

## Ser Serpas' Restless, Infinite Art By Harry Tafoya

It's early afternoon on a Friday and, against all odds, I've found myself in the bowels of the Ladyboy Ketamine Dungeon.

I'd arrived to visit Ser Serpas off the back of a canceled studio visit, when for various reasons (hangovers), the two of us decided to meet at the artist's home rather than at her workplace. Upon entry, she immediately handed me a beer, before we sank into a couch and cycled down a YouTube vortex: from *Gummo* to *Veneno* to "Let's talk: Gatekeeping and Racism within Norse Paganism." Her apartment is big and empty, but not in a minimalist or pretentious or slobby sort of way. If anything, it reminded me of models I've known, where the transition from living in a suitcase to an apartment comes gradually. Serpas had relocated back to New York after long stints abroad with a mind to settle down in one place, but she was still clearly coming down from the other side of a marathon workload and taking a moment to really feel out her space.

I had previously seen the "Ladyboy Ketamine Dungeon" posted about on social media. This tiny chamber, really just an alcove off the side of Serpas' bedroom, is equal parts cozy and brutal, draped in out-of-season Christmas lights and fitted with vintage leather gym mats as rigidly ergonomic as slabs of rock. Like everything in the artist's apartment, the nook is spare but stylish, flung together but funnily composed. A good place for scheming, a better place for dissociating. Moreover, it's a never-ending work in progress, and a slightly haunted one at that. "I re-feng shui'd the upstairs, but now I'm having sleep paralysis," she would confide over text a few weeks later. The next step would be to sage the place down, although even with those spirits exorcized, it's not clear whether it would be enough to allow the artist a chance to rest.

In person, Serpas is breezy and personable, fond of punctuating her thoughts by tossing back her long, glossy hair and exclaiming "well, yes" with an effortless Tokyo Toni lilt. But her outgoing cool is at striking odds with the art she creates. Scratch beneath the surface and you get the feeling that her air of calm is illusory, the way fast-moving objects can appear eerily still to the naked eye. Restlessness is the common theme of Serpas' diverse body of work, which has spanned everything from painting to photography, poetry to performance. The signature style she's developed is highly gestural: somewhere between an active crime scene and a condemned slaughterhouse. But to focus on the frenzy of her mark-making is to miss out on the larger picture. Every move Serpas makes is intentional, with each step building out an elaborate, improvised choreography that unites the myriad strands of her artistry. Photographs become paintings that create drippings that become fabric pieces that become sculptures. Her final stroke is to junk her work altogether and begin again from scratch. In this way, the piece you're taking in is constantly on the verge of transformation and collapse, from art to garbage to something else entirely.



The instability of Serpas' work is thrilling to behold, not least because gravity is the only thing keeping it from collapsing altogether. Serpas is best known for her sculpture, which she creates by pounding the pavement in search of interesting-looking garbage to arrange and assemble into hulking, ominous compositions. In this respect, the woman is absolutely fearless: risking bed bugs and nice manicures to haul everything from furniture to scrap metal across all five of NYC's boroughs. A good fumigator is central to her practice. A piece of what appeared to be loose scaffolding that she'd originally sourced for the Whitney was returned back and labeled a biohazard for its patina of crusted bird shit. Last I checked, it remained sealed off in plastic at the far end of the artist's studio.

It's to Serpas' credit that her own twisted vision rises above and beyond the gimmick/gnarliness of simply reappropriating junk off the street. She has a forceful sense for how her work can disorient her viewer, maxing out the floorspace so that we are either dwarfed by the art or forced to skirt cautiously around it. Sometimes she'll disregard her audience altogether, like she did for her recent exhibition at Fondation Pinault, where she performed a DJ set for the artwork, her back to a packed crowd.

Her piece *taken through back entrances...* (2024) stands heads and shoulders above most of the work at this year's Whitney Biennial. Commanding the entire first floor gallery, Serpas populates the space with heaps of found debris over unstretched canvas littered with scuff marks and stray paint from her studio. These moldy-looking paintings give a ground floor for her sculptures, which are distinctive enough on their own to feel oddly personified. The spindly metal legs of a canopy balancing a yoga ball resembles some kind of mutant, post-industrial spider, while an upturned exercise machine is lent an aura of queeniness by the disco ball stacked on top of it. A torn-up old couch draped in a tattered American flag reveals the exhibition to be a portrait of the country in ruins. But unlike other sculptors who she might at first resemble like Cady Noland or Judith Scott, the tone of Serpas' art isn't nearly as bleak or despairing. Her practice is all about accepting the tools at her disposal and the near infinite ways that she can recreate and destroy without ever having to settle.

*PAPER* sat down with Serpas to discuss dead-ends, creation through destruction, Vampire Weekend and plenty more.



**You are in the midst of looking for a new place and you constantly seem like you're in the process of moving. Have nesting and homemaking become a new part of your practice?**

I'm realizing now that I do just have to keep moving. I tried it for a bit, and I cannot domesticate myself. So now I'm like: It's still okay to have little projects, in terms of nesting and setting up my home, but it's maybe not conducive to the way that I work. I think I do need an imposed lack of structure in order to produce what I've been able to. I have a good setup, but I haven't really been able to work in the way that I want to or need to recently.

**I remember for a while your studio actually was your project for a while, like you were redoing the floors and the ceilings or whatever.**

Yeah, I got a little stuck in that kind of build up and now I need to just kind of go off. But that's the nature of doing my own admin and worrying about lack of storage options. It's all at a bit of a standstill right now.

**Which is insane to me because you constantly seem to have big shows popping off...**

I'm supposed to submit a proposal for an exhibition at the Kunsthalle Basel right now. I guess I could just copy and paste the idea that I had, but another part of me is just like, *I just want to make like, 50 sculptures and do nothing else*. Some people would be like "That's fab," but I think now I'm kind of like, "Well where'd the production value go?"

**Is it important for you to level up?**

It feels like now's the time where [people ask], "Where's the A/V equipment? Like the green screen?" Maybe it's me reading the room a bit in terms of what other artists do around this time [in their career], which is to really scale up their capability and what they can do with institutional support. Like, what am I going to make float in the air? What am I going to do for percussion? Maybe it should just be like a back-to-basics, some good sculptures — I don't know! I'll get past this hump. I feel like the settling that I've tried to do in the last few months maybe just exposed more of what doesn't work than what does work.

**I'm curious about the chicken-or-the-egg scenario here. You have these random things that you pick up for your sculptures, and those help dictate what the shape of the work will be. But it also seems like you are very good about creating scenarios for an audience to interact with, and I'm curious— which one comes first? Does it take a second for you to work with the materials before you can build a story around it? Or do you have a scenario in mind with how you want to kind of direct the audience?**

Okay, so it has happened that objects come first. I'm sure if I built up and collected 200 objects in Basel, clear narratives would spring up for me in the build-up. But then, institutionally, would they be comfortable with me going in and saying, "I'm going to make a sculpture show but I don't know what it is until I make it"? They probably would not like that. Maybe I could get away with it, but I would like that kind of freedom in an institutional setting. Would I get it? I don't know, but I want to try.

**So to play the game of making shows, you have to give a kind of—**

I have to give a narrative that feels enticing to institutional curators. That's the only way to kind of get in the door and then allow for something else to happen in the process.

**How do you feel about that trade-off? It seems like you're someone who works so deeply in the moment.**

It makes me want to do three gallery shows next year just so I can do what I want. There's so many things that happen at the institutional level that most artists are just happy to [go along with] because they get that access, but then you risk making a bad show if 90% of it is according to institutional guidelines and is supposed to happen before you're even in the fucking room.



**If you had the opportunity to have unlimited access to any kind of junk to make work, do you know what you would pick? Like, Kara Walker had that deal at Domino Sugar Factory and she got as much fucking sugar as she wanted to make work.**

Oh, yeah, I would get every piece of excess furniture from Columbia University. Period. Like give me every excess bookcase, dorm room bed, desks. You know I would take all of that stuff. And make my Vampire Weekend show.

**Lol! What would that involve?**

I just want them to basically record an EP or something while I work in another room.

**I just love this idea of you forcing these white boys to work for you, that's a very twisted approach to being preppy.**

Well yes, it's like, "Play That Funky Music White Boy: The Show"

**That's gorgeous. How was the experience of getting the Whitney? How did you feel?**

How did I feel? You know, I was like, *This is correct*. No, I'm kidding. I had the first studio visit with them like I was cracked out on Fire Island — well no, this was like a very healthy morning on Fire Island — I woke up, did Pilates, had fruit, prepared for my daily intake of a gram of K on the beach and had a very productive day.

I had a studio visit with the curators where we talked about everything and then we had maybe one more call after that, but it wasn't a long call. I was just asking about specs and then I was invited. It felt like one of the easiest buildups and probably the most time I've spent in terms of collecting. It felt very focused. But I did bring in one tarp wet and I was worried that I fucked up the floors irreparably. But they were very cool.



**What was that thing that got returned that had the bird shit on it?**

Oh, that was a [urinal] trough that was thrown out on the side of the train tracks at the edge of Williamsburg-slash-Bushwick that was covered in bird shit. And then they were both wrapped up in plastic and labeled "Bird Poop. Serpas. Send Away." They were like, "We have to return these to your studio," and I was like...*well, no.*

**You said something interesting about the fact that fucking up the material was a good way of getting your aggression out. Could you talk about that a little more?**

I've been thinking about that, too. I've been wanting to do this for a while — what if I just collected like 200 objects and I curb-stomped them into the walls of the space? And did just these be beautiful, like murals [made of marks] and then took the battered objects into the center and made beautiful sculptures with them?

And you know and I do this all the time. I'm breaking things in half that I found when they were together, but people don't know, because they're not in the room with me. It's definitely a big release. But in addition to being a release, that usually allows a bit more fluidity that I didn't even know could come out of the object and that can allow for a better piece to come out of it. I'm really more and more enthused about the thought of being able to do something that's just about the objects for the first time in a while.

**Where is that aggression coming from?**

Oh, yeah. Where's that aggression? Well, I'm a very frustrated person. There's definitely some libidinal energy in there. I think it's the same place that a lot of the images and the paintings come from. I'm very frustrated, I'm dealing with it in therapy as well.

**But like, at what point does a creative strategy become a dead end for you? Like, at what point do you give up on a particular approach?**

I want what I'm doing to feel special and singular, and the moment where it starts to feel like either I've lost my touch or it looks like other people's efforts in a similar medium, I lose interest a little bit. Because what would it take for me to try to make something that would feel like my own again? And maybe that's a little selfish, because I think a lot of great artists want to make things that they feel are in pretty direct conversation with other artists that they admire, that they've studied, etc. I mean, now I would say I definitely know more about art-making and other artists.

**People love when you put yourself into a lineage that's very unambiguous. But also, they really kind of love to max out on identity at the same time as well, too and it seems like you've had a pretty intense conviction that you're not going to put yourself into the position of over-emphasizing your identity. But I'm curious: is it tempting?**

You know, it is tempting, in the same way that like: Do I want to get invited to every kind of Art Basel VIP-whatever for the rest of my life? Or, do I want to hobnob? I know there are certain kinds of demands necessary to be near the very center of the art world, definitely more glam than the section of the art world that I fit into and I'm very happy with that. You know? I'd rather shotgun a beer than be showered with champagne.