean, do you want me to spoil it?

It's OK. You can spoil it.

—Basically, the husband dies in the war for sure, but Nicole Kidman doesn't know, and then he comes back as a ghost. Some caretakers eventually arrive to volunteer to work at the house, and they start being weird, and then they start being weirder, and then Nicole Kidman freaks out and tries to hide her kids from them. But the caretakers are like, "Ma'am, we're sorry, but we have to wake you up from this delusion of yours. We're dead but so are you guys. You killed your kids when you found out your husband died in the war. We're all ghosts and we're just back in this house, in and out."

At the end, a new family moves into the house, and all the ghosts are coexisting, watching the family from the top window. In the attic is all this old furniture, covered in dust covers. It's a really spooky movie, and it's nice. I mean, it's sad. Nicole Kidman's like: "I'm sorry I killed you. I'm sorry I

shot my kids with a shotgun." And then the kids are like, "Oh, it's OK, Mom."

And the sculptures for the exhibition, you'll source similarly through the streets?

—Yeah, I'm going to do a full process.

Did you think of looking for abandoned chateaus near Paris? There is this ghost town north of Paris, Goussainville-Vieux Pays, maybe we could find some old place still with period furniture and other belongings left behind?

—I want the show to be a more contemporary version of this type of ghost story, where you're chasing something, where things are being protected. Then it would also maybe talk about how people approach the work on an institutional level, where there's a feeling that other works have to be shielded from mine, for its potential to contaminate through bugs. But that's not the case with the Bourse, for the most part. I was already worried about them saying, "OK, if there's a weird mattress, we can't bring bedbugs in here." I understand that. I also understand termites. But generally to get dust off a thing,



“Donna Huanca saw that I was doing sculpture, and she brought me in to her studio to collaborate. That was the first invitation from somebody that I knew”

“The strength in what I’m doing is that I do so many things that don’t really line up, and that don’t even feel like the same aesthetic language sometimes”



TRICKLED HARNESS BALEFUL FALL IN, 2022
Mixed media, 220 × 250 × 170 cm

I don’t think there’s a point. Unless there’s asbestos in it or something.

The show at the Bourse will wrap up this chapter of your life and work.

—Yes.

And then you’ll put your ambitions toward making a feature film?

—I’d say that the Bourse show is going to wrap up a cycle of how I’ve been working on the go, and that being so integral to the practice. It’s about this fleeting thing, trying to capture something in the chaos of what is actually going on around production. I’ve figured out this way of working that is very fulfilling and cool, and that literally could take me a month, and people have a reaction. It’s very satisfying.

Sometimes I’ve gotten in my head and had a bit of imposter syndrome. I don’t have a very analytical approach to a lot of what I’m doing, and I want to change that because at one point I did feel an expert in things, and now the condition of being a millennial–Gen Z cusper is just being slightly knowledgeable about 100 different little things. And I’m like, “No, I can’t…”

Jack of all trades.

—I need to hone it. And just also for my own sense of… Not my sense of worth…

Validation?

—It would feel validating to be an expert in not just one thing. But I think that’s just part of growing up, and, I don’t know, maybe I need to get an Adderall script or something.

What is the plot of the screenplay?

—Oh yeah. It’s basically a *Rosemary’s Baby* thing set around 2013 at Columbia during a lot of on-campus protests. It’s loosely based on me and a cohort of friends, and it’s a horror. Not an A24 horror thing, to be clear. It’s based on stuff that I grew up watching. I want to produce it and take different portions of it out—behind the scenes photos, set design, table readings. Really milk it, milk it for everything, and then put those parts in conversation with other very dissimilar things.

The strength in what I’m doing is that I do so many things that don’t really line up, and that don’t even feel like the same aesthetic language sometimes. Some things I feel like, “This looks like a kid did it.” Or, “This looks like a 60-year-old woman did it.” And, “This is dumb.” And then, “This looks like a computer wrote it.” I’d like to mix it all together and look at it as a composition.

Can’t wait to come visit you on set.

—I just have to get my head on straight, get back on healthcare, get a therapist, have a regular doctor, get a gym membership. Just get my shit organized back to New York, so that I can tackle this other thing. It’s not like, “Get me on some nootropics and biohack my life.” But at least for now, that’s the next thing I want to do.

Are there any ghosts in the new apartment?

—No, there’s nothing. I slept here last night. I’ve never really lived in a haunted place. Even with my residency in Tbilisi—at a place that would be scary to some people—there was nothing in there. But I do think maybe I should sage it at some point. That could be nice.

The residencies don’t ever feel haunted? Not even from the past artists?

—I mean, haunted from my neighbors that were calling the cops on me probably. But other than that, they were fine.

Ser Serpas’s show at the Bourse de Commerce, Paris, will open this fall.

