

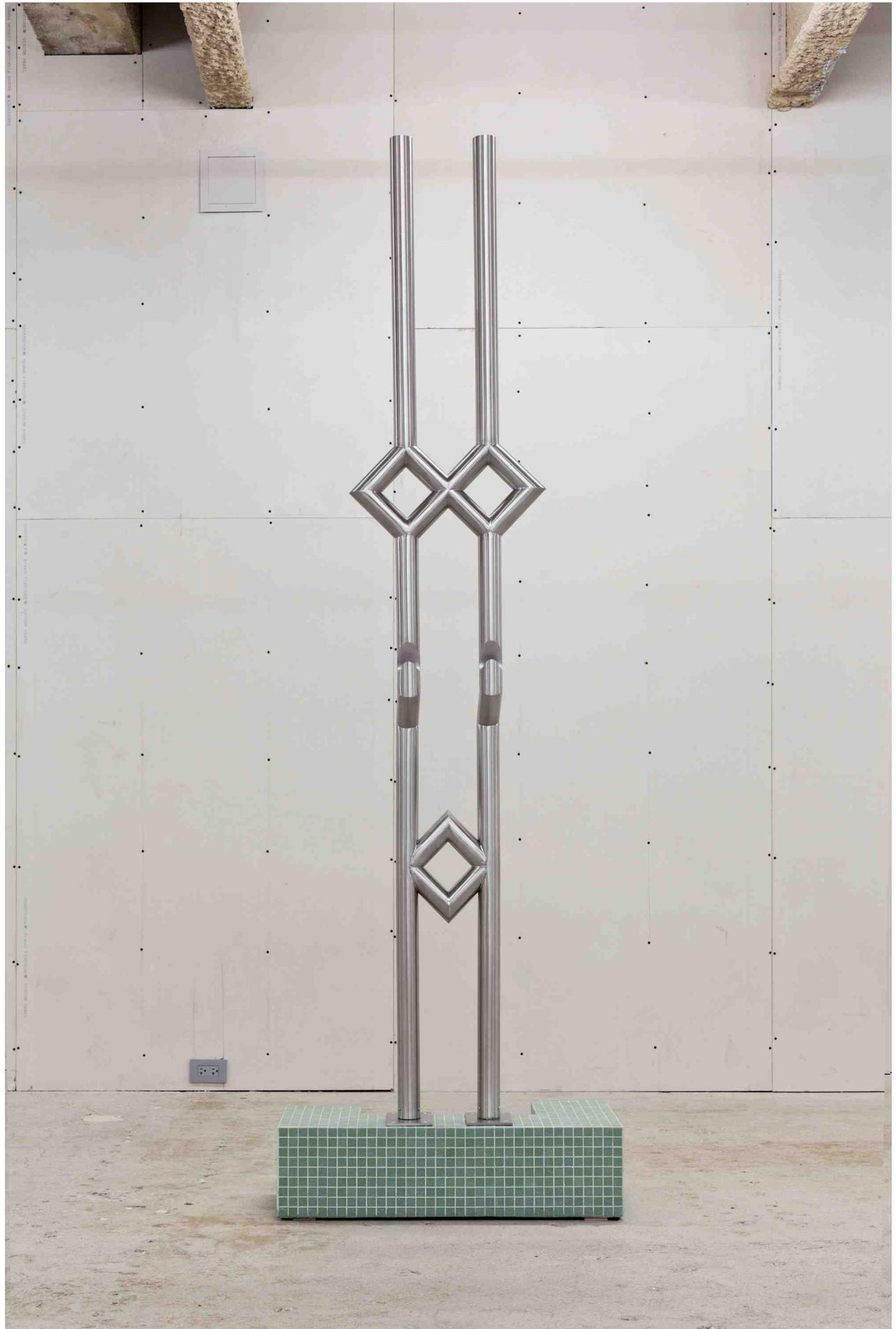
KALEIDOSCOPE

ANDRA URSUTA

words by Joanna Fiduccia



Never say Andra Ursuta didn't pay homage to her forerunners. Ten feet tall and coated in black rubber like some improbable sex toy, *Ass to Mouth* (2010) is a double tribute: a scale model of Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column* (1918/1935) whittled to a spike fit for Romania's notoriously ferocious ruler, Vlad the Impaler. They might make an odd couple—Vlad, who defended Christian lands through the indiscriminate slaughter of Turks, and Brancusi, peasant-steward of modernist sculpture—but they provide a fairly direct parentage for Ursuta's unsparing sculpture. Brancusi both is and is not the most obvious target for Ursuta's aggression. Besides Vlad, he is one of the few Romanians of repute, and on the docket of Romanian sculptors you might know about, Ursuta has only him for a companion—Brancusi, with his impressive beard and his peasant shirts, his adzes and his files, posed unsmilingly next to his dove-white dog around some of the most significant sculptures in the history of modern art. For all his overripe peasant attitudes, Brancusi transformed the medium: by absorbing the pedestal into the sculpture, thus eradicating the boundary between viewer and artwork, and by fusing an abstract, industrial aesthetic to a craftsman's ethic. Ursuta, who was born in Salonta, Romania, in 1979 and moved to the United States in 1997, comes out of this tradition. Her work insists on handmade production, even as it readily incorporates cardboard, concrete, resin, tape and trash. Yet if her background enters her work, and it often does, it is not by way of folk artistry, but through bleak childhood memories or through media imagery of Central Europeans, which alternates between exoticizing the old world and decrying its archaic practices. And though her work is equally committed to annihilating sculpture's distance from our world, it does so uncompromisingly, without a trace of Brancusi's transcendent impulses.





Consider Brancusi's gleaming and sexless *Torso of a Young Man* (1917-1922), whose polished bronze cylinders, joined in the form of an inverted Y, transpose the phallus onto the whole structure: torso as phallus, erected on its pedestal. Ursuta's riff, *Dumb Belles* (2013), is a series of tall, stainless steel poles, crooked and jointed to suggest a crude geometry of sex parts. A sister series, presented at Art Basel Miami Beach, includes discreet coin slots with very explicit placements. Forget blithe cynicism about the "cheap tricks" of an art fair; the severe economy of these works collapses the sale of sex and the act of penetration in one bathetic gesture, and leaves no remainder. So much for the dazzle of *Torso*, and all the fervid buffing that made it beam.

Pocket change, in fact, has made a frequent appearance in Ursuta's work. In her exhibition last fall at Ramiken Crucible, "Magical Terrorism," Ursuta showed cast concrete torsos wearing neckpieces composed of several strands of coins. The primitivizing forms of these torsos, with their simplified trunks and downward-pointing breasts, gesture toward modernism's enthusiasm for non-Western statuary, while the neckpieces suggest millennia-old practices of using jewelry to collect and transport wealth. Yet their title, *Conversion Table*, insists on the works' topicality. The three currencies on the neckpieces—euros, US dollars, and Romanian bani—present conversion rates between the specie, turning the female torsos into tools for a transnational market. The trade of women, after all, lies at the foundation of a general theory of

exchange, as Claude Lévi-Strauss observed half a century ago, and results in a power asymmetry that has never been rectified.

Near these torsos stood imposing marble statues, wearing nylon vests festooned with pennies and coins, which were modeled after a news photograph of a Romanian gypsy woman awaiting deportation. Titled *Commerce Extérieur Mondial Sentimental* (2012), like a series of tags below a news brief, they pointedly telescope the exchange of women's bodies over borders into the oldest forms of woman-swapping. Their proud posture, however, recalls another news story, one that provided the exhibition's title: the protest, in the form of a curse, cast by Gypsy women on the Romanian government following its decision to make witchcraft a taxable profession. Despite the evidence of destructive might in the exhibition—the gallery's windows had been blown out, and a wall driven down by a crusty silver tank—the insistent presence of the vests seemed to call out the futility of resisting the monetization of this final bastion of female power.

Given statements like these, it may seem mystifying that the artist's work has been called anti-feminist. The artwork such detractors have in mind is probably "Waiting Room," a large series of resin stools that Ursuta has been producing for a couple years, cast in the form of her backside. When installed as a group, they proffer themselves to the viewer like a gaggle of Callipyges. Though identical in form, each has been swashed or sprayed with colors that run down its sides like so many unique defilements. Ursuta's use of her own body places her in a lineage of artists like Hannah Wilke and Lynda Benglis in her infamous *Artforum* ad, whose self-objectification has not sat easily with feminist critics. The question posed by these works is still a live one, as Ursuta's ass-stools make abundantly clear: can self-objectification work apotropaically, can it achieve power by seizing the conventions used to subdue it? Or will it merely reproduce the structures of subjugation, thus making itself over as an illustration of failure, one of Ursuta's choice motifs? The image-as-capital is above all the pornographic image; it is hardly surprising that its apotheosis should occur on women's bodies.

In a sculptural tradition that produces works no less absurd than Brancusi's *Princesse X* (1915–1916), the most phallic bust to have ever been dreamt, Ursuta's ass-stools are forceful dissenters. They do not seek to raise the female body to the status of the phallic ur-signifier. Rather, they put the ass where the ass goes. They will neither reject the formal pleasures of color and texture, nor use form to transcend the body. That messy, socially and economically implicated body.

Yet this is not where Ursuta leaves us, with a refusal to transcend and an acerbic adherence to a feminist lesson still not learned. The centerpiece of her most recent exhibition "Solitary Fitness" at *Venus Over Manhattan* is a baseball-pitching machine that rockets resin stones at a tiled wall forty feet away. Locks of hair spill out between the bruise-colored and badly pummeled tiles. Like "Magical Terrorism," the work has one foot in media portrayals of a primitive "non-West"—a YouTube video of the barbaric stoning of a woman—and another in systematic forms of control—in this case, the prison system evoked by the eponymous publication, a fanatical manual on body conditioning written by the notorious British inmate Charles Bronson. It may be Ursuta's most unambiguous work; it is certainly her most violent. However alongside a recent spate of macho art spectacle—such as Arcangelo Sassolino's nitrogen-powered bottle-launcher *Afasia 1* (2008), which pulverized the bottles on a far free-standing wall—Ursuta's unconcealed message comes as a necessary corrective that extends beyond the developments of western sculpture: where both exchange and violence go unregulated, women are still the ones to pay for it. (Joanna Fiduccia)