

# Nicole Cherubini, The Motherlode

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Nicole Cherubini's exhibition, *Motherlode*, at September Gallery, Kinderhook NY, exploded the world of early 20th century aesthetics, but there is no detritus, only beauty. Spanning 20 years of artwork, this is not a conventional retrospective, but a focused stream of consciousness that expands progressive revelations initially explored by early 20th century feminist authors, most notably, Virginia Woolf, a seminal feminist writer and Carla Lonzi, an Italian feminist art critic and performance artist who came to notoriety in the 1960s. The art in the exhibition is not a look back, but a demonstrative, cogent body of work that expands on the 100 + year old struggle of women. It further aims to break down class cultural signifiers and promote gender choices by reclaiming crafts and mediums associated with the privileged class.

The show is composed of 3 discrete, but philosophically linked bodies of work, brought to fruition through photography, ceramics and performance art.

September Gallery is conveniently divided into 3 equal spaces. In the furthest space on the farthest wall in the gallery, black and white photographs in black frames lined the length of the white wall. Each image captures Cherubini or her sister invading, gate crashing and, in general, frolics in the Victorian and classical gardens and

domiciles once built and groomed to enhance the pleasures of the aristocratic male. Much like a coup d'état, Cherubini and her sister, Lebanese/Italian Americans, take ownership of these spaces by sensually engaging with garden sculptures including plump, creamy white cherubs with lascivious grins, floral wall paper and decadent luscious looking pastries. They own the space, not just the space they are occupying, but all the spaces these decorations and adornments symbolize.

The photographs originally taken 20 years ago were exhumed from Cherubini's archives and reworked. Originally shot in color, she scanned the images to convert them to black and white photos. She altered the tone value and contrast and reshot the film negatives. She then reprinted them in a darkroom, eliminating all pixels, to create silver gelatin archival prints. This produced truly beautiful, mysterious, hazy images with whispers of pioneering women photographers such as Julia Margaret Cameron, contemporary feminist photographer Francesca Woodman and Ana Mendiata's photo documentation of her performances. There are also hints of surrealist photographers such as Man Ray. Instead of Ray's image of a woman's back as an instrument to be played, Cherubini has playfully printed several cherubs in a grid on a woman's back.

Cherubini has been recognized for decades as a master ceramist and sculptor. In *Motherlode* she takes this medium to another level. Lavishly glazed triangles create an octagon bench that centers the space in front of the photographs. The minimalist

wedges are, at once, simple shapes yet, through texture, color and finish are opulent functional art pieces. Anchoring each side of this space are two sculptures, one a figurative gargoyle like creature and at the opposite end a large vase both mounted on glazed cubes. The cubes are an integral part of the sculptures and are not merely a pedestals.

Moving to the center space is, what one might describe as, the motherlode of a *Motherlode*. The space is empty except for a colossal urn- like sculpture planted in the middle of the area. Mostly Ivory colored, it is a homage to the art of ceramics. Broken glazed chards over matt surfaces, thumb print smudges of clay creating a patterned repetition, a decorative rim are all balanced on a small minimalist cube of lustrous dark grey.

During the early 20th century monumental vases were sought after as a symbol of wealth, and culture. Today some museums (e.i.Museum of Fine Arts, Boston , MA) even display vases as part of installations for renowned painters such as John Singer Sargeant. Cherubini's sculpture deconstructs these vessels through a vision she refers to as Baroque minimalism. The final art piece has a sense of a goddess fighting through a porcelain and clay battle and emerging victorious and more magnificent. A round of applause should also be accorded to the decision to install this work on its own. At a moment when galleries and pop-ups are jammed with art,

this exemplified the notion that gallery walls are not real estate spaces, but the walls and spaces serve the art on exhibit.

Virginia Woolf's, *A Room of One's Own*, entered the public domain on January 1, 2025. The text is comprised of two essays that Woolf was asked to present at two women's colleges at the University of Cambridge in 1928 and published in 1929. The subject was Women and Fiction. This treatise is the bedrock of contemporary feminist theory and the ongoing struggle women still encounter. First a space to work, and secondly, money. But this writing is far more than a list of demands. The plight of women is folded into an ingenious expository prose that touches on class and gender issues that still oppress women today. Cherubini, in celebration of this classic, now available to a broad audience and inspired by Woolf's talented gifts, collaborated on a performance, *46 Gordon* (Address of Virginia Woolf's drawing room in London) with choreographer Julia K. Gleich. This performance was modeled on the 6 chapters of *A Room of One's Own*, and follows the experiences of a fictional figure created by Cherubini, *Napolitana*, an Italian woman who travels through history engaging notable figures who are both inspiring and evil. The performance took place at The Campus on Upstate Art Weekend and in the gallery. During the exhibition the story of Napolitana could also be read while sitting in a quiet space in a simple, yet beautiful ceramic chair next to a plant nestled in an exquisitely glazed planter or online.

At <https://septembergallery.com/exhibitions/46-gordon/>.

*Motherlode* is an intellectually and artistically challenging exhibit that defiantly and confidently serves as a role model for working artists, no matter what their medium. It's joyous, beautiful and stands as a bespoke example of what work can be when addressing the environment we exist in today. Never miss a chance to see Nicole Cherubini's work, but take your time, it's not a 30 second done and dusted.