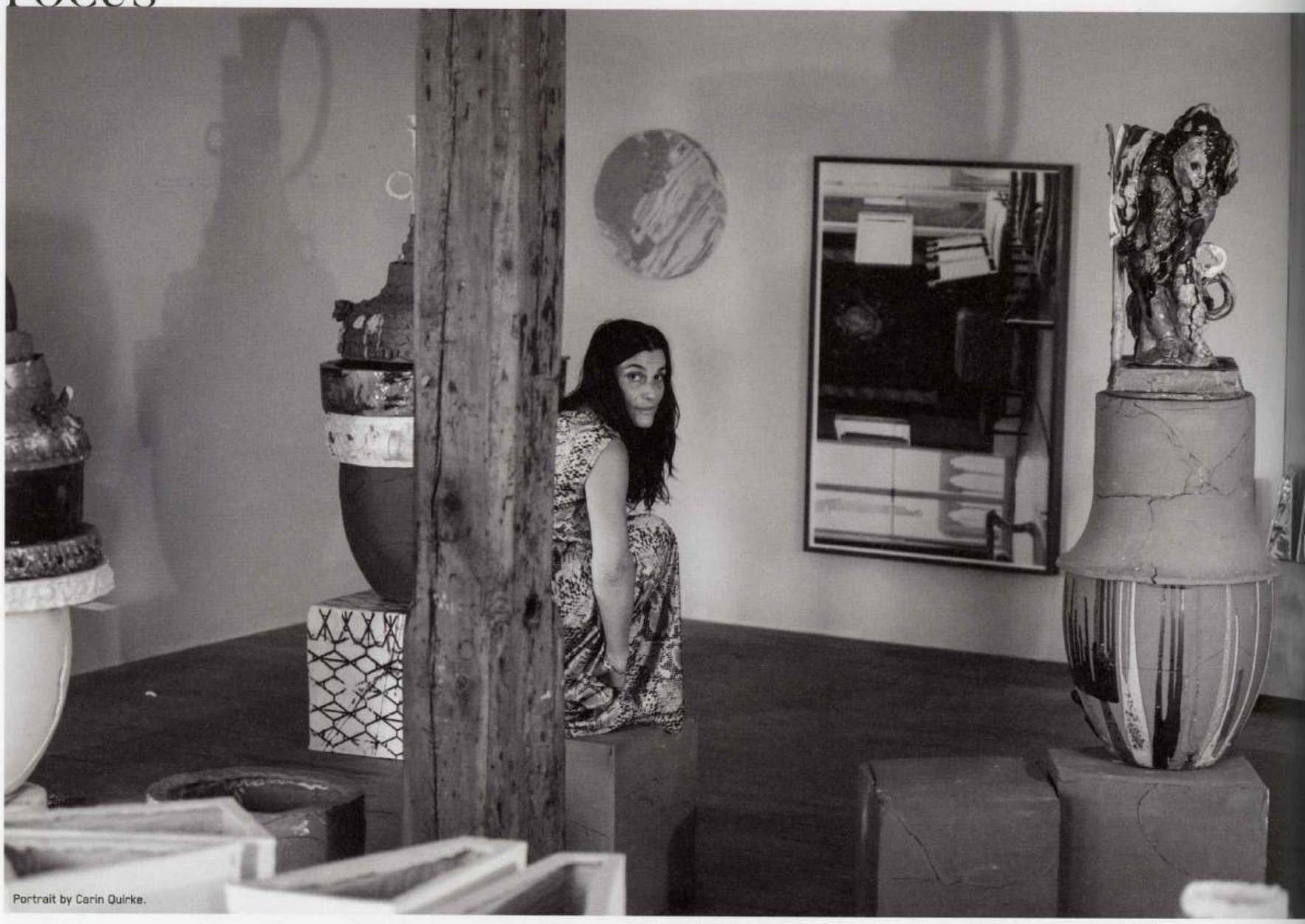

Portrait by Carin Quirke.

NICOLE CHERUBINI

At Friedman Benda, artist Nicole Cherubini unveils "Hotel Roma," a deeply tactile and feminist exploration of clay, collaboration, and rest that bridges surrealist inspiration with embodied practice.

By Katy Donoghue

In her new exhibition, "Hotel Roma" at Friedman Benda (opening January 2026), artist Nicole Cherubini continues her dynamic dialogue between form, function, and feminist history. Known for merging sculpture, performance, and installation, Cherubini returns to clay as her sole medium—creating monumental pots, totemic columns, and seating works that invite both rest and reflection.

Drawing from Leonora Carrington's surrealist text Down Below and her own ongoing dance collaborations, Cherubini shapes a world of reciprocity, touch, and transformation. *Whitewall* spoke with the artist about material intimacy, dissolving hierarchies, and how rest itself can be a radical creative act.

WHITEWALL: *The exhibition "Hotel Roma" opens at Friedman Benda in January. What was the starting point for this new body of work?*

NICOLE CHERUBINI: This show really continues a lineage from my last exhibition, "The Mother Lode," which combined archival prints, older sculpture, and newer works that grew out of a dance performance I've been doing. Those pieces were connected through a feminist lineage—a conversation with writers, artists, and collaborators—and explored ideas of rest and collaboration with the viewer.

For "Hotel Roma," I wanted to focus entirely on clay for the first time in years—no photos, no reading rooms—just sculpture. The show began while I was reading Italian feminist authors and then surrealists like Leonora Carrington. Her book Down Below really struck me; it recounts her "journey into madness." The story itself is layered—written in English, transcribed in French, and later re-translated—so it became a metaphor for collaboration, translation, and transformation.


Photo by Dressby Laleh Khorramian.

The exhibition's title comes from the Madrid hotel where Carrington stayed during that period. I've been developing sculptures that nod to her story—cast conglomerations of birds, heads, and gems; tall, thin forms; and a series of pots representing the Three Graces. One of the Graces includes a bench—the first time I've combined a pot with seating, symbolizing reciprocity and giving.

WW: *You've been performing as well. What's the relationship between dance and clay for you?*

NC: I danced when I was young and returned to it through collaborations with choreographer Julia May Jonas. Our performances have been fully collaborative—not just costumes or sets, but an intertwined process. Clay and dance share a lot. Both are physical, immediate, and unrepeatable. Every firing, every gesture leaves its mark; you can never make the same thing twice.

Working with Julia has opened me to space and movement in new ways. My sculptures record time and touch—like a performance—while the kiln adds its own unpredictability. Each work becomes a trace of a specific moment.

WW: *How do you approach scale and process in these pieces?*

NC: The works are hand-built and made from molds—I don't throw on a wheel. Because of the kiln size, there are real restrictions. I tend to work with ideas rather than sketches, assembling parts like a collage. The pieces come together as I build; they shift constantly. Some works are seven or eight feet tall, and for "Hotel Roma," I'm making a floor-to-ceiling column of stacked cubes interrupted by cast forms—owls, Venus heads, birds. It's an ode to Leonora, a dreamlike mash-up of images that feel both surreal and baroque.

WW: *Installation seems central to your work. How do you think about bringing these sculptures together in a space like Friedman Benda?*

NC: Installation is huge for me. I spend a lot of time on the floor plan and the viewer's movement through the room. The gallery's big windows and columns shaped how I thought about scale and placement—how to make the viewer aware of their own position and able to enter a conversation with the work.

Clay complicates installation because everyone already has an intimate relationship with it—we drink from it, build with it, even use it in our bathrooms. It's familiar and fragile at once. I joke that when I started showing clay work, I was always placed in a corner—like "no one puts baby in the corner." The benches help bridge that fear by inviting touch and connection.

WW: *How did you come to focus on seating, involving the audience more directly?*

NC: It began in 2016, right after Trump was elected. I couldn't understand what the purpose of art was in that moment. At the same time, the mine that produced my clay body ran out—literally, the material disappeared. Both worlds stopped making sense.

I'd always referenced a function without actually making functional work, so I decided to build something that worked. That led to the benches. The presence of the body—the viewer's body—became essential. Seating turned into an act of communication and interaction, and my thinking shifted from function to purpose. That change affected everything: why I make the work, how the viewer experiences it, and what it means to be generous with space.

WW: *Has that change influenced your collaborations?*

NC: Definitely. I'm very open to collaboration—it's become second nature. I think of it less as partnership and more as a collective act. Even the kiln participates—it has its own mind. My process is about dissolving ego so that other forces, people, and materials can enter.

WW: *You've used the phrase "Baroque Minimalism." How did you arrive at that?*

NC: The phrase came to me years ago in Turkey, visiting Konya, where Rumi is buried. In one room, everything was covered with intricate mosaics—green, blue, amber—a maximalist, horror vacui space. Then you walked into a perfectly square, silent room with a wooden floor and plaster walls where the Sufis spun. I realized you can only see one because of the other.

I grew up in a large Italian-American family surrounded by ornament, then went to art school in the 1990s, when minimalism ruled. "Baroque Minimalism" became a way to reconcile those worlds—to acknowledge that ornament and restraint define each other. It's like collage: both a violent breaking and a repair. I think of it the way the Fragonards looked at the Frick Breuer—the paintings and brutalist architecture suddenly illuminated one another.

WW: *You mentioned that clay wasn't always accepted in the fine-art world. What was that like for you?*

NC: When I first started showing clay in the early 2000s, people told me it would never be art. I studied ceramics as an undergrad and sculpture in grad school, so I was already thinking about material hierarchies. In the 1990s, theory was obsessed with psychoanalysis—the idea of lack in Lacanian terms—and I realized clay inherently held that position within art: undervalued, feminized, materially charged.

Using clay became a political act. I wanted to question who defines aesthetics, who holds power, and how to make change within a hierarchy. That's why creating a non-hierarchical space—with benches, with viewer participation—matters to me. The viewer becomes as important as the sculpture. Every material I use has to carry its own meaning; color, glaze, or paint must hold intent. Nothing's decorative for decoration's sake.

WW: *How do you think about your studio environments—Hudson and New York—and how they shape your process?*

NC: My Catskill studio is in an old industrial building with windows on three sides, overlooking the mountains and the creek. The light moves around all day—it's beautiful and quiet. I've been there about seven years, surrounded by other artists, but there's no marketplace pressure; it's purely exploratory.

My city studio, in the Navy Yard, is darker and more industrial—great for collaborative work, computer projects, and planning. Upstate, I build; in the city, I think. The separation is healthy. In Catskill, I can disappear—no phone, no interruptions—and watch the seasons shift. The ice breaking on the creek in winter reminds me to pause, to rest. That idea of rest has become integral to the work—the benches are places for stillness as much as for conversation.

WW: *You mentioned motherhood earlier. Has that changed your perspective on rest or purpose?*

NC: Completely. I think motherhood forced me to understand rest as an act of resistance and renewal. Around the same time I began making benches, I was re-learning how to pause, to give space to myself and others. Rest isn't idleness—it's connection, reflection, a way of being present.

WW: *And we talked about literary influences earlier. What are you reading now?*

NC: I'm rereading all of Leonora Carrington and diving into essays on Dora Maar. I keep circling back to artists who merged surrealism, autobiography, and myth. They remind me that imagination can be both rebellion and refuge.