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2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021

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Scott Indrisek, "Kick It, Push It," *Modern Painters*, November, 2014.

MODERN PAINTERS

INTRODUCING // BRIE RUAIS

Kick It, Push It

A sculptor gets physical with clay

BY SCOTT INDRISEK

BRIE RUAIS HAS a practice animated by action verbs: kicking, cutting, folding, cinching, stretching, pushing, pleating. Her ceramic sculptures bear countless finger- and footprints, the tangible result of how the artist physically manipulates the clay, often using different-colored stains or finishing the pieces with a glaze that gives them a quasi-futuristic metallic patina. "I don't fuss," says the artist of her process, which she likens to a form of earth art, albeit one that takes place in her studio. "There's this sweaty, hazy moment where it's just me and the material, and I'm not thinking about the form or what it looks like." In order to rein in the limitlessness of spontaneous gesture, Ruais gives herself rules for each piece. That generally means a basic shape, form, or action—removing the center of a rectangle, for example, or pushing clay up the wall—and a set amount of material, reflective of her own body weight.

Ruais came to ceramics by making vases and other vessels; she still makes these smaller pieces, dubbed Affirmation Pots—lumpy and awkward containers covered with cheekily uplifting text ("Good choice" or "Lucky you"). A period of frustration in grad school at Columbia led her to a larger ceramic sculpture, called *The Big Push*, for which she "had this nonsensical desire to shove and spread the clay up the wall as far as I could." Since then, Ruais's methods have been intensely physical—she cites forebears like Kate Gilmore and Ana Mendieta, along with ceramicists Betty Woodman, Arlene Shechet, and Jessica Jackson Hutchins. But her work also has much in common with Bruce Nauman's early explorations of his body in the studio, as well as the rule-based drawing practice of Sol LeWitt.

In late August there were several finished works in her Sunset Park, Brooklyn, studio, all of them destined for a show at Galerie Lefebvre & Fils in Paris, on view through December 20. (The exhibition is titled "Dugout," a reflection of Ruais's recent interest in tunneling and mining, as well as the phrase's application to baseball, where "the term for the thing is literally describing



ABOVE:
Torn Hole,
132lbs (Blue),
2014.
Glazed and
pigmented
ceramic with
hardware,
63 x 61 x 4 in.

OPPOSITE
PAGE LEFT:
Ruais in her
Brooklyn studio
with the two-
part sculpture
Area Whole,
300lbs, 2014.

Corner
Push, 132lbs
(Metallic),
2014.
Glazed
ceramic with
hardware,
75 x 16 1/2 x 16 in.

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the action used to make it.") The largest sculpture is in two parts: a rectangle on the wall, its dimensions roughly modeled on an average area rug, with a circle of clay removed from its center and placed on the floor. The piece is composed of around 300 pounds of clay, which is the combined weight of Ruais and her boyfriend. She started with blobs of different-colored clay, which she then flattened and massaged into shape.

Tonally, Ruais is generally nodding backward a few decades—"I look at Lee Krasner's paintings and Abstract Expressionism for colors"—though the gestural marks themselves are unplanned, simply the result of what is required to push the individual masses of clay together into the desired shape. Before it's fired, the entire piece is cut into small, square sections—simultaneously a technical and an aesthetic choice. The segmentation was "guided by logistics but evolved into having its own function, its own meaning, which relates back to the body and how we measure space," she says. "The piece is made in a very spontaneous way, and then the grid itself imposes a certain amount of control over it."

In the corner of Ruais's studio, there's another new work, *Corner Push*, 132lbs (Metallic), made by kicking clay while wearing hiking boots—and then kneeling it and manhandling it—as high up the wall as she can. It's finished with metallic glaze, making it a less biomorphic, less bloblike cousin to certain pieces made by Lynda Benglis in the 1960s and '70s. "It has a molten surface," the artist says, "which is what I like: It recalls the history of the material, which used to be soft." Other works pair that *Terminator*-like sheen with the rawness of unadorned terra-cotta. For "Dugout," the emphasis is on excavations: cavities, holes, absences at once violent and beautiful. In general, Ruais is "thinking about very mundane gestures that we approach materials in our lives with: folding and pleating and cinching and these simple gestures that are really just part of our muscles' memory." The clay retains its own record of these manipulations, though not always without a fight. "All the time it's me trying to push it beyond its capabilities, and then backtracking a little, so that the work is possible," she says. "I'm always negotiating with the material: *What can you do? What do I have to do to let you do that?*" MP

