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Interview

THE ARTIST IN MOURNING: ANDRA  
URSUTA

By BRIENNE WALSH



After a whirlwind year that included a critically lauded solo exhibition, "Magical

Terrorism," at Ramiken Crucible—Roberta Smith, *The New York Times* chief critic, called it "a bit of institutional critique worthy of Michael Asher"—Andra Ursuta needed some breathing space. So after her solo presentation at Art Basel Miami Beach, she drove the long way home.

"I'm really scared of New York," she admitted over the phone the day after she returned from a road trip. "I feel like New York is the kind of place where the second you are not able to function optimally, and you get a little slow, you're done, you're out." Fortunately for Ursuta, she's functioned more optimally than most. In the past three years, she's had three solo exhibitions at Ramiken Crucible, along with works in group exhibitions such as "Ostalgia" (2011) at the New Museum. In 2013, along with a solo exhibition at blue-chip gallery Venus Over Manhattan, she has already been granted a spot in the non-profit exhibition space at Frieze New York. Born in Romania in 1979, Ursuta came to New York to study at Columbia University in 1997. Her work, which is full of dark symbolism and mordant humor, lies very much in the intersection between the post-Impressionist, traditional education she received as a child, and the critical theory based curriculum she was immersed in while studying contemporary art at Columbia. Finding much of her inspiration in news stories and photographs she finds on the Internet, Ursuta's haunting sculptural installations—which draw comparisons to Yves Klein and Constantin Brancusi—explore contemporary experience through the lens of past histories. "I'm not really a crusader for anything," she said. "I'm just kind of reflecting unspoken attitudes that form the undercurrent of images and news stories, and the way contemporary experience is framed."

Inspiration comes from many sources, and is passively absorbed. "Usually, I don't get inspiration so much from immediate events, but more from vague things like who I'm dating, or what I'm reading at any given moment on the BBC website," she said. Necessarily, her work is informed by the fact that she is Romanian. "I'm from a very different place," she said. "I don't think I'll ever be able to ignore that. In the United States, everything is just so prosperous. It starkly contrasts the environment in Eastern Europe."

Although Ursuta's work deals with dark issues such as domestic violence, nuclear bombs, the uncovering of mass graves, and the expulsion of ethnic groups, she tries to approach each subject with irony. Spurred by an article about a woman stoned to death in a fundamentalist country, at Venus Over Manhattan Ursuta will use a baseball pitching machine to create what she calls a "silly execution device." "It's kind of a scary show," she says. "It has to do with punishment, and violence against woman. But I'm trying to deal with it in a non-moralizing way, by making fun of clichés."

Rather than diminishing the horror of such events, however, Ursuta sees her work as a form of mourning. "It's more about my unwillingness to become obsessed by an event," she said. "By using it in my work, I try to detach in the stupidest way possible."