

MADRES TODAS

FROM PELVISES TO MOLLUSKS,
NINA SUREL'S SCULPTURES
CREATE A MYTHICO-HISTORICAL
ARCHIVE OF MATERNITY

WRITTEN BY AND TRANSLATED BY
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PORTRAIT OF NINA SUREL
Photo by Elliot & Erick Jiménez

GRETA CHAMOTTA, 2024
Underglaze and glaze on stoneware
96 x 96 x 5 in



GRETA CHAMOTTA / GREAT LOVE

HER STUDIO, SHE SAYS, RESEMBLES A BAKERY

It's by sheer luck that Nina Surel and I meet when we do— we're on different coasts and daylight savings has confused us both. We show up online at different times from what we planned. "Every clock around me is showing a different time," she says with a laugh. As though making up for any time we may have lost, she takes me on a tour of her massive, brimming studio. She shows me hidden corners, collages that will become sculptures, a communal kitchen with many ovens, a magnificent kiln. Her studio, she says, resembles a bakery. "Everything's half baked," she adds, pointing to pieces of her murals. The metaphor fits. Composed of ceramic work that needs to be put in the fire again, they look like puzzles still being put together.

Born in Buenos Aires, Surel has lived in the United States since 1999. Initially intending to relocate to Brooklyn, she instead ended up in Miami. It wasn't only that the first Art Basel was beginning in Miami at the time, but that, post 9/11, the place felt "friendlier" than Brooklyn. Having grown up in the shadow of Argentina's military regime, coming to the U.S. meant, for her, exiting a "very strict patriarchal structure." In the U.S., Surel tells me, she was delighted to find a strong network of multinational women artists and a longstanding feminist tradition that came already assembled. "A dialogue already existed here," she says. Since then, Surel's work has been exhibited in galleries and institutions in Europe, Latin America, and the United States. Her art has been displayed, among other places, at the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA) in Long Beach, California and the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in North Miami, Florida, as well as in the permanent collections of El Espacio 23 in Miami.

PORTRAIT OF NINA SUREL
Photo by Elliot & Erick Jiménez



Surel's experiences as an immigrant, woman, and mother inform her art, such that her description of her practice defines both objects and techniques that brush against herself. "My practice," she says, "is intense like I am, methodical, and we could say quite malleable, in a state of constant becoming, of becoming something." Intrigued by her alignment of the material and the personal, I ask for keywords, and she shoots back "hardening, fragile, shrinking, middle age."

In a culture obsessed with youth— not just U.S. culture but everywhere— Surel offers a refreshing viewpoint that finds humor, provocation, and curiosity rather than the diffidence and quietude expected of women of a certain age. With the long durée of clay time, she ventures past the brevity of our present and the short-sightedness by which we begin to be restricted— and to restrict ourselves— in our considerations of ourselves as "too old" for something. In fact, at this year's Art Basel, Surel is presenting in the "emerging artist" category, a classification that depends

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A CONCH CALLED SNAIL



A CONCH CALLED SNAIL, 2024
Underglaze on stoneware
19 x 16 x 26 in



ATABEI

ATABEI, 2024
Underglaze on stoneware
19 x 10 x 25 in

CRAFTING CERAMIC VESSELS OF DIFFERENT WOMEN’S PELVISES (33 WOMEN IN TOTAL), THE CERAMIC AND CLAY VESSELS MONUMENTALIZE THE CORE, WHICH SUREL CALLS “THE POWERHOUSE OF MATERNITY.”

on the work itself, requiring that the pieces be made in the last three years and that, moreover, they’ve not debuted elsewhere.

Surel delves into the historical dimensions of earthwork and ceramics, punctuating their combined divinations and truths. “There are marvelous properties to ceramic,” she explains, “the fact that it’s resistant, hard, that it precedes us.” She speaks of rituals, archeologists, antiquity, ancient civilizations, and the evidence obtainable by artifacts. “Pompei,” she says with emphasis, letting the word hang in the air, the associations coalescing. Articulating the almost miraculous qualities of ash-turned-to-stone, she asks, “What made them stay behind?” She knows she cannot answer that, but she’s also confident that we share a pictorial glossary, those haunting images that have burrowed in our minds: “the old man who couldn’t move, so couldn’t leave, the mother who protected her child.” These are, Surel knows, archetypal images: they don’t need to be described. We know the stony mother’s embrace.

Surel’s performance *The Rite of the Womb* and her video installation *Grávida*— both from 2019— remain some of her most iconic works. They were exhibited together in 2022 in *A Sum of Possibilities*, a group show curated by Verónica Flom featuring Surel alongside other Miami-based artists, Leslie Gabaldón and Christina Pettersson. Crafting ceramic vessels of different

BEAUTY BERRY, 2024
Underglaze on stoneware over wood
57 x 33 x 1 in



BEAUTY BERRY



THE HOLDER



SUREL BRINGS UP THE FIGURE OF MEDUSA, NOTING, “WHAT’S ALWAYS LEFT OUT IS THAT SHE WAS RAPED.”

women’s pelvises (33 women in total), the ceramic and clay vessels monumentalize the core, which Surel calls “the powerhouse of maternity.” What’s exhibited is not only the shape of each woman’s body, but, in altering tones, a depiction of transformation and difference. For Surel, the materials are integral to the physicality of the objects and also to their figurative dimensions: “terracotta symbolizes the earth, life” she explains, “and it resembles blood”.

Grávida is the accompanying 13-minute video installation, where, employing a doula, a conscious mover, a videographer and shaman, Surel facilitated a ritual from the making of the vessels. The result is as much an archive as a display: Surel keeps an alphabetical list of everyone she met during that time and she preserves the remnants from the materials of each participant’s cast. The sculptures themselves are multimodal: some become vases where plants grow, others are stacked one on top of the other to become a combined structure— pelvis upon pelvis— where, held up by a central pole and positioned strategically upon one another, each pelvis reinforces the next. Attuned to the idea and practice of women supporting each other, Surel states, “individuality, aloneness, won’t work.”

On the day we meet, Surel’s preparing for the Art Basel Miami Beach where she’ll be presenting “Greta Chamotta / Great Love”, a series of new mosaic works including tablets, vessels, sculptures, and murals. Surel worked on this project with an assistant, the renowned Argentine ceramist, Pilar Fernández Lerda, who initially came to Miami to help build an adobe kiln, and ended up remaining at the studio. Surel describes her as “the most talented ceramist I could learn from.” The two seem perfectly matched: in an interview with the Argentine newsmagazine, Noticias, Fernández Lerda has said that in her work she celebrates the connection between humans and their surroundings, and honors the ceramic process as “an act of patience and creativity.” “It made such a difference,” Surel states, recounting how the techniques she’s practicing have allowed her to develop hues in the terracotta that match what she remembers from her childhood.

Surel’s new collection similarly delves into trans-American memory and the imagination. “Beauty Berry” pays homage to

the *Callicarpa americana* that is endemic to the southeastern United States. The chromatic collage centers the beautyberry and a woman, finding in the woman’s spurt of breast milk an analogue to the small shrub’s medicinal qualities, which include the treatment of stomachaches and dysentery. In “The Holder,” Surel depicts the *Attalea funifera* or coquilla nut palm native to northeastern Brazil, whose stalk resembles a bouquet of succulent breasts. A woman walks alongside the stem, carrying the great nuts as though they are her own, her body indistinguishable from it. Like chamotte (“supple and strong, it gets stronger with heat”), as a species, the *Attalea funifera* can survive and flourish after burning. “Atabei” and “A Conch Called Snail” depict human-animal hybrids. The former a mermaid and the latter a mollusk or snail, both are fecund to the brim, bellies round, filled with the potentiality of movement and embryonic life. There’s a distinct comfort to Surel’s mixtures. “I borrow from many sources,” she says. Conversing with ancient mythology, the botanical descriptions of conquistadors, and annals of natural history, Surel’s collection reimagines women’s bodies and experiences from the perspective of nature and ecosystems that are left alone to follow their own filtration pathways and bear the fruits of their fructification.

In Spanish the word “historia” can mean either a story or a history. “Myths are histories that have been told, the stories that women have told me,” Surel explains. The attention to history / herstories is a crucial juncture for the artist, and her work presents consistent attempts to rewrite the stories we’ve been told. Surel brings up the figure of Medusa, noting, “what’s always left out is that she was raped.” “How do we tell stories that are just and that are understandable,” she continues, “and how do we do so without the fear of Medusa, the nightmare of a raped woman?” The primal violence of Medusa’s story finds alternatives in Surel’s creations, where women’s bodies are celebrated in all their properties: the fecund, the sparse, the dry and the slimy, the secretions, the expulsions.

Toward the end of our conversation, Surel refers back to some of the collages she showed me earlier, specifically the one that, in reference to Donna Haraway’s manifesto, she refers to as a “cyborg” that has her daughter’s face. “The way I organize my work is through collage,” she explains, adding, “my pencil or my brush are my scissors.” This collage, like Surel’s archive, is a birthing of sorts, something that expands over time. She calls the process “bien mío, privado,” that is, “very mine, private,” something she does while she cooks on the weekends, organizing her thoughts. The collage is incomplete but has already emerged partly in other works. Surel’s been here before, has sat patiently contemplating a piece that takes its time to come together. A tender wreckage, a work of love. ■

THE HOLDER, 2024
Underglaze on Stoneware
33 x 11.5 x 14 in