

The Legends of Erika Verzutti

by Julie Boukobza

Dog, a submissive sculpture waiting by the door (2025)

“If you possess me, you will possess all things, but your life will belong to me.” This is the inscription addressed to Raphaël de Valentin, the new owner of *the magic skin* in Honoré de Balzac’s eponymous novel, *La Peau de Chagrin*. The Hôtel Balzac is the last place the author lived with the love of his life, Madame Hanska. *La Peau de Chagrin*¹ resonates uncannily with the themes underpinning this *in-room* exhibition by Erika Verzutti, such as the multiplicity of desires and the sometimes fatal consequences of their fulfillment. Crime scene or sex scene, tropical garden or abstract sculpture park, relations of domination or figures of freedom? How can one resist the narrative impulses of this exhibition when storytelling seeps into each of Erika Verzutti’s works for this project? Take *Dog, a submissive sculpture waiting by the door (2025)*, this obedient Cerberus, placed like a doorstop, a canine form composed arbitrarily of a melon, an eggplant, and a cacao fruit, cast in cement or bronze. It crouches low, according to the artist, and might almost succeed in keeping the living and the dead from penetrating the space.

Grounded (Babygirl) (2025)

In 1915, Malevich’s *Black Square* was hung high in the corner of the room. How can that work, which once occupied such a privileged position in art history, dominating through its authoritarian presence, lead us by association from one corner to another, to the 2024 erotic thriller *Babygirl*? Two scenes from the film unfold in hotel rooms: the first in a shabby hotel, where the sexual and emotional rules of the game are laid out; the second in a luxurious one, showing only the exhilaration that seizes the two characters once they finally understand their roles. *Grounded (Babygirl) (2025)* is a new piece by the artist, conceived for a specific corner of the room. “It’s their first encounter, in a dusty hotel room. Kidman arrives, her black dress draws a flat silhouette in the space. They are talking, she seems conflicted between surrender and control. Harris Dickinson is confused by her anger. As if to set up a pause, he leads her to the corner of the room, facing the wall. He asks her to stay there for a moment and

¹ *The Wild Ass’s Skin (La Peau de Chagrin)*, Honoré de Balzac, translated by Helen Constantine, Oxford University Press, 2012. ISBN 9780199579501

she does. My interest in submission and dominance is emotional and uninformed. So that moment of suspension touched me, she was on the edge of something and I identified with that quiver. It's a love or hate film." From the beginning, Erika Verzutti conceived the sculptures in this project in relation to surfaces they are not accustomed to encountering in institutions: the carpet, the mattress, the marble of the bathroom... From the outset, then, there was this idea of coexistence between surfaces, worlds, and people who would not usually meet. The same idea that prevails in the film with Nicole Kidman, that of a powerful boss crossing paths with a young intern. "I like to keep the studio permeable to whatever is motivating me at the time." This work, composed of bronze starfruit and bananas, is a daring feat for the artist. This arc which may represent a human body, with its spine and hips, is subjected to a precarious balance, as if ready to collapse, to break at its center, to confront a thousand dangers, consensual or not, within relationships that defy convention.

Relaxed Painted Lady (2025)

Room 103 of the Hôtel Balzac shares only one number with the legendary group exhibition *Hôtel Carlton Palace / Chambre 763*, organized by Hans Ulrich Obrist in Paris in 1993. Yet both share the same boiling desire to blend art and life. *Sculptures Last Night* reveals, within Erika Verzutti's body of work, a deep longing to overturn conventions, to literally lay her sculptures down. This exhibition represents a suspended moment in the artist's career: "The impacts of literal motivations on form, followed by the impact of form on surfaces, distort elements of the sculptures that were once destined to be symmetrical." *Relaxed Painted Lady (2025)* is a languid creature lying on the bed, composed of pomegranates, watermelons, and bananas, unreal fruits molded and deformed by hand. She shifts effortlessly from the vertical to the horizontal, embracing the contours of the duvet. She confides in the pillow, contemplating the ceiling and the organized chaos all around her after love.

Tower of Eggs with News (2024)

This tall, imposing tower made of bronze eggs, a recurring motif in the artist's work, lies on the bed beneath *Relaxed Painted Lady*. But how often in life does one sculpture consent to being placed beneath another? It was already shown in an exhibition by Erika Verzutti at the ICA in Milan in 2024. It does not

contribute to the general atmosphere of relaxation in the room —it is, in fact, its counterpoint. Here, one must almost forget the artist's usual references to fertility, which is nonetheless emblematic of her sculptural language. *Tower of Eggs with News* (2024) becomes the troublemaker, the spoilsport, the killjoy of this exhibition otherwise steeped in languor and surrender. As proof, the resin cube on which the sculpture is supposed to rest, and in which stacks of newspapers usually float, has fallen to the floor. It seems as though this piece is deteriorating before our eyes. "The gesture of leaning down sculptures that were once vertical and assured, simulates their response to the threats we are going through in the world. They could have been deposed, they could be exhausted, or taking a break, in crisis about their relevance."

Romana in the Shower (2025)

One recalls certain legendary bathrooms, such as that of Jeanne Lanvin's 1920 apartments, preserved in the permanent collection of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. Particularly its floor of beige, black, and white Hauteville marble designed by decorator Armand Albert Rateau. The bathroom of the Hôtel Balzac is made of *almond latte* marble. *Missionary with Splash*, *Jaspera with Splash*, *Mug with Splash*, some of Erika Verzutti's sculptures presented in this bathroom, particularly in the shower, have been splattered with white paint, or seem waiting to be drenched, like *Romana in the Shower*. "I fantasized about having some sculptures under the shower, wet for the first time, disrupted by water. Moreover, I wished they'd keep the marks of that experience. So water becomes paint, a white splash, not on the old sculptures but new shadows, their dark silhouettes as if seen through the *Psycho* shower curtain."

Breakfast (2025) and A Dozen Oranges (2025)

At the entrance of Room 103, a surprise awaits on the floor. *Breakfast (2025)*, a work symptomatic of Erika Verzutti's formal language, is served as if on a silver platter, in place of a room service tray, the club sandwich replaced by a bold mix of ceramic and bronze eggs and potatoes. Remaining in the more or less earthly realm of food, the room's carpet is strewn with bronze oranges, handmade and hand-painted by the artist. Like the precious bottles and cans in *Sculptures Last Night*, they stand at attention, forming small obstacles that evoke the constant motion and chaos that reign in the room after the feasts of its irreverent guests.

Life of Sculptures (2024)

On the hotel room television, *Life of Sculptures* (2024), the film created by Erika Verzutti in collaboration with Joana Luz, begun in 2017 at Pivô in Brazil and completed in 2024 at LUMA Arles, plays in an endless loop. “The first time I started attributing character or encouraging the autonomy of the sculptures was with the film. It took me seven years puzzling with the filmed material to finally realize I had to exclude all things human connected to the sculptures. Joana's photography was essential to make the setting and light enough for creating new silhouettes, new surfaces and expanding the way we look at sculptures, starting with my own perception.”