

A L T R E

ISABELLE ALBUQUERQUE BY NOUA UNU STUDIO



ISABELLE ALBUQUERQUE

TOUCH HUNGER

Interview NIKA CHILEWICH & SARA FRIER
Photography NOUA UNU STUDIO
Styling ALY COOPER
Hair & Makeup HAYLEY FARRINGTON

Los Angeles-based artist, Isabelle Albuquerque mines the vast psychosexual resources of her subconscious, ancient mythos, and art history for her deeply intimate sculptural odyssey: *Orgy For 10 People In One Body*. This orgiastic practice involves the laborious process of casting and rendering her own body for a series of three-dimensional headless figures, each made of a different material—from bronze, to black rubber, to resin, to the delicate fur of a fawn. Through this transmutation, Albuquerque is a shapeshifter, a pupa on the edge of chrysalis, and her doubles become molted exoskeletons of her personal histories—relics of a modern Vesuvius. Her figures are, in a way, inanimate doppelgängers of the artist, but they are also representational of the psyche's trickster multiplicity, naked and wanting, they can be doused with a desirous subjectivity or remain as perfect paradoxes. In the following interview, curators Sara Frier and Nika Chilewich speak to Albuquerque about materiality, symbolism, and the role of women as vessels.

All clothing Givenchy S/S 2021. Photographed at Isabelle Albuquerque's studio in Los Angeles





NIKA CHILEWICH As the first of many very seductive, loaded, and art historical approaches to materiality within your work, I thought that we could fixate on the pearl detail on the keys of the saxophone in the first sculpture in *Orgy [for 10 People in One Body]*, a luminous bronze cast of your body coupling with a saxophone.

ISABELLE ALBUQUERQUE I'm very interested in materials that invite touch. I love that you bring up the pearl embedded in the keys on the sax, because the pearl is the place where you place your fingers on the instrument. I often imagine oysters like little vaginas with an iridescent g-spot deep inside them and playing the saxophone has some kind of connection to touching that pearl. Also, the oysters that make pearls switch back and forth between genders throughout their life and I'm hoping to achieve this kind of mutability through the embodiment of all the different materials in *Orgy For 10 People In One Body*.

SARA FRIER The pearl saxophone keys create such a meaningful assemblage with the impassioned metal-cast body. Pearl's purity has maintained a freighted connection with female chastity in the history of Christian art. For example, in Caravaggio's *Penitent Magdalene*,¹ when the so-called sinful woman—in some accounts, a former sex worker—kneels in her moment of conversion. A broken chain of pearls on the ground

recalls her dissolute former life. Of course, this championing of sexual purity is one of the cornerstones of female subjugation within Western patriarchy.

ALBUQUERQUE For months I have been gazing and gazing at these paintings and sculptures of Mary when she miraculously sprouted thick hair all over her body² to cover her nudity. The hair feels connected to the pearls in *Penitent Magdalene*, as they both seem to be physical expressions of shame.

I'm really interested in trying to unbind shame from desire, but also just in accepting shame as part of the process. Like, I'll probably always be blushing deep hot red and that's okay...maybe always blushing is the goal.

CHILEWICH I'm wondering if you can talk about decision-making in terms of appropriating very traditional academic questions of history, of myth, of narrative, of female figuration, and how you insert yourself into these as an artist. Instead of engaging solely with the discourse of female representation, I feel that in your work you embody these different women throughout history and time.

ALBUQUERQUE Yes. It's much more of an empathetic practice. I almost take a method actor's approach to the roles and narratives, or scripts embedded in the work. For example, in the weeks before the scan for the deer sculpture, I ate only deer food, spent any spare time I had in the deer meadows around Los Angeles, and listened to Arvo Pärt's sacred motet, *The Deer's Cry*, over and over and over again. I immersed myself in myths of humans transforming into animals in order to transcend dark times, and I was interested in a deer's experience as one of being hunted.

CHILEWICH Can you take us through one or two material decisions when making your work?

ALBUQUERQUE I wanted the simulated fur of the deer to feel incredibly realistic and like a fantasy at once. A fantasy that is so real you could almost become it. And the fur was very much about light. The speckles on the back of a fawn protect the young deer and help her camouflage in the dappled light

of the long grasses she sleeps in. I think I was drawn to fur, especially during the pandemic, and all the touch hunger we are all experiencing, because it's so mammalian and tactile. I was thinking so much of those erotic Japanese Shunga paintings—especially the paintings that include animals. There is one painting in Kobayashi Eitaku's *Twelve Erotic Scenes* that I continue to return to, where a large mouse is eating out a woman who is in a state of pure ecstasy.³ The fur on the animal is painted with the thinnest brush, each hair a single stroke. And so in the deer sculpture, I'm also thinking of each synthetic hair as a paint stroke that can capture light in a way that is similar to a painting.

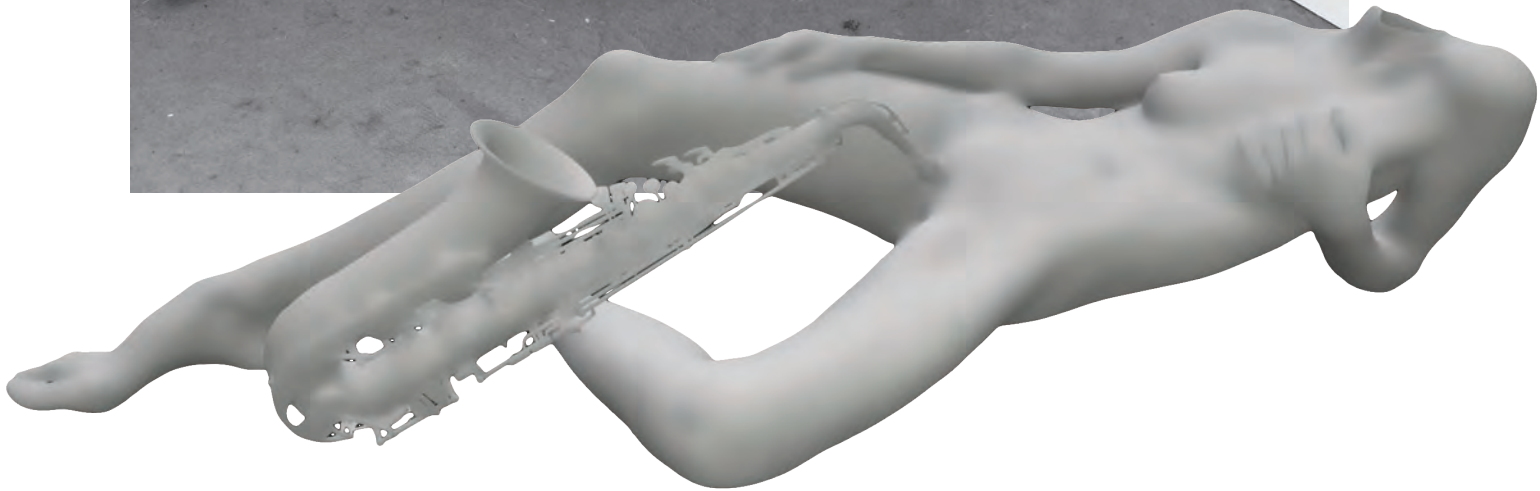
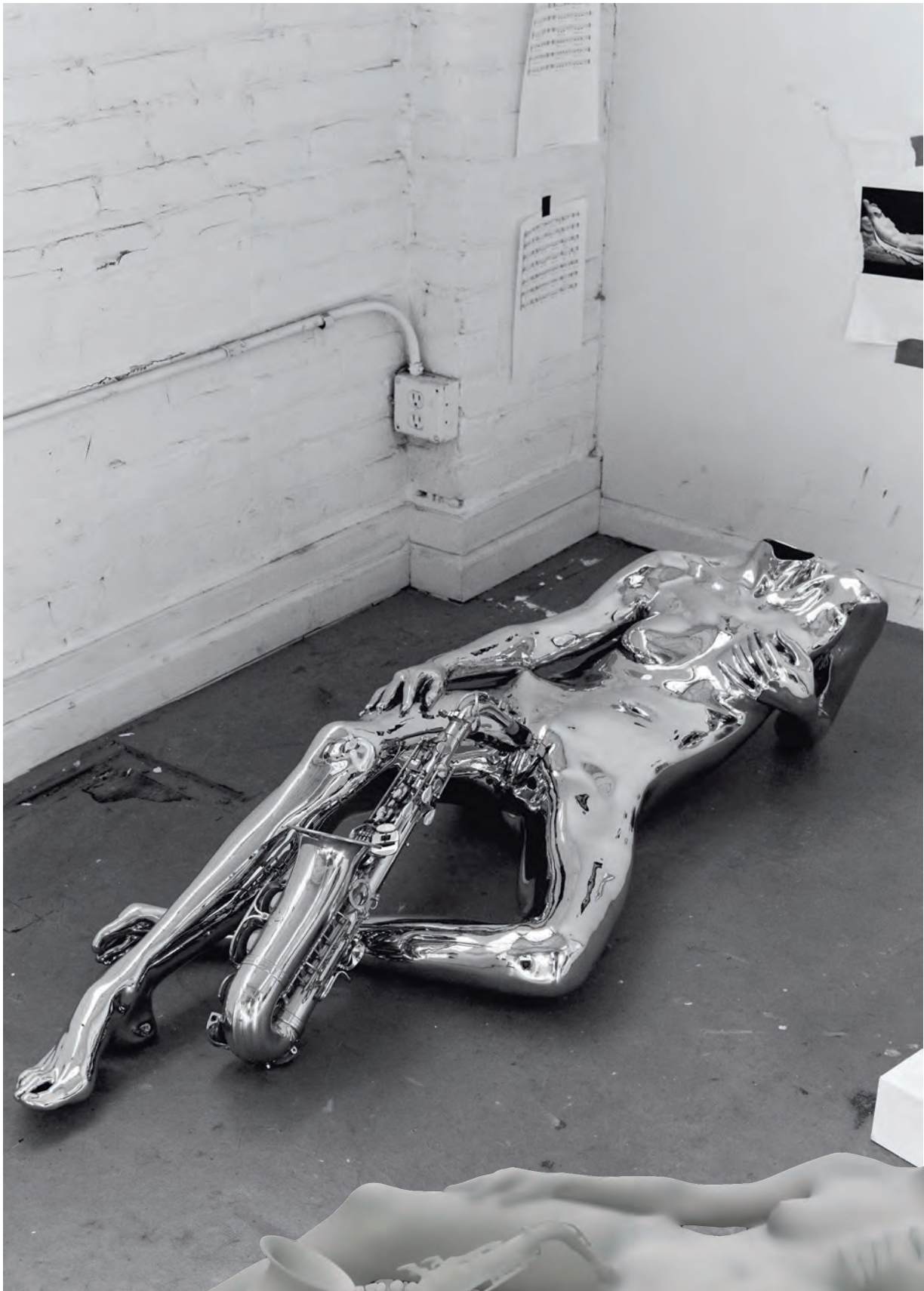
CHILEWICH Maybe you could talk us through another material because we are thinking about this question of skin and surface. The surface changes dramatically when you play with the textures of materials like rubber or fur.

ALBUQUERQUE Yes. I chose the walnut because of its warmth, and how it glows, and sweats just like skin. This kind of wood gets more and more beautiful the more it is touched. There is also something deeply erotic about the way that the bronze reflects and absorbs light. And there's a musical quality to many of the materials—like the brass, reeds, and also the deer hooves that are carved from ebony gaboon, which is the wood that is used for the black keys of a piano. The materials have a connection to touch, and I am also thinking about their vibration, and rhythm, and the way they sound. I want them to sing. I really know the sculpture is working if it starts singing.

CHILEWICH The haptic nature of your work is almost threefold: there's the physical touch, then there's the touch of light, and then this musical quality, which again is another sort of sensorial engagement.

ALBUQUERQUE It's a multi-dimensional experience, like if we think of visions, you know, like mystics, especially female mystics in medieval times, vision is never just about the eye—it's the voices you hear, the wind on your skin. The multi-sensory is really important for the materials, and the idea of touching as a way of seeing.

(1) Caravaggio. *Penitent Magdalene* (c. 1594–1595). Doria Pamphilj Gallery, Rome. (2) Tilman Riemenschneider. Mary Magdalen taken up into the air, (1490-92) from the Altarpiece of the Magdalen, from Münchenstadt, Bayerisches National Museum, Munich. (3) Kobayashi Eitaku, *12 Erotic Scenes*, ((1843-1890) *A nikuhitsu shunga makimono*, mounted with twelve erotic scenes with domesticated and wild animals and creatures endowed with supernatural powers, in ink and color on silk, signed with seal *Sensai*; with double wood storage boxes, the cover of one box painted with Autumnal grasses in contrasting tones of gold.







FRIER It leads me to wonder about the role of color, which is of course visual, but can also be multisensorial in its way. By no means are the sculptures in the *Sextet* show monochromatic; rather, each sculpture deploys strong colors as they manifest in a given material: there’s the brilliant yellow of the bronze, the alabaster white of the resin pieces, the warm brown of the wood, the black of the rubber. So, I’m wondering if you could speak to those color choices?

ALBUQUERQUE Yes. I think that the color also contributes to the musicality of the *Orgy*. Each color acts like a note in the larger score. I often think of the materials and colors phasing the way that musical notes do, so that each body represents a tone that changes in relationship to all of the other tones.

CHILEWICH I want to talk about the realm of the more symbolic decisions that you make, like your use of the wedding band. It’s so charged. When you look at something like a wedding band, I think you get into another element of your work, which is this question of performativity and the personification of the characters—of these different archetypes. For me, as a queer de-colonial scholar, the wedding band initially was something that I had a really adverse reaction to. Wedding bands in general seem evocative, especially in relationship to these ancient mythologies, of the patriarchal, colonial practice of vilifying female sexuality in order to create the nuclear family household, and to relegate female identity to a support system for men.

ALBUQUERQUE Yes, the wedding band is so complex. It can be a symbol of love and expansion while simultaneously reminding us of a lineage of ownership and control. And in the context of an orgy, it almost felt unsolvable at first. But my relationship to the ring has shifted over the course of making this work. When I see it now, I think it gives each sculpture her own subjectivity. It speaks to a self, relationships, and a life that are present but not in view. For me, the ringed fingers in the *Orgy* have become a symbol of commitment to a kind of radical love that is deep, challenging, and central to my life. But in a broader, more historical context, the rings root the desires of the *Orgy* in systems of power and oppression that recognize the power in these desires, and that have been trying to control them for centuries.

FRIER The ring can be such a meaningful artifact of this ancient rite of marriage, but the way it threatens to define a woman definitely can exceed the notion of personal choice. I wouldn’t really ever want to be thought of as a wife.

ALBUQUERQUE Exactly. The ancient rite and bond with another is potentially so powerful, and even expansive. But this power has been corrupted and controlled over and over again. At a certain point in my life, I just wanted to reject all of it, but now I’m more interested in understanding, integrating and redefining that power. I think that a wedding ring as a repeated symbol in an orgy may be part of that process of reclamation.

CHILEWICH I feel like one of the transcendent qualities of these works is that it’s sort of an homage to a woman’s ability to hold these very contradictory, almost antithetical, hypocritical, and violent truths together within themselves, and to repurpose, and own them in a subtle way, in a private way, because the female experience has been so relegated to intimate, marginalized spaces.

FRIER It made me think about nuns. Nuns enter into their own kind of mystic marriage. They sometimes wear wedding rings to symbolize their unions with Christ and the church. In some way, nuns have performed the traditional wifely ideal: chaste, silent, obedient, disciplined, cloistered...but then I think back to what the ring stands for in images like *The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine of Alexandria*.⁴ Women have chosen death over forced marriage, and to this day, nuns still refuse the cult of domesticity by entering into monastic orders where they study and work in the company of other women.

ALBUQUERQUE They were able to escape those roles by marrying Christ.

FRIER Yes. I’m not Christian, so I would even feel free to view this practice as a union with the spiritual self, right? In the past, these women entered into a union with something invisible and intangible, which took the place of their only other option, which was to be a childbearing wife.

ALBUQUERQUE It’s interesting because many of these nuns wore wedding bands to symbolize their union with this spiritual self, and they spoke and wrote about becoming “pregnant with nothingness.” Perhaps becoming pregnant with nothingness is a metaphor for making art? [Laughs]

Sexuality in the sculptures is connected to pleasure and ecstasy, but it is also connected to a history of violence and control. Like, how do you live with those contradictions and still have love, and still have sex, and not lock the door (or the two doors) and never come out again?

(4) “The Mystical Marriage of St. Catherine of Alexandria” is a devotional tempera painting on wood by Scuola del Pinturicchio (1454-1513) from the second half of the fifteenth century. It is currently located at the Vatican Museum. This painting depicts St. Catherine of Alexandria’s mystical marriage to the Christ child, which is being witnessed by the Virgin Mary and several angels. (5) W.B. Yeats, *Leda and the Swan* (1865-1939) and Francois Boucher, *Leda And The Swan*, (1740). (6) Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), *The Origin of the World*, Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

CHILEWICH And that, for me, is where the element of the works as monuments, or as magical sculptures, really do remind me of ancient sculptures. These more fantastical creatures that you create in your practice take on new meaning. They are open-ended for each person to interpret.

ALBUQUERQUE All of us have a feminine part of ourselves. Like, I used to present more masculine, but when I started connecting to that female part, I found it powerful, exciting, juicy—wet. I really hope the sculptures give people access to their own wetness.

CHILEWICH I think that this ties into the question of rape and violence within your work, sort of like a parallel symbolic gesture that’s repeated in the narrative.

ALBUQUERQUE Yes. The *Orgy* begins with the myth of Leda and the Swan, and the site of a rape. I wanted to begin here because Leda and the Swan is often understood as an origin story for the birth of classical Western art and I wanted to acknowledge the violence at the core of the story.⁵ I never want to take the violence or power structure out of the picture, or out of the sculpture.

CHILEWICH Well, I think about the representational space of rape and what you’re talking about in this context, victims of sexual assault, instead of remaining silent and internalizing all of that shame and anger, are speaking up more and more.

ALBUQUERQUE Yes. And there is some kind of power in trying to create forms to contain and express our deepest horrors as well as our deepest desires.

CHILEWICH This gets at our next area of discussion—the idea of the hole, or of the woman as a vessel. In your sculptures as vessels, the female body as an orifice becomes a site of complicated magic.

ALBUQUERQUE I do think of them as objects embedded with magic. And there is such a beautiful connection between something like Courbet’s *The Origin of the World*⁶ and Hubble’s images of black holes. I’m also just really interested in the parts of the sculpture that are open, and hole-like, that speak to a kind of porous experience.

FRIER I think this leads to the question of headlessness in the pieces of *Sextet*—there’s cuts and sometimes holes where their heads would be. The first piece is very clearly a vessel; we can enter into the body’s interior darkness. I was wondering if you could speak a little bit to this headlessness.





(7) Artemisia Gentileschi. *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (c.1612-1613). Collection of the Uffizi Galleries. The subject takes an episode from the apocryphal Book of Judith in the Old Testament, which recounts the assassination of the Assyrian general Holofernes by the Israelite heroine Judith. The painting shows the moment when Judith, helped by her maidservant Abra, beheads the general after he has fallen asleep drunk. (8) Lucas Cranach the Elder. *Salome with the Head of Saint John the Baptist* (c. 1530s). The Museum of Fine Arts Budapest, Hungary.

ALBUQUERQUE Yes. By removing the head, the body becomes monumental and the sculpture becomes more symbolic. There is more room for the projection of your own experience and for information that is not only located in the brain, or a kind of hierarchy of the head.

FRIER The head has always been the seat of individual identity. I think of the whole history of art, and even legal documents like passport photos, it's always all about the head. So what does that do when we're encountered with these bodies? They are individuals, they're wearing wedding rings, they deploy these specific narratives that unfold in different moments. We're invited to experience how it all plays out in the body itself.

ALBUQUERQUE The hole is a gap for the viewer to enter. Those are my favorite parts in art. I love art that has a space or a void. And I guess the lack of the head here is the space for the viewer. It leaves more room for the person looking at it. In the gap, there's so much room for projection. A lot of the ancient sculpture we experience is missing huge parts of itself and I think that allows us to project ourselves into those missing parts, or to project a story, something personal. If it's too complete, there's no room.

FRIER I'm obsessed with the headlessness of your work, especially the trope of the woman as a sexualized beheader. Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes*⁷ shows the power of a woman who has used her wiles to access and vanquish an evil leader. Artemisia herself was famously the victim of rape. And then, there's Lucas Cranach's many pictures of Salome, the ultimate temptress of Christian lore, who gets John the Baptist's head served up to her on a platter.⁸ Artists in that period loved to explore the open neck wound. You can see the bone and meat of the body.

ALBUQUERQUE The only way I can even think to express it in words is like, "I want your skull." I've never heard very many people talk about that, but I think it's about that kind of desire a lot. I have heard Francis Bacon in interviews speak about that with the men he loved—with their shaved heads. He wanted his lovers to have shaved heads because this brought him closer to their skull. There's something so erotic and transgressive about the skull. And the head of a body is so connected to the head of a state, and cutting it off can decentralize that power in a very satisfying way.

CHILEWICH I am thinking about these paintings too, more in the sense of a female desire to behead—an erotic desire, a desire for

vengeance, as a desire for dominance, an act of erotic transgression. In heterosexual sex, the woman is always penetrated, with rare exception. Even if you are dominant, you are still penetrated. These paintings and this idea of chopping off one's head, devouring someone, is, I think, an act of penetration.

ALBUQUERQUE Wow. Yes. Devouring as penetration! Now, that is food for thought [laughs]. It brings me back to the Shunga painting where the woman is being eaten out. Devouring or being devoured is such a deep part of sexuality. There's also that thing in art history—the body is always dirty, but the head is right. Or in religion, where the voice of God, or voices of angels are so often disembodied.

CHILEWICH Another layer of your practice is the actual casting of these sculptures, in which you explore a tension between activeness and passiveness, and strength in oneself, and then of giving oneself over to community. You've spoken in the past about how these sculptures really are fully *you*—they are so subjective, but that you needed so much help from different people and communities because of just how ambitious they were. Could you speak about that process?

ALBUQUERQUE Yes. When I begin conceiving the sculptures, there are many months of working alone. I work almost like a butoh or vogue dancer, finding the poses and body language to express specific scripts, ideas, images, codes, and emotions that run through the forms. This part of the process is very internal. But once the form has been found, the work opens up and I begin to work with other people, often inventing processes to materialize these highly developed forms and gestures. I work with many classical materials, but I approach them experimentally. This includes finding and creating new technologies or processes to achieve the desired effect.

FRIER We were also thinking about the obviously very intense labor of this work, the stress on your body that went into the casts. We see and sense the dynamic between the erotic and the laborious: the question of "work," the need for stamina, the possibility of suffering.

ALBUQUERQUE Ah yes. The lifecasting process can be quite intense and often trauma releases from the body when doing it. Some of the forms require physical training so that I can hold them long enough for detailed casts and 3D captures. It's a very corporeal, athletic, and even devotional practice. Maybe you can feel the sweat and tears in the final piece. All different expressions of wetness.





FRIER This idea of labor actually also makes me think about its antithesis, which is rest or repose. We already spoke about pose and passivity. I'm wondering if you could also talk about the relationship to the ground, or support that these sculptures rest or stand on.



bed, including myself. The bed is a studio for many women. I have my own studio now, but the second I started working there I filled it with beds because I was so accustomed to the bed being a place where I work. And I saw my mother do her work in the bed with us all piled on top of her. I remember the ink stains on all the sheets. It's a really common place for women to do their work—in the bed. And I don't even mean sexual work. That can be part of it too, but all work. The bed is a kind of sacred space, a site of conception, birth, and death.

CHILEWICH I think it fits into these tropes of women in art history and your work—it's the contradictory idea that the female is always lounging or in a state of repose in a bed, but actually that supposed passivity is a place for so much strength. The bed is really a metaphor for the structures that relegate female labor to the domestic space. And they're basically foundational lies of female beauty being something that is about inactivity, that female desire is about its passivity.

FRIER Yes, I was thinking about the endless visions of female erotic repose, like the *Venus of Urbino*,⁹ which reflects the male gaze upon a nude woman lounging in bed. Such paintings were frequently given as wedding gifts, which even brings us back to the symbolism of the ring. They're also pictures about wifely fidelity—the dog in the *Venus of Urbino* symbolizes fidelity. The body on view will forever belong to her husband. As you

ALBUQUERQUE

Almost all of them are pretty low to the ground. I wanted to make sure they weren't monumental or hierarchical. In fact, the ground is where the power is. You're actually looking down on them and they can still have power over you. So, I think about that a lot with the pedestals—they're very grounded. And then, I use beds a lot. I think of beds as another place of power. Even the way we size beds related to power: king, queen etc.

I have so many women friends who work in

said, Albuquerque, we witness these kinds of art historical nets around the female body in bed. What is the boundary between work and rest, especially when you're a woman, a wife, or a courtesan?

ALBUQUERQUE I think that the reclining nude can simultaneously imagine passivity, submission, hedonism, and autoeroticism. But there is also a kind of resistance and anarchy in the indolence and self pleasure innate in the sculptures resting.

CHILEWICH I think this plays into it too—the strange and uncanny eroticism of all of the work. The fact that the works are so sensual, attractive, and seductive in their repose. Even the ones that are in more powerful positions, they all seem so comfortable. In the queer community of artists that I am in touch with, and with the artists that we're working with in our upcoming show, the first question was, did Bambi have a Tinder? And how do I go on a date with Bambi? These pieces are so sexy and so queer.

ALBUQUERQUE I love that these are the questions being asked! The deer sculpture has her own life now, and her own relationships with people, and I find that incredibly exciting. And I think that all of the sculptures are about pleasure and a different, unfixed and expansive relationship to self and sexuality. Also, they're not having sex to have babies. That sounds so basic, but that's often what sex is about. But these bodies are not sites of production.

CHILEWICH Do you want to tell us briefly about the next sculpture?

ALBUQUERQUE Right now I'm deep in the myth of Romulus and Remus and the she-wolf that raised them. I am interested in how the wolf gave herself, her teats, her wildness, and her teeth completely over for the survival of the two twin human brothers, and how one brother killed the other in the forming of the first democratic state.

CHILEWICH Just to zoom out a little bit, there are six of the ten bodies in existence? How are these going to evolve? Do you have a sense of the timeline?

ALBUQUERQUE The Romulus and Remus piece will be the seventh sculpture in *Orgy For 10 People In One Body*. With this work I am hoping to bring the *Orgy* to a new level of breath, life, articulation and detail. This weekend I am doing a structured life scan of the she-wolf form to capture as much detail in my body as possible. From there



I will be working with a very sophisticated CNC machine to capture every vein, bone, and wrinkle alongside some 3D-sculpted, and milled modifications.

CHILEWICH Maybe if you could speak about the next two pieces, and our show.

ALBUQUERQUE I am so excited about *NUESTRXS PUTXS* working with you both and the ideas that are already emerging between us, Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, and Barbara Sánchez Kane. Just the thought of building

a temple of pleasure all together at Human Resources this summer is yes, yes, yes.

And the remaining pieces in the *Orgy* are still in the internal phase I was speaking to earlier. They often exist in a kind of non-linguistic place before they become physical.

CHILEWICH They are so intimate. They do in many ways exist beyond the space of language.

end

(9) Titian. *Venus of Urbino* (1538). Uffizi Gallery.