

PURPLE

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Issue

ART

SER Serpas

INTERVIEW AND PORTRAITS BY OLIVIER ZAHM

SER SERPAS IS A POLITICAL ARTIST FROM New York WHO BRINGS THE STREET into THE GALLERY AND SOMETIMES RETURNS THE COMPONENTS OF THE WORKS TO WHERE SHE FOUND THEM.



SER SERPAS, (LEFT), *SINCE THE DAY I MET YOU*, 2017, MIXED MEDIA IN PLASTIC BAG, (RIGHT), *MIGRATION*, 2017, MIXED MEDIA IN PLASTIC BAG, INSTALLATION VIEW OF "KREISLAUFPROBLEME," 2019, AT CROY NIELSEN, VIENNA, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, KARMA INTERNATIONAL, ZÜRICH, GIACOMO PIAZZA AND KIRI-UNA BRITO MEUMANN COLLECTION, PHOTO KUNST-DOKUMENTATION.COM



OLIVIER ZAHM — Ser, when did you decide to pursue a career in art?
SER SERPAS — I started about six years ago, but before that, I was writing poetry.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, we can still say that you're a young artist.
SER SERPAS — Yes. I have a few more years. [Laughs]

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, what attracted you to New York? You moved here five years ago, right?
SER SERPAS — No, in 2013. I went to college here at Columbia, uptown. And I came because I met Hari Nef on Tumblr. I was in LA, and I was very attracted to her and her life in the city.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Hari?
SER SERPAS — Yes. She was going to Columbia, and she was two years older than me. I basically sent her a message on Facebook and was like: "Hey, I love your performance art. By the way, how's Columbia because I'm thinking about applying?" And she was like: "Oh, yeah, come. It's simple." I wanted to go to Yale or Hampshire College, this very communist hippie-to-be thing in the woods in Massachusetts.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, you met at Columbia University?
SER SERPAS — Yes. But we basically became friends over the Internet, and she was like, "Yeah, come." She looked over an essay of mine and was like: "Yeah, this is good. Just apply." And I got in. And as soon as I showed up, she started taking me out.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You fell in love immediately?
SER SERPAS — Yes. I saw her last night. I love her. But basically, she got me my first job, which was working for Susanne Bartsch at the Chelsea Hotel, as her assistant. My job was archiving her collection of clothing for her FIT [Fashion Institute of Technology] exhibition, which opened in 2014. I was taking photos of her Jean Paul Gaultier, her Mugler, etc. and noting the condition of the garments and their assembly, and how they would go on the mannequins.

OLIVIER ZAHM — I didn't know she had such a serious collection.

SER SERPAS — She has a serious collection of archival garments that designers made just for her. From the '80s on...

OLIVIER ZAHM — What else happened?
SER SERPAS — I started going out, and immediately I knew that I wanted to get into nightlife. My background was as a community organizer in LA. I worked for nonprofit organizations, mostly around the criminalization of Black and brown students, queer students, disabled students. That's pretty much what got me into Columbia. I have been doing all this political work since I was 13. It was not a rebellion against my mother, who works for the LAPD. But it was a bit of like, "Oh, yeah, you're gonna have to come to my leftist anti-police meetings." And she's, like, hiding her badge. She's cool.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, New York represented a freedom magnet for you?
SER SERPAS — Yeah, basically... In high school, I was identifying as "they/them," and I used to dress like a freak. I saw Hari and other people in New York going to parties like Top 8, and I was like, "Oh, I could wear what I want there." I was doing political work, but I was attracted to the arts. I wasn't making paintings in high school, but in the back of my mind, I was like, "Okay, if I go to a small college in the middle of Massachusetts, in the woods, it might be a bit difficult to express myself." So, it was a desire to be around real freaks, I guess. [Laughs]

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, the nightlife in New York is still a scene for emerging artists?
SER SERPAS — Absolutely. Because every other person I met was an artist — stylists who were Sunday painters, people who made video work about nightlife... People like Juliana Huxtable and DeSe Escobar are prime examples of people who actively do nightlife. They DJ, they host parties, and then they make artwork. pretty low-income. But I wanted to work, so Hari getting me that job with Susanne solidified that desire to be involved in something. For my second job in New York,

I interned at the Whitney the summer after my freshman year.

OLIVIER ZAHM — That's more serious.
SER SERPAS — Yeah. That was more serious, more buttoned-up. I think I was wearing Uniqlo slacks and Crocs and a weird, button-up t-shirt every single day. I was losing my mind. Also, I got arrested my freshman year of college. It was a racial profiling thing in Harlem, back when I used to look like a cholo. But a friend whom I just reconnected with lent me their family lawyer to clear it off my record. If it wasn't for this roommate of mine, I would've never been able to move to Europe. But I had to use my first check from the Whitney to pay the lawyer.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, in a way, Columbia, together with the nightlife in New York, was still a place where you could grow and find your artistic identity?
SER SERPAS — Absolutely. And I wasn't doing that well in school, admittedly.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Was nightlife better than school?
SER SERPAS — It was better, I would say.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What was your first project or performance?
SER SERPAS — Well, people like Ally Marzella sometimes would invite me to be in their performances. This video duo Mike and Claire, who used to make videos for *Vice*, or the Luck You Collective, like Bobbi Salvör Menuez — I was friends with them. I met them through Hari, and when they would do video art projects, they would involve me sometimes as a model, or I would get naked and painted blue for a music video. [Laughs]

OLIVIER ZAHM — For me, you're an example of the potential this city has for creating, having a community of artists interacting, supporting and inspiring each other. Working with each other. It's real.
SER SERPAS — Absolutely. I would not be in the position I'm in now without all of those little accidents. But those accidents, I think, got sped up by the velocity of how much people are attracted to the city.

More things can happen in line for the bathroom at a club — in terms of your potential as a cultural producer in the city and the connections you make — than could happen in the halls of a campus.

That's not saying I don't have desires to be somewhat more fulfilled in my academic pursuits. I'm thinking about going back to school. I just did an MFA in art in Geneva, but I want to go back — and probably here in New York. I might go back to Columbia for a new degree.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, let's speak about your early work using trash and found objects on the street. Because

New York is a consumerist machine, SoHo is now a big department store, but at the same time, when you walk on the street, you're always bumping into trash. Was it a critique of consumerism? SER SERPAS — Initially, I was working with garments that my friends were giving to me, and also found objects. I would find a chair, children's bedposts, and it was born out of a desire to physically engage with these objects. Because I was doing all this twisting and tying. I would attach it more to an OCD impulse. [Laughs] I had this studio to work in, and I was like, "Okay, well, I'm not gonna go buy materials." I didn't have the money for that or for any type of fabrication. I also didn't have the desire to draw up schematics for specific things. I just appreciated the chance encounters with things that had a look to them. It was also a reflection of personal style at that point. I like wearing distressed jeans, so I also like this distressed chair that I just happened on in Brooklyn, and then I would take it to my studio and work with it. But I didn't see it as connected to a critique.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It's simply part of the city landscape. SER SERPAS — Yes, it just felt like a communication of what was happening around me.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Like a land artist working with stones. And I read that you also put the sculptures back on the street. That's fun. SER SERPAS — Yes.

If the work doesn't sell within a certain time, then I don't keep this rotting

piece of a bookshelf in a storage unit forever. I'll just dump it. Sometimes, I make it a point to do so.

In the coming year, there's going to be a project or two where everything will be dumped out, and there'll be some others where it's okay to sell, potentially. But I give it the time span of a normal gallery loan of a work, which is typically six months to a year, before things are tossed out. After that, there's no point if there's no interest. But of course, for the first dozen or so sculptures that I made, most of them are just gone, which feels nice.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And you work very quickly. SER SERPAS — Extremely quickly, yes.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Is this also something you get from the velocity of the city? SER SERPAS — It's a rush, yeah. And honestly, I'll get a little drunk, and I'll do some coke, and I'll play the right mix, and I just get to work. It's really the funnest time that I have, and it feels like I'm putting on a show both for myself and for the excited gallerist or museum curator whom I invite in, and I'm like, "Come look at what I did." And then they're like, "Oh my God." And I'm like, "Yeah, that was fun."

And then I'll wipe my nose and walk out of the room. [Laughs] It's always like a private dance that I do.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Is it still a performance? Or is the making of the sculpture also part of the sculpture?

SER SERPAS — Yes. Because I don't glue or nail anything. I don't weld anything together. Everything's held up by friction and tension exercises that happen in between the pieces. Once I make it one time, you're never gonna get the piece of the bookshelf in the exact right alcove of the chair that I stuffed it into ever again. It's one and done. People have reinstalled work. I don't say, "Don't do it," but when I look at it, I'm like, "Oh, that's kind of off from what I did." But that's fine because that original action and private choreography are the work to me. Sometimes, it's an issue for collectors. They're like, "Well, then I'm not actually buying work from you?" And I'm like, "Yeah, you are — you're buying the aftermath of the performance." But it comes from this original impulse. At the end of my undergrad studies, when I was fully in the visual arts program — because I started off in urban studies and political science — I was told that the sculptures I was making felt violent and intense. Like, in a nice way. But they wanted me to record myself doing it. And at that time, I felt offended because I was like, "Oh, so because I'm a trans artist, you wanna see me on a camera doing what I'm doing." In my head, I was like: "I'm anti-exploitation of myself. I'm not gonna show you what I'm doing." And I made a very angry performance at MoMA PS1, where I got everybody to lay on this trash tarp and look up at the security camera footage of themselves, while I was doing a really crazy DJ set and reading rude poetry, while friends made sculptures around me with these event score instructions and made a circle around the audience. It was fun. I got a review in *Tiny Mix Tapes* for it. [Laughs]

OLIVIER ZAHM — And your friends were lying on trash?

SER SERPAS — No, my friends were the only ones who weren't on the trash. The audience had to lie on a tarp I made from discarded fabrics that I let rot in my backyard in Brooklyn for four weeks. It was kind of gnarly. And they had to lie on it. It wasn't soggy anymore — like, it had dried at that time, but it still smelled like a blanket that's been outside in the winter, you know? So, it was a very angsty thing, and I was so angsty back then. But I still think about it in terms of like, "You need to shut the windows when I'm gonna make this installation because I don't want people looking in on this maniac running around, tossing chairs onto other pieces of furniture, listening to gabber music." But sometimes, I let the right people watch.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, your art is rooted in performance. SER SERPAS — I try to think about it like a music video that I really like. It's always connected to music for me.

OLIVIER ZAHM — I didn't know you DJ, too. What kind of music do you like to play? SER SERPAS — Techno, drum and bass, gabber. I like putting in sound effects, like spooky Philip Glass mixed in.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Old movies, too? SER SERPAS — Yeah, sometimes I include interview clips, and I do text-to-speech buttons, where an AI voice will read stuff I'm writing live, but that's when it gets more performative. I blame my mother — she was showing me gruesome horror movies from the time that I was five years old. She was like, "Let's watch *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*." I was the only kid at the R-rated movie. But I thank her for that. I love horror.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Another question about politics — because New York is still a political city, compared with other cities in America, and you were working as a community organizer in LA. Is art a way to expand or extend your activist sensibility? SER SERPAS — When I first started making work, I felt it as totally different.

When I was in high school and only doing political work, I was interested in art, for sure, though I wasn't practicing. But from that early leftist education, I was like, "Oh, okay, in the fine art world, it doesn't even matter because any work that comes out of what I could potentially do could just get co-opted in a number of ways." I felt — or I was told to think — that specifically Black and brown artists don't get supported in the right way, or queer artists get pigeonholed and don't get the same financial compensation. I was basically

red-pilled about it by other activists who were also engaged in art-making.

OLIVIER ZAHM — But that's true. Or it was then, in any case.

SER SERPAS — Yeah. In 2013, I was just like, "Oh, okay, whatever." But when I came to college, I didn't feel comfortable tapping into any organizing bodies here. I tried a bit within college to do some community organizing again, but I'm not from here, and I don't understand the terrain of New York. So, I thought, "Let me just involve myself in fashion and art."

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, activism didn't feel right?

SER SERPAS — It would've felt artificial to me, which was definitely my critique of other students on my campus. Columbia's a very leftist, politically minded school, but I was like, "What do I care if a rich kid knows about the ghetto where I'm from, if they're just gonna talk down to me or try to, especially in political science classes, urban studies classes?" So, in my head, I became a bit of a leftist snob. I was like: "Oh, I'm a true leftist. I'm from the ghetto. I'm not gonna deal

with these people. I'm just gonna go to the club." But with the art-making, I basically came into it thinking, "My work is gonna be about aesthetics and beauty and physicality. I won't have any political messaging in the work at all." And in my paintings, I've never shown any faces. I don't really know how to paint faces. It probably wouldn't look good. I've always kept myself completely out of it. And in the sculpture, I'm working with other people's garbage — I didn't want anything to be made in a certain way. I want to take other people's language and speak to



LEFT: SER SERPAS, *UNTITLED*, 2019, OIL ON CANVAS, 26 2/3 X 26 2/3 INCHES, COURTESY OF PRIVATE COLLECTION, PHOTO FLAVIO KARRER

RIGHT: SER SERPAS, *UNTITLED*, 2019, OIL ON CANVAS, 18 1/2 X 18 1/2 INCHES, COURTESY OF PRIVATE COLLECTION, SWITZERLAND, PHOTO FLAVIO KARRER

OPPOSITE: SER SERPAS, *UNTITLED*, 2021, OIL ON WOOD, 16 1/2 X 19 3/4 INCHES, COURTESY OF PRIVATE COLLECTION

them in that, instead of trying to create my own.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, you distance yourself from any political message. But it's not easy because your work, when we look at it objectively, is not from your own perspective, but we know that it comes from you, from a personal history...

SER SERPAS — I agree. I was very resistant to it for a long time. And a lot of my friends, mostly trans girls who were doing things in fashion and art, even Hari and other friends who were more corporate fashion — we all at one point, maybe six

OLIVIER ZAHM — New York is definitely a place for new identities.

SER SERPAS — Yeah. It's definitely a bubbling pot. [Laughs] For better or worse.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And if you don't speak about it and if a person like you doesn't embrace it...

SER SERPAS — Then what chance do these other girls have?

OLIVIER ZAHM — Because now you are becoming an example.

SER SERPAS — I feel that the work is also at a point

like, "Okay, that's never happening again." Next year is very open and clean, and there are no crazy work trips every other two weeks. But that also means I have to adapt the way I work because it can't be so site-specific all the time if I want to give myself a break, or I have to be more selective about the projects that I do. I'm just learning how to balance that out. And I'm 27, you know — I still have a lot of energy to go do these things, but even I was almost passing out in a hammam in Marrakech in March, and I was like, "Okay, I can't be going on crazy work trips followed by party trips, followed by other work trips and rehab trips."

OLIVIER ZAHM — And for you, New York is still a reference point? You belong to New York.

SER SERPAS — Absolutely. I love Paris. I will be going back and forth forever. But I'm excited to sign a lease here on my own place, hire a studio assistant.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And what would you say to anyone who claims that New York is dead, New York is too expensive for young artists, New York has no creativity?
SER SERPAS —

Having to think on your feet as a young person, not having everything so cut-and-dry, and actually really struggling

are pretty conducive to creative work in New York. I'm not saying that everybody is built for it and that New York is perfect. It's definitely not.

OLIVIER ZAHM — The struggle can stimulate creativity.

SER SERPAS — I'm still very simulated by it, even if I'm not struggling as much anymore with some things versus others.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Being an artist is a permanent struggle. That's what you were saying yesterday. You're never on vacation, even in Marrakech. [Laughs]

SER SERPAS — I couldn't work nine to five, so I just decided to work all the time.

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or seven years ago, were like: "We're just not gonna talk about it at all. We're going to do an embargo. We're not gonna deal with it. We're just gonna get bimbofied." Like, we can't be stealth. We've been on the Internet our whole lives. Everybody knows what we are. But we're just not gonna deal with it and try to work on what we're working on. And it functioned for maybe four years. I was on Fire Island this summer — it was a blast. I feel like I started to embrace myself a bit more. And then I meet these younger girls from the city, who are all trying to figure their shit out. They're modeling. They're going to college. They're broke, but they're fab, and they look really good, and they remind me of myself. But then, I want to be protective and be able to offer advice.

of change. I'm writing a script for a movie. It's set at my college actually, in 2013. It's not going to be an art film. It's going to be a standard horror movie. [Laughs] I feel a strong desire to try and throw myself into new media so that I can be more honest about other parts of my perspective. And a screenplay feels like a good entryway.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It's courageous because you don't capitalize on what you've already been recognized for. It's anti-capitalistic.

SER SERPAS — [Laughs] Well, it can't be totally anti-capitalistic. But yeah, there's definitely a point of change. I'm also trying to change the sculpture because I love traveling for work, but this last year, I had been living out of 10 hotels since February, and I was exhausted. I was