



ANDRA URSUTA IN NEW YORK, APRIL 2013. COAT: SACAL. SHIRT: MAISON MARTIN MARGIELA. RING: URSUTA'S OWN. BOOTS: LAURENCE D'ARCADE.

Andra URSUTA

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FOR THIS SUMMER'S VENICE BIENNALE, NEW YORK-BASED ARTIST ANDRA URSUTA CONJURES DARK MEMORIES AND HOSTILE FORCES TO MAKE A NEW FORM OF PERSONAL WORK

This past spring, in her Long Island City studio, Andra Ursuta was building rooms. The four one-and-a-half-foot-tall models she created replicate specific quarters of her now-demolished family home in the small town of Salonta in northwest Romania. But unlike many artists who mine their childhoods as a form of nostalgia or self-mythology, 33-year-old Ursuta's highly detailed dioramas look like despairing anti-doll-houses, crime scenes waiting to happen, or even apotropaic, witchlike spells to fend off romantic memories.

There has always been a thrilling and unnerving sense of destruction and metonymy in Ursuta's sculptures and installations—recent works have included marble gravestones outside at Frieze New York, as if to mourn extinct species of contemporary art, and a giant marble nose placed in a wheelbarrow on the High Line like the inverse surviving element of classical statuary. And perhaps most exceptionally, she doesn't steer away from using her own personal history—whether the damaged psychology of her native country or her own body, which is often the source of her cast pieces—to ignite her mixed-media productions. Even when human figures aren't present, there is a constant sense of the human body entwining with the industrial materials. Ursuta walks a line between politics, aesthetics, and open-ended possibilities to brilliant effect. And in what often feels like a passive, empty-gestured field of young New York artists, there is an urgency and risk to her work, even when she's building small, loaded anthems to



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her dark days as a kid in a salami-manufacturing town under a Communist dictatorship.

Ursuta's chamber models will appear this month at the Venice Biennale. We met up for lunch shortly after she sent them on their way.

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN: You've built something of an art cemetery on Randall's Island for Frieze.

ANDRA URSUTA: Yeah, it's kind of a buzz kill for an art fair. There are six black marble slabs that are tombstones with carvings of the icon you find online when you do an image search and the image is no longer there.

BOLLEN: Right, like a page cut in half.

URSUTA: Yeah. Part of it has something to do with all of the art that was made and has been forgotten.

BOLLEN: I think about that often. I don't think people realize how fleeting most of the artwork circling around right now is. Most art is not permanent; it will disappear. The artist will be forgotten. The collectors and galleries will move on.

URSUTA: Art fairs operate on this premise that value increases in time, and that's impossible because there's too much art around. So, yes, I think a good amount of the stuff at art fairs ends up forgotten. No one will look at it again.

BOLLEN: I don't want to pin you down as a political artist, but in a time when most young artists in New York are concerned with very conceptual or formalist strategies—two very safe bets these days for instant success—your work stands out. You use your body, your Romanian background, even the house you grew up in. It's an entirely different track.

URSUTA: Well, I envy them. I would like to do some of that kind of work, but I come from a country that doesn't have a very long tradition of fine art. The known Romanian artists really became recognized abroad. So it would be silly for me to suddenly be a minimalist.

My family doesn't even know what art is. They have absolutely no use for it. And I think that's fine, actually.

BOLLEN: You grew up in a small town in Romania. Was there any art around at all when you were growing up? Even in books?

URSUTA: My parents had a couple of books about painters. There might have been a Michelangelo book and an Ingres. I mostly looked at history books because my father was a history teacher. For some reason, I really did want to become a painter.

BOLLEN: When you came to New York for college, were you still interested in being a painter?

URSUTA: It took me a while to accommodate to living

in the States. I spent my last year in high school in Florida as an exchange student. I remember one of my teachers from high school knew Marilyn Minter, and on my first trip to New York, my teacher told me to show her my slides. This was about 1997. I went to her apartment, somewhere around SoHo, but I had never used a buzzer before, so I just pressed it and didn't take my finger off. For minutes! [laughs]

BOLLEN: Marilyn Minter must have been pissed. “Who the hell does this girl think she is?”

URSUTA: Yeah. Everything went downhill from there. I don't think she liked my work either, but really I think the buzzer just killed it. But even when I came to school in New York, I was still not used to America. It was a bit of a lost phase for me.

BOLLEN: What I think is interesting is that most people use the opportunity of moving to New York to reinvent themselves as well as the subject of their work. I think you could have just suddenly decided that you were a minimalist. But you held on to so many Romanian influences.

URSUTA: For some pieces ... But also, I could not make this work if I lived in Romania, so I'm not really a Romanian artist either. But it became clear to me after school that I was not going to be a painter.

BOLLEN: Why did you feel you didn't have the talent for painting?

URSUTA: There were a lot of reasons. I just wasn't mature enough, and painting is too depressing. If you're really honest with yourself and your work, you can't really be a painter. So instead, I had all these shitty jobs. Then I did a clothing line and made costumes and joined a band.

BOLLEN: You were in Gogol Bordello for a while. What was your part?

URSUTA: A really embarrassing part. I was one of the two girls they had performing these dance and theater routines. And I sang a little bit and made costumes, but it was really just about being a chick from Eastern Europe running around in shorts! Which is also why I stopped. [laughs] Then I worked as a carpenter. And then I started to make furniture for my house, and then sculptures. But I didn't know that was what I was aiming for. I wasn't even keeping up with what was going on in the art world—I didn't go to openings. I still feel that gallery openings aren't the best way to look at art.

BOLLEN: Maybe that's why you have such a knack for creative installations, like shattering the front window for your 2012 show, “Magical Terrorism.”

URSUTA: I think that came from my relationship with Ramiken. When I first met Mike [Ursuta, Andra's fiancé and Ramiken gallerist], Ramiken was in a basement full of rats on Clinton Street. It was the most amazing space I'd ever seen. And Mike really pushed everyone not to take the gallery space for granted as a neutral space that immediately makes everything you put in it “art.” And I believe in that. I think art is too dependent on this structure. It's almost like art is a sick man that needs life support called galleries and art fairs. It should really be something that functions outside of that if it's genuinely good. And if it's not, then it's just garbage that is going to end up in the mass grave of art.

BOLLEN: Did you feel people in America understood what had happened in Romania when you first came to New York?

URSUTA: There are waves of stigma associated with being from Eastern Europe. In the '90s, people knew about the poverty and the orphans. And now I feel there is a second wave of, “Oh, it sucks to be from Eastern Europe,” because of what is happening with the E.U.

BOLLEN: Do you think in Romania there is still a hangover from Ceausescu? Are people still afflicted by living under the charismatic dictator?

URSUTA: Yeah, I think, in very complicated ways. People my age are still Ceausescu's generation because we were born at this time when abortions were illegal, and a lot of us were unwanted children. If it weren't for him, we wouldn't be here. I certainly wouldn't be here.

BOLLEN: Really? You're certain of that?

URSUTA: Yeah, it's very clear in my family history. And also that's why I like Cristian Mungiu's films, because they deal exactly with that generation and with those issues. I also think there's a lot of nostalgia for the stability, even though it was bad. The people had more security under Ceausescu. But I really don't spend a lot of time on Romania media. When I do, it's more for the more sensational stories coming out of the country.

BOLLEN: Like how you titled a show around the event when the Romanian (CONTINUED ON PAGE 121)

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN IS INTERVIEWER'S EDITOR AT LARGE. ABOVE, LEFT: ANDRA URSUTA'S CRUSH, 2011. CAST: URETHANE, WAX, SNEAKERS, WIG, SILICONE. COURTESY THE ARTIST. ABOVE, RIGHT: URSUTA'S VANDAL LUST, 2011. WOOD, CARDBOARD, PLASTIC, ELASTIC, ROPE, METAL. PHOTO: ULI HOLZ. COURTESY RAMIKEN. CRUCIBLE HAIR PRODUCTS: BUMBLE AND BUMBLE. INCLUDING FULL FORM MOUSSE AND CREME. CONTOUR HAIR: JIMMY PAUL FOR BUMBLE AND BUMBLE. MAKEUP: FRANCELLE. RETOUCHING: GLOSS STUDIO NEW YORK. FASHION DETAILS PAGE 127. >See more of ANDRA URSUTA on interviewmagazine.com

government tried to tax Gypsy witches for their work, and the witches retaliated by putting a curse on the government.

URSUTA: Yes, and the government did collapse. It worked. The decision of part of Romania to despise the Gypsies and view them as having magical powers also became a way for the Gypsies to make money from that fear. They are owning it in a way. Which I think is pretty awesome.

BOLLEN: You mentioned Romanians being nostalgic of security. The piece you are showing in Venice consists of bleak, dollhouse-like models of four of the rooms of the house you grew up in Salonta.

URSUTA: The house was destroyed a few years ago to make room for this huge Austrian supermarket chain. I made a similar piece in 2007 when the house was still standing. I had many bad memories of that house. It was a bad place to grow up. But I think I also feel very nostalgic about that time, even though it was awful. My family lived there until I was 6. We were kind of the crazy family in town and were stigmatized in a lot of ways. I don't want to say I was damaged, but the grotesque and scary things that went on in that house left a mark on how I look at the world. But this time around, the house is actually gone. So it's a very ugly reminder of how perishable we are. Your origin is there and then it's a supermarket. I know in America, things get demolished and rebuilt all the time, but over there it is not like that.

BOLLEN: Was trying to recreate it in some way therapeutic for you?

URSUTA: No. [laughs] I think the first one might have been, but this was more a labor of love. Just the idea of something gone that was not really a major moment of history. It doesn't really need to be recorded in such detail or given so much attention. It's like a shitty house in a shitty town in a shitty country. There is no need for this to exist, and yet it does in a very articulated way.

BOLLEN: But you do think of this work—and some of your other pieces—as biographical?

URSUTA: Yeah, absolutely. But it's not important that people know that. It's dangerous if a work is dependent on the gesture of a particular artist or his persona, because all of that is lost so quickly. If you no longer have the personality, then the work kind of collapses. So I like to feel that this work can stand on its own just because of how descriptive it is and meticulous. It doesn't have to be tied to me specifically.

BOLLEN: Even when you cast parts of your body such as the resin stools [*Waiting Area*, 2011] or the flattened urethane figure on the floor [*Crush*, 2011]?

URSUTA: I feel like with the pieces where I used my body, or parts of my body, there is a physical comedy that is implied in what the piece is. Like a tragicomedy.

BOLLEN: I like the way you play with the tensions between the bodily and the industrial. Your sculptures are hybrids of tough, militaristic materials and a softness or deflation or tactile malleability. And torture is a subject you also seem to be interested in. I keep thinking of that piece where you use a batting-cage baseball-pitching machine as a stoning device, throwing rocks against these fleshy tiles [*Stoner*, 2013].

URSUTA: I look at a lot of really weird stuff online, which makes me worried now, especially because of the Boston attacks.

BOLLEN: Artists and writers have search histories that would be deeply disturbing to any FBI agent.

URSUTA: I know. I read this BBC article about one of the bomber's YouTube accounts, and I also look at a lot of Chechen jihadi training videos. And I also have all the music of this one pro-jihad musician.

BOLLEN: It's like when you need to understand how to kill people when you're writing something, the search looks so incriminating, but really it's about artistic investigation and research.

URSUTA: There was that cop who was convicted—

BOLLEN: You mean the one who was found guilty because he was researching ways to eat women? That was disgusting.

URSUTA: He didn't do anything!

BOLLEN: I agree. It was a situation where the idea of the crime was so gruesome it kind of perverted justice on the facts. His fantasies might be disgusting but people are allowed their fantasies.

URSUTA: See, I don't necessarily feel disgusted by the idea of eating a woman. If you go see some shows in galleries right now, you will find artists who took research one step further and made objects. I almost feel obliged to somehow make a work about this. I heard them talking about it on NPR or something, and then the next guest was Marina Abramović, who actually used disembodied heads for performance, on tables, as centerpieces! That's tasteless!

BOLLEN: She was also accused of paying those people used as centerpieces an atrociously small amount of money while all of the rich ate around them.

URSUTA: Art is a way for me to test-drive uncomfortable things. Like for the show at Venus Over Manhattan, I was looking at images of executions. I don't remember what triggered the connection for me. What does baseball have to do with stonings? Nothing. But I saw these pictures of a woman hanging from a crane in Iran. It was a piece of equipment that looked perfect to do that job, although it was not the job it was originally designed to do. The baseball-pitching machine was the same.

BOLLEN: You've forever ruined batting cages for me. What about your catapult piece from 2011 [*Vandal Lust*] that borrows from Ilya Kabakov's famous piece *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment* [1984]? In his piece, the man is presumed to have successfully launched himself into space. In yours, there's a dent near the ceiling and the figure curled on the floor. Is that about failure?

URSUTA: Launching and failing. I guess it could be seen as being about the art world, that trajectory. But it was more about knowing you will fail but going for it anyway.

BOLLEN: It's interesting that you see it as a hopeful piece. I saw it more as despairing.

URSUTA: I don't think of my work as being hopeful—just as Beckett is not a hopeful author. Yet his exercises in despair are still a call to do something. At least I see it that way.

BOLLEN: "I can't go on, I'll go on."

URSUTA: It's a grim world, how horrible it is, and how we die, and all these things. But you still have to fill your time with something. So much of what is around and so much of history is just wasted effort, and yet it produced something. It's produced some sort of continuity, so that's interesting.

BOLLEN: For all of the linguistic feats of Beckett's work, his productions focus very heavily on the physical. They are so much about bodily endurance.

URSUTA: Totally! Like the one where the characters are moving around, like, in one of Dante's circles but it's shit. They are moving around in shit, and it doesn't get more physical than that.

BOLLEN: Yes, and it reminds me of Dennis Cooper too, where his writing involves a sexual nature that literally cuts into the bodies of the objects of desire. It moves the desire inside, into the organs; it internalizes this object, very violently. I feel like you do something similar in your work. You really excavate the physical body, or manipulate it, or put it through such strain.

URSUTA: I come from a pretty religious family, and growing up, I was surrounded, basically, by this idea of Christian self-denial and total divestiture and mortification of the flesh. That—combined with this Eastern European sense from the Communist era when

you were not showing emotions and were not enjoying things—were very important for me growing up. I internalized them and took them to this crazy extent where I didn't smile. It was very much about denying yourself things. So, in a way, these assaults on the body are about that. There is also something in the religious, Eastern European philosophical world that has a mystical tendency to deemphasize the body and focus on the essence. I don't believe in that. And that move is something that automatically happens in what I do.

BOLLEN: So what are some of the rooms depicted in the models for Venice?

URSUTA: The kitchen, the pantry, the sleeping room—I don't want to call it a bedroom because it really wasn't that—the room where we raised nutrias.

BOLLEN: The animals? You raised them for the fur. Did you have to see them get killed?

URSUTA: I am ashamed to say that I was very excited to see them killed. [laughs]

BOLLEN: You enjoyed that as a child?

URSUTA: I had a little stool! My father would kill them. He would slaughter one at a time. And I would bring my chair and watch him. And then my father would make an omelet with the kidneys and the balls of the nutrias—and I loved it. That was my favorite thing to eat!

BOLLEN: [both laugh] That's disgusting!

URSUTA: Well, I am a vegetarian now. But a woman in town would use the fur for coats or hats.

BOLLEN: What was the main industry of this town?

URSUTA: There was this salami factory in the town. It was famous in the whole country, even though all the salami was for export. But if you knew someone at the factory and you could get a piece, it was like this black-market gold bar. It would open all these doors for you.

BOLLEN: How strange to make something in a town that townspeople weren't allowed to enjoy.

URSUTA: Right. I feel like that salami is a really big part of the psyche of Romanians, even to this day.