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ART

Ser Serpas' uncanny lens on the world

The artist's multimedia new show presents work from the 10 years since she left LA.

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Ser Serpas' Hall shows an artist flexing her muscles across several media while upholding a key principle of conceptual art. What we see in the gallery is a byproduct, a latent artefact of processes which themselves represent the creator's artistic vision. A shattered wall lies in the middle of the gallery, a remnant of a previous exhibition at the Swiss Institute. VHS stills and photographs show Ser collecting garbage for her sculptures, which are then remade in 10, 15 different ways before being settled. It's a practice that calls into question ideas of artistic form and finality, a "funhouse" of alteration and restlessness, Ser says.

The LA-born artist's paintings show ink leaking across skin, or a greyed figure holding a dress against their torso. They are figurative but also formal exercises: Ser paints from photographs she took at art school, allowing her to "stretch out the ligaments and make these uncanny compositions." The paintings and pictures look down on reams of Ser's notes, frenetic line sketches and journal entries, another insight into her process. Here she talks to i-D about films, farce, and wandering the streets of Paris looking for garbage.



Ser Serpas, *Untitled*, 2022. Courtesy the artist and Maxwell Graham, New York

Can you start by telling us about this exhibition?

For this show, what I'm doing is building up a toolkit — seeing what I can do in various mediums. On the one hand, anyone could do what I'm doing with sculpture. But now people say to me, 'When you make a sculpture, it looks like yours.' That's hard to do with garbage. And I think, 'Yeah, that took a lot of chances and invitations to get to a point where I have a language.' Now I've gotten to a point where that visual language is recognisable.

There's also a photo collaboration with Rafik Greiss, who's a great friend of mine and gallery mate here in Paris. The collaboration captures the performative way of making sculpture that's been built up in tandem with the sculpture itself. So every time I go around a city, there's a protocol to the making process. It's not super strict, but it might be that we go around the city for a few days; collect objects with an art handler or a gallery assistant, then we put whatever we've collected in the space. There's a certain level of choreography even to that; I feel that's well captured in the show. The photographs are the only time that I've documented this making process. But being able to do a photoshoot around collecting and creating my sculpture works is still a bit of a farce.



Untitled by Rafik Greiss and Ser Serpas 2022 courtesy of the artist and Balice Hertling, Paris

You've also spoken about how the show is influenced by your research and ideas around film — can you tell us about that?

This show captures my huge urge to make films; there's a lot in here that feels like a storyboard for something. I want to stage elaborate scenarios with a few different practices involved. I'm writing a film now, which I've been toying with for two years — a horror movie that I want to direct myself. Other artists I admire are doing the same: Amalia Ulman, Martine Syms and Andrew Norman Wilson especially.

I also know that I want to extract as much material from the making of this film that can be discrete art objects themselves. BTS polaroids that I can show in an art context, for example. Drawings on the script pages or the edits of the script as art objects. Film as a medium has that opportunity to break out of a white box gallery space. Amalia Ulman's *El Planeta* is on HBO Max right now, for example. A lot of people are able to consume that work not in the confines of an institution or gallery.



Ser Serpas, Untitled, 2022 courtesy of the artist and Balice Hertling, Paris

The language used to describe your work – found objects, assemblage – tend to refer to your material rather than conceptual decision-making. Do you view your process as one of discovery or transformation?

It varies. With sculpture, I consider what people go to see as the aftermath of a very choreographed performance in the gallery. The works are remnants or artefacts of that – and themselves are less important than what went on in the physical space. I'm still trying to wrap my head around what it means when these performance remnants are crated up and re-installed somewhere else, and often not by me. For me, that's not really my work. In the gallery, I'll make a sculpture ten different times over, and the final way that I leave it is what it is. But there were four other assortments of what it could have been. They just get lost. That's the work.



Ser Serpas, *Untitled*, 2022 courtesy of the artist and Balice Hertling, Paris

It sounds as though you work in quite a momentary, fragmentary manner. What does this mean for your photography?

The way I first thought about the project was wanting to capture both the sculptures and myself within the lens of editorial fashion photography. When I was younger – and more androgynous and a lot skinnier – I used to do modelling. A lot of my friends at school in New York were also models; most of my friends still work in fashion. That process made me realise that I'm not that comfortable in front of the camera. I realised how women artists' images are treated -- on the front of artist monographs, for example. I realised that I needed to completely hide myself. I reframed it as my sculptures being subjects of fashion photography on the streets of Paris. I'm going to work with anonymous objects on the street, do this private performance that nobody sees, and then sell people the artefacts that aren't the work.



Ser Serpas, *Untitled*, 2022 courtesy of the artist and Balice Hertling, Paris

And what about the paintings -- they're a relatively new feature of your work.

Hannah Black, my studio mate in New York, saw that I was struggling with painting and suggested that I work with images that I could look at for a long time. I went back to the photos I had taken in college -- most of them for, like, a weird Tumblr page. There are photographs of me, friends, people I was seeing or sleeping with. They'd be moody -- smoking a cigarette or holding up a dress in good lighting. I had a lot of material that was pretty base-less, marker-less, which is what artists mostly photograph. I used those images and painted 18 of those pretty steadily, which felt cool. The project ended up becoming me learning how to paint skin. I liked how gloomy the paintings were. I would also use tricks: painting a portrait of an iPhone photo on a landscape piece of wood or canvas. That would make me actively have to stretch out the ligaments and make these uncanny compositions. That felt better than copying a photograph using one-to-one scaling.



Ser Serpas, Untitled, 2022 courtesy of the artist and Balice Hertling, Paris

There's a lot of humour in the work -- do you think people recognise that enough?

The show is the most personal and biographical that I've done, while having a lot of farce and lying in it too. If you try to make work about yourself or your own experience, there's going to be a lot of lies in it. I wanted this to be a very generous show. I've had a lot of friends say that this is a really funny show; that's definitely a reading that I want. But then it can also be seen as a weird kind of structure for a coming-of-age film. It's pretty on the nose, but I'm very happy. It's a funhouse setting — a Halloween maze-style thing for friends.

'SER SERPAS: HALL' is on show until 23 April 2023 at Swiss Institute



Ser Serpas, Untitled, 2022 courtesy of the artist and Balice Hertling, Paris