

HAUTE INTENSITÉ SER SERPAS

L'artiste américaine installée à Paris a connu une trajectoire fulgurante. Et sa récente exposition au Swiss Institute de New York ne fait que confirmer son talent de poète visuelle. Connue pour ses sculptures réalisées à partir de rebuts trouvés dans la rue, elle y présentait également ses puissantes peintures de corps. Chez elle, objets et éléments de la toile forment autant de mots qu'elle assemble en poèmes d'une intensité folle. Ses œuvres qui convoquent l'urgence, le désir et la contrainte seront présentées à la Bourse de commerce à la rentrée.

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Ser Serpas
“Haute Intensité”
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In 2017, Ser Serpas presented a performance at MoMA PS1. The artist, who today is known for her improbable contortions of the things we throw away, then a senior at Columbia University, was irritated by a suggestion made by her thesis advisors and classmates that would prove persistent in the years to come. As she describes it in a press release for a 2019 show at Truth and Consequences in Geneva, where she exhibited the physical remains of the PS1 performance in a darkened room, her work, already defined by an irrepressible kineticism, a threatening bodily elasticity, apparently did itself a disservice by denying the viewer access to the turbulence that marked its arrival into the world of form, the institution seemed to cry out to her in unsettling unison. They wanted her to appear in her work. They wanted her to render her body which tumbles household appliances into tattered furniture, hoists bookcases into baby’s car seats, and fists mattresses into the busted-in doors of gym lockers, somehow more available. Of course, Serpas, an artist whose most, and perhaps only, consistent commitment is to her own antagonism, did the exact opposite.

At PS1, she enlisted performers, situated throughout the audience, to fashion trash she provided them into small sculptures, according to a set of scores with loose, poetic instructions for them to follow. Live surveillance footage of the performers at work was projected onto the interior of the dome encasing the space in the “action” and “violence” of other people while Serpas watched from out of sight. The gesture was simple and angry, as is Serpas’s preferred method of engagement. In the heavily redacted and deeply personal text that accompanied the Truth and Consequences show, where these sculptures reappeared, she writes of the annoying and still incessant suggestion that occasioned her decision to begin removing herself from her work, “I was blanked, I was sure they wanted me to make blank work, or rather to just identify my work as blank work which they sometimes think is equally as good, and I was not having any of that. Enough blank artists were doing blank work.”

This fall, in Serpas’s first solo institutional exhibition in France, set to open at the Bourse De Commerce in September, sculptures again produced by performers following her written instructions will, for the first time since 2017, be substituted for her own manipulations of found objects. This time, she’s made the performers’ task more difficult, scaling up with scores that call



for much larger objects, the kind her own sculptures most frequently consist of. But now, she's decided the artworks generated by these experiments in procedural dislocation and creative dismemberment will be exhibited under veils of fabric. With the sculptures drowned in drapery, Serpas will impede the viewer's ingress: a blanketed stoppage, delay, or interruption of our vision intended both to attenuate and ambiguate the drama of the cloaked forms' hidden contours.

Only once before, for the Hammer Museum's 2020 edition of their biennial *Made In LA* entitled "A Version," curated by Lauren Mackler and Myriam Ben Salah, with Ikechukwu Onyewuenyi, has Serpas allowed material not modified by the force of her own hands to be displayed in an exhibition. Mounted in the thick of the pandemic, the artist was restricted by travel bans from leaving Switzerland, where she lived at the time, during the period assigned to her to install her piece for the show. She asked that the institution gather the materials for her sculptures as if in preparation for her presence. Laid out in a glossarial grid, refuse collected from around the exhibition site awaited Serpas's arrival. But, the artist never came. Like all of us during those months, her movement was circumscribed by the virus; however, Serpas maybe less accustomed to conceding her autonomy than most felt the only way to preserve her artistic freedom was to document the ways in which it had been restricted and managed.

With the sleek subversion, entitled "Potential Indefinite Performance, This That And Now Again," Serpas makes the decisive claim that the objects gathered are not her work, nor are they an artwork at all. Instead, they represent something like the promise of an artwork, perpetually unfulfilled, or the anticipation of one. The proposition similarly casts into relief the constitutive centrality of Serpas's body, of the plain, magnificent fact of her existence, or what she calls in the text that outlines the non-work her "discretion," through its absence. What projects like her PS1 performance, her forthcoming exhibition at the Bourse de Commerce, and her contribution to *Made In LA* illustrate is how urgency becomes for Serpas a kind of material. Lust, compulsion, whimsy, and impulse replace form and dislodge what we might call conceptual content, in the artist's triumphant recuperation of the contested political category of individual freedom, which here rediscovers its radicality and revels in its own problematization. Frustrating meaning out of what we discard, Serpas situates herself in the churning stomach bile of a civilization that went up in flames a long time ago. Like any good poet, she understands words as objects, as intensities, and in her writing she makes the burden of language both more



manageable and more pronounced. This logic extends to her treatment of matter: junk, music, fabric, the figure, and paint, which imagines itself in her work as a thick historical soot the artist can't quite wipe herself clean of.

The bathtubs, jacuzzis, toppled stools, and chairs laid bare that she braids into withered towers and recumbent statuary have assailed Serpas's practice with recurrent comparisons to Duchamp's corpus of recalcitrant nuts, bolts, bicycle wheels, and coffee grinders. A parallel not without its utility, but one that's often mishandled, privileging optical similarities rather than strategic affinities, a straightforwardly ridiculous thing to do when attending to the work of two artists with as distressed relationships to the activity of sight and the injunction of being seen as the young American and her French forbearer, and as such does a tremendous disservice to them both.

More than a century ago, Guillaume Apollinaire wrote of his friend "perhaps it will be the task of an artist as detached from aesthetic preoccupations and as intent on the energetic as Marcel Duchamp to reconcile art and the people." Serpas, on the other hand, appears anything but disinterested in viscosity, instead newly preoccupied with aesthetic detachment, rather than detached from aesthetic preoccupations, she insists we indulge in the forbidden pleasures of color, texture, and form. Producing artworks that have the vivacity and strangeness of people, Serpas, like a petulant god, knows that creation is at least half destruction.

In a book on the artist, Dawn Ades, Neil Cox, and David Hopkins explain Duchamp "posed basic questions concerning both the survival and definition of art in the 20th century. Merely to question, in a Darwinian spirit...whether art is an essential and timeless phenomenon and [if it is] in what new forms it might survive in the modern world." They continue, what skeptics once dismissed as "bad faith" recreant "iconoclasm" in Duchamp's work, punkish symptoms of the artist's seemingly endlessly metastatic ego, a preening self-importance that demanded critical censure, is motivated in actuality by a brutal, unflinching curiosity. An attitude Serpas shares. In dramatizing her own originality, she provokes in the viewer an unpleasant but necessary hesitancy, the slithering suspicion that we might have accepted our own dullness with a bit too much slack enthusiasm. With sculptures and paintings whose absurd, comical austerity attest to the artist's indifference towards authority, her bravado, and audacity, Serpas returns to us the secret hope that we are, or rather could be, special. She taunts us to disregard convention, to break the rules. Of course, assuming a task as challenging and monumental as this one involves a





degree of narcissism, but Serpas's narcissism is generous and expansive. In interviews, she often wonders aloud how much of her work is motivated by a desire to swindle the art world, but much like Duchamp, whose legacy has been as troubling and transformative for artists as it has for con men, even if Serpas is getting one over on us, with each new trick, she endows those with the fortune and misfortune of making art in her wake with a host of new possibilities. As the extraordinary Beatrice Wood once remarked in defense of Duchamp's infamous hoax, R. Mutt's fountain, "the only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges." Wood's observation isn't just an insult to the work of American artists, although it might be read as such, it's also a plea for intellectual flexibility, both a permission granted to us by Duchamp, via Wood, to acknowledge the incredible threat modernity poses to art, and a command that we must continue even as life becomes ever more sparse, scattered, and threadbare to ruthlessly scrutinize its immense totality for moments where art might emerge again. If a pissoir, or a bridge, can be made to retain some shred of the activity and singularity that has been scrubbed out of the human mind and spirit, why shouldn't we learn from its lessons? I'm reminded of a line by the poet Christian Mack, who writes, "most people don't have depth, just plumbing." Serpas, insatiable and uncompromising, demands both and more. Now, having already plundered pipes from cities all over the world, perhaps all that's left for the artist are our bridges.

It's of note, that just as ingrained into our image of Duchamp as his readymades themselves are the many photographs other artists captured of Duchamp's carefully selected mass-produced forms. Stieglitz's moody black-and-white study of Duchamp's industrial lavatorial dish looking askance from its perch on a skinny plinth is perhaps the best example of this. These images do more than document a sculpture, they relay a personage. In her most recent solo exhibition "Hall" at the Swiss Institute in New York City, she collaborated with the artist and photographer Rafik Griess on a series of sumptuous portraits, which capture Serpas wrestling artworks out of discarded rummage on the streets of Paris, where she currently resides. The pictures, which flirt with a nearly editorial sensuality, are the only existent residue of these sculptures which Serpas either disposed of or left where they were made for someone else to pick apart. None of the sculptures in the images appeared in the exhibition, nor did any of their components.

As a college student, Serpas worked briefly as a model, an experience that bored her. As seen through Griess's lens, Serpas's simultaneous discomfort with being photographed, and



striking ability to negotiate how her image is constructed from behind the camera, substantiate the picture's contention that representation can, and perhaps must contain a certain self-conscious ambivalence. This idea suffuses her paintings, which populate her Swiss Institute show and will be featured in her upcoming exhibition at the Bourse De Commerce. Following an inverted trajectory of the conceptual master, who early in his life renounced the brush, Serpas began painting only recently. Her rich desecrations of oil, primarily on unstretched jute, or wood panels, depict passages of distended ligature, swollen limbs, and concave torsos sourced from iPhone images of past lovers or before-and-after pictures from cosmetic surgeries. The paintings echo the formal concerns that animate her sculptures: collision, exertion, and disfiguration, in summary, the possibilities and limitations of the body. More directly, they are proof of an artist intent on simply doing whatever the fuck she wants. Within a matter of only a few years Serpas, habitually exhausted by repetition, found herself increasingly disinterested in making the work that earned her her early success. She turned to a tradition that perhaps no one could foresee would interest an artist who had proved herself so stubborn, itinerant, and chaotic, and yet she has launched herself into painting with utter disregard for what the medium has to come to connote, a dogged determination to resist her calcification, and most impressively an unconditional willingness to fail.

In her most recent presentation, an exhibition at the Acacias Art Center in Paris featuring artists nominated for the Reiffers Art Initiatives Prize, Serpas returns to poetry, where her identity as an artist was first formed. In the installation, a mottled patchwork of lexemic fragments transferred unto the walls, Serpas subjects discarded bits of language to renewed material scrutiny. Lace curtains, left balled up in the corners of the space, interrupt the registration of meaning from Serpas's brush to the interior, rendering much of the phrases unavailable and diffuse, anemic and bastardized. Serpas, whose interests as a sculptor can be reduced to something like the syntax and grammar of things, seeks out the practical limit of language, the threshold of legibility. Like much of her work, the installation is vulgar and brute, it situates itself in the long shadow of empiricism and yet relies internally on a simple mathematical structure, and finally, even in its divergence from the pursuits that have come to stand in for the remit of her work as an artist, it foreshadows where the young American might go, where she might bring us.





