

All Hands on Deck

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **KATIE LEVINE**

This past February, Visionary Women, the Los Angeles-based nonprofit membership community dedicated to women empowering and supporting other women and girls both locally and internationally, announced The Chara Schreyer Arts Initiative. Funded by the renowned art collector Chara Schreyer and curated by the Hammer Museum's Erin Christovale, the initiative annually commissions a female artist to create a work that addresses parity and gender equality. For the inaugural project, Rosha Yaghmai, whose father immigrated to California from Tehran, has created a life-cast sculpture of herself. Made shortly before the Santa Monica-based artist gave birth to her first child in January, the piece explores the diversity of women's voices. It will be displayed publicly in LA later this year before ultimately being sold by Kayne Griffin Corcoran gallery to benefit the city's Downtown Women's Center. Hoping the initiative will ignite a broader dialogue on challenging conventions of womanhood and unite women across society, Schreyer, Christovale and Yaghmai come together with Visionary Women cofounder **Angella Nazarian** to begin the conversation.



From left: Angella Nazarian, Erin Christovale, Rosha Yaghmai and Chara Schreyer sit together on Franz West's *Sitzwuste* (2000).

Angella Nazarian: Chara, as a board member of the Hammer and MOCA, you are one of LA's most prominent arts patrons. What ignited your passion?

Chara Schreyer: Art has always been core to my identity. I studied art history in college and have been collecting for over 30 years. Beyond its aesthetic value, for me, art is also a medium for telling the stories of outsiders. My parents were both Holocaust survivors, and by supporting the art community, I have the opportunity to help raise the visibility of those who have been marginalized, including women, immigrants, the LGBTQ community and African Americans. The primary reason I've personally given—and continue to give—hundreds of tours of my collection is that I am passionate about helping to ensure these stories are heard.

AN: What inspired you to fund this extraordinary initiative with Visionary Women?

CS: Your enthusiasm, my dear friend Angella, is contagious! I'm committed to Visionary Women's goal of not only highlighting relevant issues affecting women and girls today but also providing hard cash to promote literacy, education and vocational training. Art

is a catalyst for change because it communicates beyond borders of nationality, religion, political affiliation, gender and expectations. It unites people by creating dialogue and opportunities for shared appreciation and contemplation. When people come together for freedom of expression, it kindles a deep sense of connection and hope. We're all in this hot mess together!

Erin Christovale: You know, it's true. Some of the best art of our time is rooted in thinking about current social and political issues. All different types of people, who maybe have different opinions or different experiences, can come together through art and have a visceral response to an art object that opens them up to having larger conversations with their community and others. Art, in its sort of most abstract way, can bring people together.

AN: Erin, with that in mind, how did you choose Rosha for this project?

EC: I had worked with Rosha, before, for the Hammer's Made in L.A. 2018 biennial. I have a deep admiration for women's sculpture. Although all of these mediums are typically dominated by men, there's something about women taking on the scale and the material of sculpture that is very powerful. What I find amazing about Rosha's practice is she's so

innovative in her thinking and brings together all these things in her work—from psychedelia to her own cultural history and what it means to be a woman living and experiencing in the world. It was the perfect combination.

AN: Rosha, what has influenced you and led to such a unique approach?

Rosha Yaghmai: After graduating from CalArts, I spent several years working in the studios of Martin Kersels, Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy. I am very grateful for those years because I learned so much while helping to fabricate their works and by just being involved in their vibrant and ambitious studios. Technically, my relationship to materials and scale was broadened, and I was inspired to keep looking more closely at identity both personally and culturally within the context of making art.

AN: How is this commission pushing your practice forward?

RY: There are so many exciting aspects to this project. I have never collaborated to create a sculpture before. At the very start of the process, I am taking impressions of attendees' hands at the Visionary Women's third annual International Women's Day celebration and using them to create the surface of the sculpture, bringing multiple bodies together to create one form. It's an intimate way to sit with so many different types of women, to understand and connect with them. They will all be collaborating with me in the studio! Also, I have never made a figurative sculpture before; I just had this image of a strong pregnant woman staring straight ahead and knew I had to create it. Thanks to Erin and Chara, I now have the opportunity. And even better, the work has the potential to raise money to support the Downtown Women's Center.

AN: Why is that cause important to all three of you?

CS: The Downtown Women's Center serves homeless and previously homeless women. Home is an incredibly powerful concept to me. My parents were displaced after World War II, and I came to the US as an immigrant child. Home is comfort, safety, security and permanence. No one should ever have to suffer the deprivation of those things.

EC: Homelessness is one of the biggest issues we're contending with right now. It is hyper-visible in this city. I think we'd all be remiss not to think about how that issue directly affects women.

RY: The Center provides so many necessary services in a women-only environment. Homelessness is obviously a huge problem nationwide, but especially here in LA. So many women experiencing homelessness are in this position because they are survivors of violence. That angers me a great deal. Our vulnerable bodies connect all women, and I hope this sculpture speaks to that.

CS: It does. Your isolated and naked sculpture will be touched and imprinted by many hands, illustrating she is not alone—that women can come together as one voice. This is especially moving and important to me because I want The Chara Schreyer Arts Initiative and my affiliation with Visionary Women to be a platform that empowers women who, in turn, will help and encourage other women because that's what women do.

Schreyer stands in the entryway of her home next to Ruth Asawa's *Untitled S.437* (1956). She personally gives hundreds of tours of her vast art collection to ensure artists' voices are heard.



“When people come together for freedom of expression, it kindles a deep sense of connection and hope. We’re all in this hot mess together!”

-Chara Schreyer