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Erika Verzutti

BY KIKI MAZZUCHELLI

Pivô, São Paulo, Brazil

Housed in Oscar Niemeyer's iconic Copan building – São Paulo's equivalent of Le Corbusier's Unité d'habitation – Pivô occupies a generously sized yet uncompromising exhibition space that boasts some unusual architectural features. Originally conceived to camouflage the Copan's structure, this interstitial space was later converted into a dental hospital before being renovated as a gallery. Artworks must subsequently contend with plenty of visual noise, including tiled wall sections, an inverted beam protruding from the floor and a disused lift shaft. Erika Verzutti's solo show, 'Swan, Cucumber, Dinosaur', which includes sizeable new commissions as well as a number of earlier works, seems to have been carefully planned to address these challenges.

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Erika Verzutti, *Nessie*, 2008, cold porcelain clay, wood and acrylic, 257 x 40 x 50 cm. All images courtesy: the artist and Pivô, São Paulo; photographs: Everton Ballardin

The exhibition opens with *Nessie* (2008), a tall periscope-shaped plaster sculpture whose rugged surface is covered in splattered gold paint that trickles onto the floor. Sitting atop a narrow wooden crate in a curved wall niche, the work sets the tone for a show in which the artist explores the upright form of much classical sculpture as evidence of the medium's illusionistic aspiration towards verticality and lightness. For over a decade, Verzutti has developed a particular vocabulary of recurring forms, often modelled in clay then cast in bronze or concrete, combining references that range from the mundane (makeup cases, fruits and vegetables) to the sublime (modernist masterpieces by Constantin Brâncuși or Maria Martins). She has stated that the swans, cucumbers and dinosaurs populating this exhibition were inspired by a mysterious cylindrical shape with a rounded edge that emerges from a rural

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Erika Verzutti, *Swan Hula Hoop*, 2016, styrofoam, carbon steel, wood and spackling paste, 3.4 x 3.4 x 2.8 m

In the past couple of years, Verzutti's sculptures have grown to a larger-than-human scale. The three-and-a-half-metre work *Swan with Stage* (2015), the centrepiece of her exhibition at New York's Sculpture Center last year, doubled as an actual stage for an actor's delivery of a monologue, written by the artist. While not functioning as a stage, the newly commissioned *Cisne Bambolê* (Hula Hoop Swan, 2016) at Pivô reprises that project: a long, white, neck-like form protruding from a circular metal plate. Despite its enlarged dimensions, the work manages to retain the gestural quality and structural precariousness so characteristic of Verzutti's smaller sculptures.

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Erika Verzutti, *Swan Catwalk*, 2016, styrofoam, carbon steel, wood and spackling paste, 3.3 x 7.8 x 1.3 m

Elsewhere in the gallery, the swan motif reappears in another large, site-specific piece. Installed on the sloping edge of a ramp, a towering *Cisne Passarela* (Catwalk Swan, 2016) meets a modernist tripartite pillar that mirrors its smoother, sharper surface. Verzutti's works are often precariously balanced and roughly finished; yet, while it maintains this vulnerable quality, *Cisne Passarela* is the first of her sculptures to respond so directly to its surrounding environment. Here, rather than merely enlarging the form of an earlier work, Verzutti has taken a site-specific approach to the challenges of this complex, monumental space.

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Erika Verzutti, *Auditório*, 2016, styrofoam, carbon steel and spackling paste, dimensions variable

But it is in the last room of the exhibition – an awkward, cave-like space with uneven floor heights and a sloping ceiling, which the artist has described as resembling a cinema – where Verzutti pushes this experimentation even further. Scattered across the floor and illuminated by stage lights, lies a series of small abstract sculptures (*Banquinhos, Seats*, 2016), fashioned using polystyrene cut-outs and the metal plate remains from the larger commissioned works. The artist's first installation, *Banquinhos* eschews the figural qualities of her other sculptures. In the same space, the intimately scaled bronze sculpture *Tarsila com Novo* (Tarsila with New, 2011), lit by a spotlight, casts a wide shadow against an opposing wall. Verzutti's previous works have functioned as sets or props, but at Pivo the sculptures themselves have become the performers. More than merely a strategic response to a demanding exhibition space, however, the heightened drama of this staged environment also offers an insightful exploration of the manifold ways in which audience and sculpture interact.