

IN THE FLESH

Brie Ruais' delicately bruised ceramics offer a gutsy take on the self-portrait.

BY ASHTON COOPER PORTRAIT BY ADAM REICH



The artist with the 400-pound *Unzipped, Line and Circle*, 2015, made from glazed ceramic and jeans.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Brie Ruais' art is defined by her physical entanglement with material. She gives herself an action to complete—push, rake, tear, cinch, spread—and then enacts it on a 130-pound chunk of clay—the weight of her own body. “I have this encounter with the material and challenge it,” she says.

These clashes result in metallic figures sliding up corners, round “compasses” smeared on the floor and swirling area rug-sized rectangles of pigmented clay, all of which are impressed with the marks of the conflict: finger-, toe-, knee-, hand- and footprints are embedded on the works' surfaces.

Following her second solo show in New York at Mesler/Feuer gallery this summer, Ruais is also included in the group exhibition, “Crafted: Objects in Flux,” on view through January 10 at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Her three-part

sculpture, *Perimeter with Crumpled Center* (2013), is included in the show, which focuses on contemporary craft-based artists who bridge cutting-edge concepts and traditional skills as they embrace and explore the increasingly blurred boundaries between art, craft and design.

Ruais' confrontational process is undoubtedly informed by a certain strain of macho Process art: “A huge influence from the beginning was Bruce Nauman,” she says, and Richard Serra's *To Lift* also immediately comes to mind, but she is critical of that history. “I do feel conflicted about being influenced by those super muscular male artists, but I have really envied the way that they have no problem taking up a massive gallery space with a massive structure,” she says. “It's very confrontational. I think my work is gentler than that, but I do think about this challenge that female sculptors have—dealing

with space and dealing with occupying space.”

One way that Ruais addresses this issue of taking up space is by using her own body weight as the measure of her material. Like Ana Mendieta and other feminist forerunners, Ruais uses the female body as the central site of interrogation and importantly, the source from which the artwork springs. “I think about the female body as needing to insist on being seen. That's where a lot of my work comes from—it's an urgent feeling.”

In the Mesler/Feuer show, “130 lbs. of Proximal Frontage” Ruais explored new directions for her work with three large-scale pieces each made with approximately 400 pounds of clay. With her next project, Ruais will ask “female supporters and influencers” to make a piece in her studio using their own body weight in exchange for a work made by her.