

Interview



This past spring, in her Long Island City studio, Andra Ursuta was building rooms. The four one-and-a-half-foot-tall models she created replicate specific quarters of her now-demolished family home in the small town of Salonta in northwest Romania. But unlike many artists who mine their childhoods as a form of nostalgia or self-mythology, 33-year-old Ursuta's highly detailed dioramas look like despairing anti-dollhouses, crime scenes waiting to happen, or even apotropaic, witchlike spells to fend off romantic memories. There has always been a thrilling and unnerving sense of destruction and metonymy in Ursuta's sculptures and installations—recent works have included marble gravestones outside at Frieze New York, as if to mourn extinct species of contemporary art, and a giant marble nose placed in a wheelbarrow on the High Line like the inverse surviving element of classical statuary. And perhaps most exceptionally, she doesn't steer away from using her own personal history—whether the damaged psychology of her native country or her own body, which is often the source of her cast pieces—to ignite her mixed-media productions. Even when human figures aren't present, there is a constant sense of the human body entwining with the industrial materials. Ursuta walks a line between politics, aesthetics, and open-ended possibilities to brilliant effect. And in what often feels like a passive, empty-gestured field of young New York artists, there is an urgency and risk to her work, even when she's building small, loaded anthems to her dark days as a kid in a salami-manufacturing town under a Communist dictatorship.

Ursuta's chamber models will appear this month at the Venice Biennale. We met up for lunch shortly after she sent them on their way.

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN: You've built something of an art cemetery on Randall's Island for Frieze.

ANDRA URSUTA: Yeah, it's kind of a buzz kill for an art fair. There are six black marble slabs that are tombstones with carvings of the icon you find online when you do an image search and the image is no longer there.

BOLLEN: Right, like a page cut in half.

URSUTA: Yeah. Part of it has something to do with all of the art that was made and has been forgotten.

BOLLEN: I think about that often. I don't think people realize how fleeting most of the artwork circling around right now is. Most art is not permanent; it will disappear. The artist will be forgotten. The collectors and galleries will move on.

URSUTA: Art fairs operate on this premise that value increases in time, and that's impossible because there's too much art around. So, yes, I think a good amount of the stuff at art fairs ends up forgotten. No one will look at it again.

BOLLEN: I don't want to pin you down as a political artist, but in a time when most young artists in New York are concerned with very conceptual or formalist strategies—two very safe bets these days for instant success—your work stands out. You use your body, your Romanian background, even the house you grew up in. It's an entirely different track.

URSUTA: Well, I envy them. I would like to do some of that kind of work, but I come from a country that doesn't have a very long tradition of fine art. The known Romanian artists really became recognized abroad. So it would be silly for me to suddenly be a minimalist. My family doesn't even know what art is. They have absolutely no use for it. And I think that's fine, actually.

BOLLEN: You grew up in a small town in Romania. Was there any art around at all when you were growing up? Even in books?

URSUTA: My parents had a couple of books about painters. There might have been a Michelangelo book and an Ingres. I mostly looked at history books because my father was a history teacher. For some reason, I really did want to become a painter.

BOLLEN: When you came to New York for college, were you still interested in being a painter?

URSUTA: It took me a while to accommodate to living in the States. I spent my last year in high school in Florida as an exchange student. I remember one of my teachers from high school knew Marilyn Minter, and on my first trip to New York, my teacher told me to show her my slides. This was about 1997. I went to her apartment, somewhere around SoHo, but I had never used a buzzer before, so I just pressed it and didn't take my finger off. For minutes! [laughs]

BOLLEN: Marilyn Minter must have been pissed. "Who the hell does this girl think she is?"

URSUTA: Yeah. Everything went downhill from there. I don't think she liked my work either, but really I think the buzzer just killed it. But even when I came to school in New York, I was still not used to America. It was a bit of a lost phase for me.



BOLLEN: What I think is interesting is that most people use the opportunity of moving to New York to reinvent themselves as well as the subject of their work. I think you could have just suddenly decided that you were a minimalist. But you held on to so many Romanian influences.

URSUTA: For some pieces ... But also, I could not make this work if I lived in Romania, so I'm not really a Romanian artist either. But it became clear to me after school that I was not going to be a painter.

BOLLEN: Why did you feel you didn't have the talent for painting?

URSUTA: There were a lot of reasons. I just wasn't mature enough, and painting is too depressing. If you're really honest with yourself and your work, you can't really be a painter. So instead, I had all these shitty jobs. Then I did a clothing line and made costumes and joined a band.



BOLLEN: You were in Gogol Bordello for a while. What was your part?

URSUTA: A really embarrassing part. I was one of the two girls they had performing these dance and theater routines. And I sang a little bit and made costumes, but it was really just about being a chick from Eastern Europe running around in shorts! Which is also why I stopped. [laughs] Then I worked as a carpenter. And then I started to make furniture for my house, and then sculptures. But I didn't know that was what I was aiming for. I wasn't even keeping up with what was going on in the art world—I didn't go to openings. I still feel that gallery openings aren't the best way to look at art.

BOLLEN: Maybe that's why you have such a knack for creative installations, like shattering the front window for your 2012 show, "Magical Terrorism."

URSUTA: I think that came from my relationship with Ramiken. When I first met Mike [Ursuta, Andra's husband and Ramiken gallerist], Ramiken was in a basement full of rats on Clinton Street. It was the most amazing space I'd ever seen. And Mike really pushed everyone not to take the gallery space for granted as a neutral space that immediately makes everything you put in it "art." And I believe in that. I think art is too dependent on this structure. It's almost like art is a sick man that needs life