

Ice-pop red and blue and Halloween-orange six-inch-high tapered torsos merging into outrageously demonstrative faces, Alice Mackler's sculpted clay portraits, with their scarred, furrowed, and lumpily textured surfaces, are alternately distorted, grotesque, totem-like, and irrefutably endearing. Blow-up-doll mouths and huge peepers, drooping boobs, all curves and contrapposto, self-possessed, and at times appearing confrontational or provocative, maybe laughing at the observer or defiantly asking, 'What are you looking at?' Mischievous and coy or in other instances sad and abject, they are psychically dense tributes to the full scope of feminine humanness in all its ungraspable heterogeneity. The Venus of Hohle Fels meets Gandhara Grave Culture cremation urns with an updated, Rubenesque twist, and along with all their other qualities they're sassy and bawdy, pulsating with an erotic vivaciousness that attracts viewers' attention no matter what their amorous fancies might entail. Intensely

ALICE MACKLER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HEATHER STEN

personal and enigmatic, paradoxically both inscrutable and inviting, they afford multiple entry points of interpretation and are never not totally alluring. And that's just the ceramics. Her now 60-year output also includes insouciantly one-lined, pendulous, billowing nude ladies floating in front of colour-field backgrounds in her paintings, and watercolours and collages toggling between amalgamations of sprawling hips and butts accented by her trademark jaunty nipples to soft-hued daubs encircling photographs of lithe models cut out from fashion magazines. Even if there are acute links back to her lodestar Paul Klee, as well as Willem de Kooning, Niki de Saint Phalle, Saul Steinberg, and many others, and a commonality with the last decade's surge of contemporary ceramics, her vision is genuinely, unmistakably her own. Archetypical, yes, art-historically comparable, sure, but completely eclipsing the far-ranging constellation of touchstones to singularly surprise, enchant, and delight.



A too-rare triad of elicited responses, and for a long time barely ever experienced by anyone besides the artist herself. Beyond aesthetic concerns a sea change from more than half a century of neglect to awareness and celebration can't be ignored and niggling questions persist about how, why, and when certain people are validated for their creative pursuits and others aren't. Whatever societal failings and previous injustices have contributed to this state of affairs isn't the theme here, but they do provide a sobering foil to this extraordinary artist's long-delayed emergence from obscurity. And while undoubtedly that's a testament to lifelong perseverance and fortitude in the face of indifference, luck and serendipity also played a major role. Thanks to Mackler's decision to start attending pottery classes at Greenwich House in New York's West Village 20 years ago her work was noticed by teachers and fellow students, specifically Derek Weisberg and Joanne Greenbaum. Their advocacy and enthusiasm were instrumental and led to the critical involvement of Kerry Schuss, an artist in his own right and dealer possessed of a consummate knack for discovering and deftly contextualising previously overlooked talents. Put another way, it takes a village, and this story has a happy ending because in this case the village model worked. In a big, big way, garnering much acclaim and a devoted following, with appearances in group exhibits at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Connecticut and the Jewish Museum in New York, and solo and group outings at galleries in New York, Los Angeles, and Cologne. Fittingly there is also a comprehensive and excellently illustrated monograph recently published by New York Consolidated and Gregory R. Miller & Co. with Kerry Schuss Gallery. Which are just a few of the reasons why, at 90, Mackler is unabashedly revelling in the success and admiration now coming her way, and just as or more importantly charging full steam ahead, very much in the moment, excitedly making new work with ambitions to exploit unexplored mediums. The embodiment of joie de vivre, she sparkles and amuses with witty anecdotes, sharp opinions, and a pithy and irreverent take on the ups and downs of life. Surrounded by her own bulbous, voluptuous, vibrant clay creations as the September sun streams into her winsomely multicoloured apartment, her impish, inspirational, and animated manner leaves absolutely no doubt

who made them all. And, crucially, that even if recognition is slow to come, there's also no substitute for the sustaining satisfactions that result from the determined, consistent, and profoundly fulfilling act of art making.

How are you doing Alice?

I'm doing great! I feel really good. I'm so glad to see you, and hear you.

It's really great to see and hear you too, Alice. It's been about three years since I saw you last at your birthday party with the cake and everything. That was a lot of fun. And now it's a pleasure to have this opportunity to catch up. I'm doing great, but the only problem I do have is my eyes. I'm scared silly. I've worried about it since I was a little girl. I was always told I would have eye problems; it runs in the family. But mostly I'm good.

So to begin, how long have you lived in this apartment at 11th and Ave. C?

It's been 42 years, since 1979. My mother lived here before me; she moved here in 1968. I lived downstairs first and then after she died I got this apartment.

I lived on 3rd between B and C from 1992 to 1995, and it's hard to imagine you being here too at that time. Even during the daytime Ave. C was pretty sketchy.

I never went down Ave. C in my whole life. Well, I did once, and that was enough.

Remember the maxim that Ave. A was 'Al-right', B was 'Beware', C was 'Crazy', and D was 'Death'? There was just no good reason to be on Avenues C or D unless you were buying drugs or wanted to have an adventure, possibly a thrilling or dangerous one. Or you lived there, of course. But now, I just came from the First Ave. I stop and there are normal civilians nonchalantly riding Citi Bikes and young women in skimpy outfits walking their cute little schnauzers. You just didn't have that assumption of safe passage 25 years ago. It's changed.

That's a major understatement, Alice. Were you born in New York?

I was born in Manhattan.

You're a real native.

Yes. But we moved to New Jersey in 1943.



My parents wanted to find a school and it took my father two years to find the Buxton School. It was owned by a woman in New Jersey and was called Buxton Country Day School, for the first grade through to high school. Something happened though, someone had passed away, and they had this beautiful house in Williamstown, Massachusetts, so someone suggested she move the high school there. So she did.

And you went there?

Yes, and lived there. It was a boarding school, right next door to the wonderful Clark Art Institute. But the first year, the first of October, the white stuff came.

The white stuff, you mean the snow?

And it didn't stop. But it was gorgeous up there. I graduated in 1950 and moved back to New Jersey.

And then you moved to Manhattan? Where did you live then?

All over Manhattan. I wouldn't live anywhere else, not in Brooklyn or the Bronx.

I moved here in 1991 and it took almost 10 years before I really ventured to Brooklyn. For the first phase I barely ever went above 23rd Street and the other four boroughs might as well have been in Ohio. It was the East Village and the Lower East Side and nothing else, except for some forays up-town to museums or to see movies. In 1995 I moved to Suffolk Street around the corner from Ratner's, the legendary and slightly grimy Jewish kosher dairy restaurant on Delancey Street.

I haven't heard that name in a long time!

Isaac Bashevis Singer and a lot of those other cats hung out there a lot. I mention it because I see you have *Great Yiddish Writers of the 20th Century* on your bookshelf. Do you speak Yiddish?

No.

Me neither, unfortunately. You have a lot of poetry books, including that big Carl Sandburg collection over there.

I read a lot, when I still could. I like poetry. In fact my mother could read a book in one night. She read really fast. And my older brother was very smart and read a lot too.

In your daily life, besides being an artist from way back, didn't you work as an advertising manager at some point?

I worked all kinds of places, in advertising, at bookstores, and went to art school at night, the Art Students League on 57th Street. I knew I was interested in art and I went to a friend's and she said, 'I'm going to take you to the Art Students League'. I didn't know what to say; that was my dream.

So you went to the Art Students League from 1952 to 1954 and also got a Certificate in Illustration from the Cartoonists and Illustrators School in 1957. But then much later you went to the School of Visual Arts to get a BFA in the mid '80s?

The reason I went to SVA is also very funny. I couldn't get into an art gallery, not because the artwork wasn't good but because the first question was always, 'What college did you graduate from?' So then I told them, 'I'm going over to SVA, tell them I'm coming'. I was still working at the time and I was very, very tired. Full-time job and going to school. But what happened is that even though I had a BFA I still couldn't get into an art gallery.

So were you going around to galleries, bringing your slides?

I'd go all over with my portfolio and slides.

That's a tough row to hoe and you really learn first-hand about repeated rejection. It can be punishing and extremely discouraging. Back to SVA, you were painting at the time, like *Emily Brontë* from 1986. That's a really arresting image and though it's mostly abstracted in a general female shape of brown and white and red, it does capture on some level what I imagine *Emily Brontë* actually looked like.

I had taken classes with Will Barnet, earlier, at the Art Students League.

Barnet taught there and reportedly influenced Cy Twombly and James Rosenquist, among others. I can see your connection to his flat, stylised aesthetic and his solitary figures. So he had an impact on you?

Yes. And I liked folk art a lot too.

I know you say that you really like Paul Klee. I love Paul Klee. There are the books on the shelf I bought on him.

On the topic of books, the one published last year about you came out so good, a substantial overview. Are you happy with it? Very! That book is great. It took a long time.

I liked your handwritten answers in the interview with Joanne Greenbaum, especially the one where she asks, 'What compels you to keep working?' You reply, 'My genes want me to work. I have to work, and do beautiful bright artwork'. With this book and all the exhibits, it's clear that in the last 10 years there's been a massive, life-altering change in your fortunes. You're right. I couldn't be happier. Not many people my age are happy.

first. Then one day I was there and got mad at myself and I took my fingers like this and scrunched up the clay. Then everyone said, 'I want to buy that'.

You'd hit upon something. That's exactly what happened.

In the beginning your ceramics were mostly grey, the ones from the early 2000s, and didn't have all that hyper-expressive colour that people associate with your work. You weren't putting paint on them at first? Those are just glazed; there's no paint in there. Well, maybe a little.



Making beautiful artworks has worked out, even if acknowledgment was a long time coming. Since the Greenwich program has been so integral, why don't we talk about that. I know you still go twice a week. When did you start? In 1999. At the time, I wanted to do something different, some other kind of artwork than painting and drawing.

So you were interested in ceramics?

I just knew I wanted to do something else, but I didn't know what. So I said to myself, 'Go!'

And you took classes there?

Yes, but I wasn't doing what I wanted to at

So how did it go from the grisaille to all the colour? When and how did that start?

When I met Derek Weisberg, he helped me with that; he also teaches at Greenwich House. Then he would say, 'Kerry has to see this, Kerry has to see this'.

Kerry Schuss?

Yes. So then I met Kerry. And he said, 'I don't care if you have a BFA or not', and that was it.

Along with Derek and Kerry, didn't Joanne Greenbaum also help out by starting to collect your work?

Yes, she started buying them, and other peo-





ple too, mainly artists. That's how it began, and people started taking notice.

Joanne and Adrienne Rubenstein co-curated *Forget About the Sweetbreads* at James Fuentes in 2013, and that first brought you attention, is that right?

See, Joanne did something really funny. She put me into that show and someone said, 'She must like your work', because she picked me up at 6pm, we got there at 6.15pm, and there were six other people in the show, who all had one piece, but she had put 10 of mine in. At 10pm they said, 'You have sold eight of your pieces'. They sold for \$400 to \$600.

I love the eyes.
Oh yes. And the big lips.

And now you're doing ones that have a corner behind them, little walls, almost like a stage set?
Exactly. I love stage sets.

Do you go to the theatre often?
The opera, but I go for the stage sets and not for the singing.

Do you think there's a connection between going to the opera and your artwork?
Yes. And inspiration. Many years ago they did a ballet of *Alice in Wonderland*, and you know



A bargain by today's standards. A lot goes into these sculptures; one can see that right away. There's a raw quality mixed with a remarkable amount of skill. Do you start with the clay that you form, and does the paint go on then or after it's in the kiln?

You can do it both ways, but usually after it's been in the kiln. Everyone says not to do it that way. And then you fire it again. The colour is the glaze.

You have multiple figures with their arms over their heads, hands touching in a continuous form, a circle. Prayerful but also a portal. Everyone likes those. It just looked really good.

my name is Alice. When I was growing up I had *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, so I had to go see the performance at the Koch Theater and it was gorgeous. The sets, the costumes, the dancing. It was marvellous.

Well, you live in New York, and there are operas and plays to go see.
I like it all. But right now I'm not going to anything. I don't want to be around a lot of people; it makes me uncomfortable.

I can understand why, but I hope you get to go to the opera again soon.
I'd rather stay at home and do my own work.

As far as the collages and paintings, you do them all here? And where do you get the fashion magazines that you cut up to use in the collages?

Joanne gives them to me. And yes, I do them standing up in the kitchen, on that counter. I love standing and I can't do any artwork unless the house is clean, I can't.

Who did the yellow and purple tiles on the floor of the kitchen here?

An Irish contractor who lives upstairs. I haven't seen him for a while. He doesn't like to work so much, but when he does, it's good. And he did the shelves in the other room.

It's understandable. Also sometimes it looks like they're wearing big blocky sunglasses. I'm sure people ask you and maybe you're sick of it, but are your sculptures self-portraits?

People say, 'They look just like you!' I say, 'What?!' I used to get that constantly, but I don't see it. They used to say that a lot, though I haven't heard it in a long time. But way back it was constant. It bothered me.

I can see how that could get annoying. Beyond the resemblance or not to you, or to womankind in general, they do have a potentially prehistoric air about them. On one hand primitive and from a faraway time, but also with a defi-



The daubs of paint that surround the photos in your collages look a lot like how you use paint on your sculptures, which makes sense. Though it seems the colour in the collages is often lighter, more summery or pastel, not as primary as they are in the ceramics. And they used to be on paper, but now you're using canvas, right? It depends on what mood I'm in. And I think they look better on canvas. They also sell better on canvas.

Good point. Concerning the arms raised, again, and the eyes, you said everyone seems to like them?

The eyes get everybody.

nite connection to your personal mythology. I'm going to quote Barry Schwabsky from his *Artforum* review that really gets to the heart of the matter. He wrote that you can be seen as an 'ancient artist, the survivor of some lost civilization who just happens to live among us today', who has 'a staunch refusal to initiate outsiders into a body of knowledge held close in a secret society that just might have only one member'. I love that. He really outdid himself.

They are obviously women, perhaps from some alternative, damaged, yet triumphant Amazonian culture.

I can't make a man.







Did you ever try?

Yes! And you know what happens? They become a woman.

With your work, the sculptures, psychologically there are many layers. But despite the awareness of possible distress deep down, at the same time they almost always have the effect of making one smile. Unaccountably, maybe unintentionally, you can't help it because they're just so infectious and joyous. It's no small feat, and it can be argued that it's a rare accomplishment to so often get that reaction.

They do.

'Wagner has some great moments, but a lot of miserable half hours'.

I don't like him at all! And I don't like Gustav Mahler either.

Well, you have to make distinctions and choose what pleases you, and not everything can be your cup of tea. You know, now after spending an hour here and taking it all in, I have to say that your place is so full of colour and artwork and it has such a vibrant and lively ambience that you can feel. Also I like your pink pillows. When and where did you get this big Chinese screen?

A long time ago. I like oriental things a lot.



Maybe it's partially a consequence of the calming effect of classical music, which I know you listen to a lot while you're making art. Who are some of your favourite composers? Bach, Stravinsky, Tchaikovsky. I also like other people and old music from the 16th century. I just like music, except for country music, that puts me to sleep. It's very slow. And jazz singers I don't like, but I love jazz. And opera, Verdi. The only one I really don't like is Richard Wagner.

He's a lot to take sometimes. There's a great Mark Twain quote, 'Wagner's music is better than it sounds'. He also supposedly said,

So almost everything in here is your artwork, except the Adrienne Rubenstein painting, and one by Joanne, and a Polly Apfelbaum, and the screen, and a few other things. And I see you have some hatboxes. You have this art-filled, light-infused apartment and it makes for a very pleasing environment. And you're making a lot of work.

I've got no reason to stop.

I know things are going really well now, but didn't all those years of hardly anyone paying you any mind get discouraging for you? That can't be easy.

Oh yes, it did, a little bit.

I'm really impressed, Alice. Because being an artist, you want people to see it, you want to play to the room. And when you don't have an audience, that can be very dispiriting. It reminds me of the artist Robert Barber, from Tucson, who Kerry also represents. He basically didn't get any recognition until he was 92, and now he's had a museum retrospective and been shown at the Independent Art Fair, and many people know who he is and are buying his paintings. For 40 years he only occasionally showed while he worked as a sixth-grade teacher, but he kept at it and he's a real testament to perseverance, as are you. I love his work. I want to see his new show. You know, I knew I was good, but I just couldn't get into a gallery. Better late than never, I guess.

Have you had anybody who you don't know come up to you to express their admiration? Any fans approaching you on the street?

Well, it's very interesting, the first one was right around the corner, a guy on Avenue A saw me and said, 'Excuse me, are you Alice Mackler?' I said, 'Yeah', and he said, 'I own one of your pieces'. And then on Sixth Avenue a woman came towards me and was really excited, 'I love your work!'

That's wild, getting recognised like that. To return to Greenwich House, it's evident that it's been a really big part of your life for the last 20 years.

I love Greenwich House and I've made a lot of friends there. They've taken good care of me, especially Derek, he's been very good. It's wonderful to be there because there are people from all over the world, like Ghada Amer, from Egypt; she's very well known and has shows all over.

I'm really glad to hear that; the city can be hard, especially as you get older. I'm happy to hear you have so much encouragement and support from your community there.

But Lilli Miller can't come anymore. Marianne can't come anymore. She's great, she was married to Jan Yoors.

Wait, Jan Yoors, who wrote *The Gypsies*?

Yes, that's him. Marianne was at Greenwich House for a long time. I couldn't put that book down. It's called *Hidden Tapestry*, by Debra Dean. I had to read it, because she had the most unreal life of anyone you ever met.

I'm slightly flabbergasted. In college I read his memoir about travelling with the Roma when he was a kid, and it was so alluring and exotic and made a major impression. I don't think I've ever met anyone since who's known about him. He lived with the Roma part of the year starting when he was 12, fought in the resistance during World War II, was tortured by the Nazis, had this dramatic escape over the Pyrenees to Spain, and then he came to New York with Marianne and his other wife, Annebert, and did those pretty astounding tapestries.

You wouldn't know it, how interesting their lives were. Marianne is very quiet, she's about her work. Yes, he had two wives, and that was legal at that point. With the other wife, Annebert, he had a boy and girl, with Marianne he had a son who she lives with. When she dies you should read her obituary, because no one can match it. But her and Lilli Miller can't come anymore and I'm the oldest one there now at Greenwich House.

Their travels and displacements make me want to ask, since you never really lived anywhere but New York, if you did leave is there some place in particular you'd want to go?

I would love to move to Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Really?

For two reasons. One is warm weather, and the other is that I'm interested in American Indian art. But I think I might not be able to do that because the art world happens to be in Manhattan, so I don't have a choice. I was born here and I will die here, what can I do? But I can dream.

