



[Isabelle Albuquerque]

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[keep the matriarchy alive]

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THE FAMILIAL FIRE:
A CATALYST FOR BRONZE

"When we went through the ashes, the only things left were three bronze busts. Everything else was gone". Isabelle Albuquerque shares from her studio, perched on the edge of Sierra Madre, a quiet mountain enclave on the outskirts of Los Angeles. A turning point in her trajectory came from a fire that destroyed generations of her family's artworks: "That influenced my choice of bronze for some of my sculptures – bronze is eternal and fire-proof. About ninety percent of art is eventually destroyed. Even with ancient art, we're only seeing a tiny fraction of what once existed."

This event helped spark her series *Orgy* for 10 People in One Body. "The first sculpture was made of bronze, the second of plaster, then wood. Materials hold history, permanence, fragility". Her limbs, torso, or other corporeal elements might fuse with the sculptural medium. The series title references an imaginative melding of multiple selves: "orgy" becomes a metaphor for merging mythological influences and evolutionary biology.

EMBRACING THE BODY
IN SYMPATHETIC MAGIC

Although her art appears modern, even futuristic in its use of 3D scanning and conceptual frameworks, Albuquerque keeps an eye on ancient ritual practices. "The materials that are used in the treatment of PTSD and for trauma. The simple act of petting a cat and what that does to the nervous system. How, through material, you can do something that words can't do often, and that action can't do often." Isabelle Albuquerque uses human hair, or fur, to make tactile sculptures that might be stroked or handled, echoing the comforting effect of an animal's coat. This sympathetic magic works through embodied processes rather than intellectual reflection.

RELIQUARIES: CONTAINERS FOR
LOSS AND HOPE, AND THE EROTIC
MEADOW: BLOSSOMING DESIRE

Following the *Orgy* series, Albuquerque started exploring the notion of reliquaries – smaller, more intimate pieces with hollow interiors. Each *Reliquary* piece offers a private space in which individuals can place their personal grief, pain, or treasured mementos: "Italians are familiar with reliquaries, but they're less common here. I created them after 2022 – a difficult time in the U.S. and the rest of the world – as places that people could put pain or loss inside the object to kind of release their bodies from it. They could be dancing around the house while not throwing away the loss or pain but having a place for it."

"Another ongoing project is an erotic meadow – a field of sculptural flowers, drawing from the sensuality in the works of Georgia O'Keeffe and Robert Mapplethorpe. It explores how we embed sexuality and hope in floral imagery. I'll be showing it in New York this spring." Rather than focusing solely on human anatomy, she steps into the botanical world, where stems, petals, and pollen become metaphors for erotic vitality.

IN THE STUDIO: SOURCING
AND RESPECTING MATERIALS

"When I work with wood, I never go to a lumber yard – I find fallen trees. When I use hair, it's temple hair of my own. I try to work with materials that have had a life. Recently, I worked with a 100-year-old trunk from Portland. Trees have their whole story written in their rings; they are living beings. I don't frame it as sustainability, but I respect materials as alive."

"I avoid plastic. There's pleasure in experiencing something in a state of not perfection." Roughness is a liberating force that frees artist and viewer alike from the tyranny of the perfectly finished. In an era where images can be endlessly retouched, she favors the raw, the tactile, and the partially unrefined – analogous to the unfiltered, immediate allure of a lover's skin. "We can't think about the word 'rough' without also thinking about sex. There's a pleasure in roughness – experiencing something in an unrefined state. It feels freeing. It's connected to independence. Roughness makes you feel free."

Such an embrace of the unpolished continues to inform her sculpture. Some pieces display smooth, classical curves, while others preserve the coarse textures of found tree bark or the irregular swirl of cast bronze. To create each piece, she begins with sketches or direct body casts, followed by 3D scans that allow for the morphing, repeating, or distorting of forms in digital space. Sometimes, she reworks these scans by hand,

printing or casting them in bronze, silicone, or wood. The final object often melds hyper-real body details – like a recognizable face or torso – with imaginative additions, such as extra limbs or animalistic features.

MYTHOLOGICAL THREADS:
FROM AMAZONIANS TO LEDA

"The story of Leda and the Swan deeply fascinates me" Albuquerque reminds. She sees it as a foundational Western narrative, predating the Trojan War, that captures an uneasy power dynamic – "possibly a rape, possibly a seduction." This ambiguity resonates with the broader complexities women have faced historically. Her hope, she stressed, is to create new works that rewrite oppressive narratives.

"A lot of my work is about creating even a feral mythological timeline where we have our own agency, and we can have as much pleasure and love and wildness as we want without being punished. I explore the divine feminine through ritualistic art practices, drawing from ancient traditions to create works that honor the body as a sacred vessel. My sculptures reference historical depictions of goddesses, reinterpreting them in contemporary forms to reclaim feminine agency."

Her personal experience as a teenager – having been born with a congenital condition that shaped her breasts differently from most peers – to mythic figures such as the Amazonians, who were legendary warrior women rumored to have a single breast.

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A MATRIARCHAL TAPESTRY
OF ARTISTS

Albuquerque's sense of lineage passed down by female ancestors. She speaks with reverence about her family's matriarchs, from her great-grandmother in South Africa (a traditional malouf singer) to her grandmother's radical theatrical pieces, to her mother – a visual artist – and sister – a dancer and choreographer.

"I work so much with my own body, and my body is an extension of their bodies. I was in my mother's body, she was in her mother's body – we are not separate." Over time, the generational continuum reveals itself in Albuquerque's sculptures, in her reliance on



physical forms that echo inherited traits. Her impetus to become a steward of material art solidified after the family fire that destroyed so many objects, pushing her to *"keep our story alive and keep the matriarchy alive,"* as she puts it.

CONTENDING WITH PATRIARCHY:
SOVEREIGNTY, POWER, AND
BELONGING

"I don't think you can do anything without kind of coming up against patriarchy," Albuquerque remarks, reflecting on the cultural environment that shapes (and often resists) her work. She describes how, in a patriarchal worldview, seeing a body might trigger an impulse to own it. Her own perspective, closer to a matriarchal ethos, involves recognizing that *"you see a body and you see how it belongs to you, and you belong to it."* A chunk of wood or a piece of human hair is not inert matter but something living or once living. *"We belong to each other"* is the subtext, whether she is referencing the environment, intergenerational relationships, or the erotic union of bodies. This worldview becomes politically charged in a climate where bodily autonomy – particularly for women – can face legal restrictions. *"They've made abortion illegal in various states,"* she observes of the evolving U.S. political landscape.

DEATH AS ONGOING BELONGING

Sculpture – especially in traditional materials like bronze – possesses a kind of temporal longevity that naturally invokes mortality. *"Art is some kind of way that we contend with death,"* – she states, describing the Egyptian pyramids as literal afterlives we still visit, thousands of years later. Albuquerque frames sculpture as a message through time, one that might help us process our finite lifespans in the face of what she calls the possibility of eternity.

"When you're thinking about a system of belonging – where every living thing belongs to each other – the concept of death shifts a bit. It's hard not to laugh when people think they die alone – as if the body was one thing with a definite end and beginning. As if life was containable. Ha! We understand that the body is made up of many living entities – all the microorganisms that live within our organs whose lives continue – whose lives are indistinguishable from our own. All the water in our blood. If the head is sliced off, the blood pours out of the body and waters a flower, which blossoms with an aspect of the self from the blood. A mother can die, but her cells live on in her child, in the thoughts she has placed in her child's mind. These thoughts become the reality of the future, so long after her heart stops beating, she is still part of the rhythm."



- IA 01 Orgy For Ten People In One Body Three , 2020
Walnut
76,2 x 25,4 x 17,8 cm
- IA 02 The Left Hand of Darkness, 2024
Bronze, silver nitrate
78,7 x 25,4 x 30,5 cm
- IA 03 Second head, 2024
oak, thermoplastic rubber, red string
20,3 x 17,8 x 25,4 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery

Some of the objects are tests or prototypes



IA 03



"I avoid plastic. There's pleasure in experiencing something in a state of not perfection."

"Keep our story alive and keep the patriarchy alive."



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Isabelle Albuquerque creates life-sized figurative sculptures cast from molds of her body, a process through which she investigates *the protean nature of identity*. Each sculpture is like a physical unsolvable gesture that she refines through months of bodily exploration, similar to a dancer rehearsing a role. In the studio she might pose, photograph herself, and even choreograph movements – she calls it *the drawing phase* – in order to discover new forms for her pieces. Materiality: her sculptures are often rendered in classical materials like bronze, beeswax, and carved wood, which imbue them with textures.

Born in 1981 to a family of artists, she grew up surrounded by creative influences. Isabelle Albuquerque studied architecture and theater at Barnard College in New York before returning to her native Los Angeles to pursue art. Early in her career, she explored music and performance, co-founding the experimental duo Hecuba and working as a dancer and designer. These experiences instilled in her a bodily, spatial understanding of art.

Albuquerque's sculptures, while replicating the human form, serve as vessels for mythology, metaphor, and metamorphosis. The artist mines the psychosexual resources of her subconscious, drawing on ancient mythos and art history to inform what has been called her *intimate sculptural odyssey*. Albuquerque's art is also rooted in contemporary feminist and socio-political discourse, reclaiming authorship over the female body in art.



TEAM makeup Karo Kangas @ForwardArtists, photography assistant Justin Michael Brooks, retouch and assistance Camille Rice

