

VENUS

MANHATTAN

Solitary Fitness

Andra Ursuta

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Venus Over Manhattan

980 Madison Avenue

New York City

“Being in solitary I am denied access to a gym and not allowed to mix, so I am on my own at all times. I get one hour out of my cell a day to exercise out in the yard, which is a cage 20 x 30 feet long! This is my arena; I am the Gladiator! I work out under the sky in the rain, snow, wind, and sun in all weathers, six days of every week (religiously) and my routine works: I am a strong and powerful man.” –Charles Bronson, *Solitary Fitness*

Solitary Fitness is an exercise manual written by a notoriously violent British prisoner who has spent much of his incarceration in solitary confinement. The manual, which details his claustrophobic regime, is laced with monomaniacal and paranoid ramblings on the individual’s sole responsibility for the health and form his or her own body. A different type of solitary fitness, but one just as rigorous, can be found in Andra Ursuta’s current exhibition of new works at Venus Over Manhattan.

Stoner, contained within an industrial fence that dominates the gallery space, consists of a baseball- pitching machine that has been modified to hurl stones at two large tiled walls some forty feet away. The walls, on closer inspection, are covered with aged and cracked tiles in the color of bruised flesh, encrusted with human hair and filth. The floor is littered with the hundreds of stones that Ursuta hand-made to be fired through the machine. Stoning is a centuries-old method of capital punishment by torture, still sanctioned and practiced today in a handful of countries as the penalty for adultery, among other crimes. But absent from the present execution is the victim, her body subsumed within the backdrop of her death; and the perpetrators, their throws reduced to the motion of a machine designed for the solitary pursuit of athletic practice.

Standing watch in the gallery are three of Ursuta’s pole sculptures, part of an ongoing series of anthropomorphic sculptures made from stainless-steel poles. The current grouping, *Dumb Belles*, is supported by pedestals covered in tiles, the sort one might find in a gymnasium shower room. Their lean, angular bodies are testament to discipline and rigor; their impervious, sterile surfaces free of contamination and attachment. Fit, clean, alone.

Much of Romanian-born Ursuta's work is informed by her native country, her subsequent move to New York as a student, and the attendant issues of foreignness, exoticism and dislocation. She is deeply committed to the studio, spending the bulk of her time addressing these concerns in solitude; building, shaping, and refining in her form of solitary fitness.