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# With Erika Verzutti at the Pompidou

by Charles Asprey • 15.03.2019

The unrelenting pressure on young artists – from the market, audiences and critics – has forced many to stray far outside their comfort zones in search of newness, to trial new media, new forms of display, new anything. There is an alarming multi-disciplinary overload underway and you can see the often confused results in exhibitions, biennials and fairs. You see it in the emergence of stylistically similar artists who ought to have little, if anything, in common with each other but who have been brought together by a perverse logic that states that if the work is made of sufficiently diverse materials it will eventually cohere into a trend, or even a curatorial concept. These artists – I call them the *Bit-ists* and *Drape-ists* – are among us in numbers. Those who over-populate their work with stuff, endless tiny bits (pity those install teams in future decades who have to deal with this paraphernalia) and those who drape; soft rubbery forms hanging and drooping from poles and plinths. They are hard to tell apart but you know the ones.

For a young artist facing this terrain, an invitation to show at the Pompidou must be a daunting prospect. Faced with the weight of historical precedent, they must also negotiate the challenges of the inside-out architecture, which is famously uncompromising. Occasionally, however, you find a contemporary artist who is comfortable in their work, has bonded with their materials and range of subjects and who knows instinctively that there is a lifetime of opportunity for development within their established language. The Brazilian artist Erika Verzutti (b.1971), who has just opened a solo show at the Pompidou in Paris, may be just that. For the past twenty years or so she has stayed on her own distinct path. And it is a relief.



**Fig. 1** Installation view of *Erika Verzutti* at Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2019. (Photograph Philippe Migeat).

The first-floor space is actually at street level on the North side of the building, has floor-to-ceiling windows on two sides and an outlandish amount of navy blue ducting fixed to the ceiling. Seeing the room empty would be terrifying if you were the one asked to fill it. The way Verzutti deals with this particular set of challenges sets the tone for a remarkable and sophisticated exhibition: she has applied pale yellow paint (not quite *gilet jaune*) at the top of the walls, descending about three feet and creating a soft barrier between the pipework and her objects below **FIG.1**. It is a brilliant and deceptively simple solution.

Verzutti's work feels rooted, not so much in a classifiable tradition (it's got Latin American soul), but in the reassuring way it channels past sculptural and painterly activity into its forms, which are in many ways very classical **FIG.2**. A few years ago words such as classical, decorative and even beautiful would have been seen as pejorative, but not now. Look at how Marc Camille Chaimowicz has elevated the once almost taboo subjects of pattern, beauty and memory to such respected heights. Verzutti's sculptures – hung on the wall or presented on the floor; coloured with exotic powdery hues or left bare – are made from bronze, plaster, concrete and papier-maché and, once installed, it is often hard to tell which it is. Part of the pleasure in looking is realising that it does not particularly matter, because there is a sense of harmony among the works and there is no hierarchy of material. Each work feels like an individual but of a family.

Her painter's sensibility (many wall sculptures are created flat and then 'elevated' to the position traditionally occupied by paintings)

combined with hands-on shaping and moulding of these forms gives them a tactility and strength that is deeply sensual. I have no problem at all in saying I find her work very beautiful indeed.

Perhaps the most satisfying ingredient in the show is Verzutti's self-confidence. Right outside the Pompidou is the recreation of Brancusi's studio. But this has not prevented Verzutti displaying her own Brancusi-inspired columns, replacing his double pyramid forms with her native jackfruit. This is exciting because here is an artist taking pleasure in the roots of her work, revealing and sharing that which inspires her. You can see it in other works that unashamedly reference Jasper Johns, Robert Gober, Lucio Fontana and others [FIG.3](#). She adopts the essence of these major male figures and imbues her own work with an exuberant femininity; they fizz with erotic pleasure, from the smallest works – measuring perhaps twenty centimetres – to the mighty *Turtle* (an Arthurian table with orbs) [FIG.4](#) or the *Swan Catwalk* [FIG.5](#), a twenty-five-foot plaster plinth of a swan that carries Verzutti's 'signets' (some of her smaller works) on its back. It is easy to imagine how a show like this would have been ruined by a less alert artist or less sympathetic curator placing the works on individual plinths. This exhibition confirms an artist who is firmly in the zone, in control of her style and mode of display, confident in the legacy of certain traditions and she is clearly enjoying the journey.

Verzutti is also a cat lover. Her *Páqui* is a frequent personality on her Instagram page and has even been collaged in to a double-paged spread in the excellent exhibition catalogue. Is it too much to suggest that the poised, intelligent élan and affectionate spirit of Verzutti's work is inspired by a feline?



**Fig. 2** *Star Without Makeup*, by Erika Verzutti. 2014. Bronze and wax, 65 by 35 by 35 cm. Edition of 3. (Collection Maria Rita Drummond and Rodolfo Barreto, São Paulo; © Michael Brzezinski; exh. Centre Pompidou, Paris).



**Fig. 3** *Peacock*, by Erika Verzutti. 2014. Papier mâché, brushes and iridescent paint, 91 by 91 by 20 cm. (Fortes d'Aloia & Gabriel; © Thomas Strub; courtesy of the artist; exh. Centre Pompidou, Paris).



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Erika Verzutti* at Centre Pompidou, Paris. 2019. Image shows *Turtle* (2015) (Photograph Philippe Migeat).



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Erika Verzutti* at Centre Pompidou, Paris. 2019. Image shows *Swan Catwalk* (2016) (Photograph Philippe Migeat).



## **Exhibition details**

### **Erika Verzutti**

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20th February–15th April 2019

## **About this book**



### **Erika Verzutti**

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