

TERRESTRIAL AFFAIR

BY JODI THROCKMORTON, FRAUKE V. JOSENHANS,
AND MARTHA TUTTLE



Portrait of BRIE RUAIS in her studio, 2020. Photo by Adam Reich. All images courtesy the artist and albertz benda, New York.

BRIE RUAIS

American artist Brie Ruais creates abstract ceramic sculptures from clay equal to her own weight, which she spreads out dynamically, allowing the material itself to guide her in terms of its final shape and size. On the occasion of the artist's first institutional solo show at Houston's Moody Center for the Arts at Rice University, "Movement at the Edge of the Land," the exhibition's curator Frauke V. Josenhans and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts curator Jodi Throckmorton, as well as artist Martha Tuttle, discussed their perspectives on Ruais's practice.

In Brie Ruais's formidable sculptures, the motion of a body in space is materialized. She scrapes, excavates, tears, and spreads clay on the ground into oftentimes large-scale forms that are then fired. Though abstract in appearance, the artworks are in fact deeply rooted in nature, reflecting the colors and contours of landscapes as well as traces of the human body.

Ruais's own body sets the parameters of her sculptures—her weight establishes the volume of the clay she uses for each piece, the maximum reach of her arms determines the dimensions of the work, and her strength and endurance influence the shape. The toll that the laborious process takes on her may not be readily apparent, however remnants of the struggle can be found both in her art—visible in the impressions of fingers, fists, and knees made in the fired clay—and the physical exhaustion brought upon the artist as a result. Her practice follows the tradition of sculptures carrying evidences of their making, leading her to feel a connection toward the late Greek-American artist Peter Voulkos, whose abstract expressionist ceramics reveal his arduous and, at times, violent process. Although Voulkos's practice appears transgressive—with him fighting against his chosen medium, sometimes slashing and puncturing it—Ruais's interaction with the substance is an attempt at better understanding her place in the natural world.

Ruais's method acts as a ritual that connects the body with the earth. The material mediates an exchange between the two; the sculptural form a record of this action. A fossil of sorts, the pieces retain traces of not only the exertion of their creation, but also the space

that the artist's body once actively occupied between the clay and her surroundings. In *Scraped Away From Center, 130 lbs (Night)* (2018), for example, the jagged edges and surfaces of the pigmented stoneware, extended from the middle to form a two-meter-wide circular shape from where the artist knelt, accentuating the effort required from Ruais. In addition, the shiny volcanic-rock-like glazing, with its crackled layers of pink peeking through the charcoal-colored surface, assert primordial qualities, as if it is an opening leading to the earth's inner core. More broadly, the sculpture expresses dysphoria with ongoing environmental changes that now, more than ever, speak of humans' vital responsibilities. This ceremonial aspect of her work brings about what Ruais describes as "something deeper, and unknown, or unrealized" by even the artist, until its completion.

Working in clay, Ruais has not been spared from biased conventional assumptions that equate large-scale sculptures with men. She calls into question the very notion of "life-sized" works, reorienting the scale and meaning of monumental sculpture to fit smaller bodies like her own. She pushes herself to her physical limits, and, in turn, her creations, to accomplish things deemed impossible for her by others. Her sculpture represents the human body—a scale that evokes the minuteness of the individual when confronting the infinite scope of global ecological crises—and her material, clay, is humbly dependent on the earth. In its fired sculptural form, it is permanent and stable, yet at the same time, fragile—a reminder of the frailness of human life.

Of Body and Land: Process and Presence in Brie Ruais's Sculptures

By Jodi Throckmorton



Detail of BRIE RUAIS's *Scraped Away From Center, 130 lbs (Night)*, 2018, glazed and pigmented stoneware, hardware, 205.5 × 185.5 × 9 cm. Collection of Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia.

Jodi Throckmorton is curator of contemporary art at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) in Philadelphia. She recently organized Rina Banerjee's midcareer retrospective, which debuted at PAFA, and is currently showing at the Fowler Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles. The show will subsequently travel to the Frist Art Museum in Nashville and the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham. Major publications include *Rina Banerjee: Make Me a Summary of the World* (2019) and *Postdate: Photography and Inherited History in India* (2015). Throckmorton is currently working on a retrospective of the works of Joan Semmel.

Born in 1982 in Southern California, Brooklyn-based Brie Ruais received her BFA from New York University in 2004 and her MFA from New York's Columbia University School of the Arts in 2011. Solo exhibitions of her work have been held at New York's albertz benda gallery; Cooper Cole gallery, Toronto; and Night Gallery, Los Angeles. The artist has been featured in numerous group exhibitions, including at the Dallas Museum of Art; Craft Contemporary, Los Angeles; Regis Center for Art at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia; and Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. Her works are included in the collections of the Dallas Museum of Art and the Pizzuti Collection of Columbus Museum of Art, among others.



BRIË RUAIS, *Closing In On Opening Up*, 132 lbs (*Nevada Site 3*), 2020, glazed stoneware, hardware, 226 × 223.5 × 7.5 cm.

Movement at the Edge of the Land

By Frauke V. Josenhans

Brie Ruais's 2020 solo exhibition, "Movement at the Edge of the Land," evokes a powerful encounter with the elements. Her large-scale ceramic sculptures interact with each other, forming an organic-like entity. Pieces of clay seemingly thrown onto a surface by a vigorous force burst into various forms and colors; the interwoven strands of earth defying physical laws.

Ruais's artworks compose and shape a terrain that displays vistas of earth manifested as clay both on the ground and on the walls, confronting the viewer with nature and human intervention. Her work is about locating oneself in the landscape, and stressing the relationship between the viewer and the surrounding scenery. The first part of the installation conjures the expansiveness of the desert, in which the human body becomes a microscopic element in comparison; works such as *Closing In On Opening Up, 132 lbs (Nevada Site 3)* (2020), a red and gray-toned circular figure spreading radially, take possession of the space, extending toward the exterior of the building and connecting with the soil. The second section brings the viewer face-to-face with the powerful push-and-pull of waves breaking onto shores. The sheer size of her creations plays a crucial role: the large, multifaceted sculptures, such as *Compressing from West and East, five times 135 lbs* (2020)—with numerous subtly hued folded sections, similar to textile in their appearance, rammed toward the center—seem to contract and expand alternately, imitating forces of nature.

The artist deeply engages with the earth both in a material and a symbolical manner. The pigmented clay that Ruais employs recalls color variations of iconic American landscapes, like the red-hued rocks of New Mexico and Utah, and the multi-toned palette of geological formations in Arizona and her native California. She also finds inspiration closer to home: in some of her recent works, Ruais draws



Detail of Brie Ruais's *Compressing from West and East, five times* 135 lbs, 2020, glazed stoneware, hardware, 188 × 325 × 15.25 cm.

inspiration from her garden in Brooklyn, where she is based, sculpting with some of the botanical features, such as leaves, blossoms, and stems. Just as many modern female artists, from Georgia O'Keeffe to Agnes Martin, were immersed with their natural surroundings as reflected in their paintings, Ruais's works mirror sites of the Southwest, and at the same time, are profoundly imbedded in the history of the land.

Sourced from the ground, clay metaphorizes domination over nature, which for the artist parallels the oppression of indigenous people who were expelled from their homes in the aftermath of the conquest and settlement of Native American lands. The ragged forms of her sculptures also draw attention to undermining in states like New Mexico where vital supplies such as water and soil are being contaminated during excavation processes. Meanwhile, the negative space she utilizes resembles wounds inflicted upon the planet's surface, bringing to mind gravel pits. As the artist said, "the ecological idea of deep time has been ticking in my mind—the resources that our brief modern human existence requires took millions of years to form. The impact of our existence will affect the earth for hundreds of thousands of years."

Ruais's bodily involvement with her chosen medium echoes that of the Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta, whose seminal *Siluetas* (1973–1985) series—for which Mendieta carved and shaped her silhouette into trees, sand, grass, stones, and soil, submitting herself to nature—inspired Ruais. However, where Mendieta's ephemeral traces left visible, yet fleeting, contours of her body, Ruais recuses herself from her work, allowing the pieces to speak for themselves. Through her process, Brie Ruais allows the viewer to connect with her work not only on a physical or spiritual level, but intellectually as well.

Frauke V. Josenhans is associate curator at the Moody Center for the Arts at Houston's Rice University. Previously, Josenhans was the Horace W. Goldsmith associate curator of modern and contemporary art at the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, and has also worked at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Josenhans has graduate degrees in art history and museology from the Sorbonne in Paris and the École du Louvre in Paris, and a PhD in art history from Aix-Marseille University.

*There was a star riding through clouds one night,
and I said to the star, "Consume me."*

— Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

In her studio I asked Brie if a person can be healed by the land.

We spoke of this quietly, shyly.

A hard question because it admits to the possibility of needing something outside of human creation.

Yes, she said, because I dissolve into it.

We are nets that plankton pass through

By Martha Tuttle

Martha Tuttle is an artist based in Brooklyn.

In Brie Ruais's recent works, clay both marks earth and place, emphasized by outward beacons. Plant residue, dirt, an aerial view of Nevada over which *Cycling* (2020) is placed—these sculptures are made within a place, not a site.

Brie needs the physicality of material and land in a way that makes her work less "about landscape" than it is landscape. A body is touching earth. Whether within the vast space of rural Nevada or her garden in Brooklyn.

And because touch requires two, when I look at Brie's work, I am aware that as we leave a mark on the world, it also leaves its mark on us. Like the way clay changes chemically when fired, the body too experiences atomic reformation.

A thought—

not all labor without evident purpose is Sisyphean. Often, it is devotional, like dance.

In her performance video *Tidal Movement* (2019) filmed at Brooklyn's Fort Tilden Park, Brie works at the edge of the sea. The clay dissolves into water as her body struggles to learn the rhythm of the waves. She adjusts, absorbs, and becomes collaborator with both material and place.

This world is a physical reality, and we are in it.

The significance is adaptation.

When I ask her to think of an artwork that has influenced her, Brie said she is always thinking of Jay DeFeo's *The Rose* (1958–66).



Stills from BRIE RUAIS's *Tidal Movement*, 2019, three-channel video: 12 min.



BRIE RUAIS, *Spreading out From Center*, 132 lbs (Fort Tilden October 2019), 2019, glazed and pigmented stoneware, hardware, 198 × 190.5 × 7.6 cm.



Detail of **BRIE RUAIS**'s *Spreading out From Center*, 132 lbs (Fort Tilden October 2019), 2019, glazed and pigmented stoneware, hardware, 198 × 190.5 × 7.6 cm.