

HYPERALLERGIC

Artists Quarantine With Their Art Collections

"It is intriguing, what the mind selects to focus on (or seek refuge in) during a time of crisis."



Stephen Maine July 4, 2020



György Pártos, untitled ("The Blue Nude") (c.1970s), glazed Pirogranit, 14 x 9 x 2 inches (image courtesy Julia Kunin)

Julia Kunin (Brooklyn, New York): I've gone to Pécs, Hungary, every summer since 2009 and it's become my home away from home. Covid-19 prevented me from returning this year. The pandemic has been used as an excuse for the Hungarian government to ramp up an already autocratic regime. The "Blue Nude," as I'll call her, has become my portal to Pécs, reminding me of my friends that I worry about and miss very much.

The Blue Nude was made during the socialist era in Hungary, when ceramics were produced in factories by highly skilled anonymous artisans. My collection pays homage to these unsung craftspeople, without fetishizing a repressive era. What looks like hip retro-modernism has deep political roots. Themes of labor and family were ubiquitous in works of art, but there was some room for artistic expression and innovation.

After much searching, I was able to identify the artist of the Blue Nude when I found a signed, clothed version of my wall sculpture. (A few brushstrokes of glaze give her a shirt.) Perhaps my piece is one of a kind, even if it was reproduced with a mold. György Fürtös most likely made my “Blue Nude” in the 1970’s at the Zsolnay Factory , where he was a designer from 1962 to 1999. (Sadly, he passed away in 2010.) The piece is made of Pirogranit, the factory’s proprietary clay for outdoor works.

I’ve speculated that Fürtös was using humor and sexuality as a form of rebellion. Then I discovered that during the 1970s in Hungary, artists often combined modernism with elements of Hungarian folk art. Archaic figures such as the Venus of Willendorf were glorified, encouraging an abstracted eroticism in the form of large-breasted female figures. Even tulips, a common Hungarian folk symbol, became eroticized. The bird on the blue woman’s breast is a dove, a Hungarian folk symbol of love. From my Hungarian teacher, who knew Fürtös, I learned that what I thought was generic state-mandated artwork is very likely a portrait of the artist’s second wife, Zsofi.

The Blue Nude has inspired me to incorporate an unabashed eroticism in my multiple-gendered wall pieces. I am also paying homage to the Venus of Willendorf in the creation of queer goddesses and warriors. Looking hard at these ceramics reminds me of the circumstances in which they were made and the artists who made them. Meanwhile I’m thinking about my artist friends in Pécs.