

INTERVIEW

with the

ARTIST

CHARLOTTE KRUK

FULL INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interview with New Museum Los Gatos for the *In the Artist's Studio* featuring Charlotte Kruk exhibition.

Tell us about your studio, how do you work in it?

KrukTart Industries, headquartered in Willow Glen, is my sacred creative compound. The main house acts as “clean” studio where anything and everything sewing happens. Horizontal space is at a premium and numerous projects are continuously in the works. What might function as a living room for others, houses multiple dressmaker forms replete with mid-process projects in the queue for their turn at attention.

By contrast the detached garage is arranged to tackle ceramics, metal fabrication and any other media where dust might be generated. The “Peppermint Palace”, another detached outbuilding, is covered in giant ceramic peppermints and serves as an on-sight gallery. All finished artworks are displayed here while they await their future home.

What inspired you to use food wrappers as a medium?

Labors of graphic design, color theory, and material sustainability coalesce in the creation of the perfect harmony for sanitary standards in the packaging of our food and other goods. It's remarkable to imagine the art and science involved in the countless hours of creativity ignored by consumers as packaging quickly makes its way to trash. Repurposing the “clothes” of our food seemed a fine way to comment on what is, or what isn't, underneath all those layers.

What are some of the unique challenges about working with this material?

Keeping collections clean and categorized is a huge investment of time. The numbers of food wrappers mathematically required to cover the human body is profound and requires years of collecting. Learning to sew is another worthwhile endeavor; I only began exploring this art form at 23 years old when I wasn't able to realize my initial vision in metal. Adding to my challenge was encouraging a domestic sewing machine to do the unthinkable and power through unconventional materials. I've learned deeply as I've invented my process and pathway.

Are the wrappers a commentary on personal consumption?

“You are what you eat” is a memorable saying from my childhood. To be sweet was always important to me and I had great teaching examples of this at an early age. Clothing is a profound personal statement. We wear messages about the tribes we associate with. Our clothes are the first judgement that, often times, people make of us.

Has this medium made you into an artist who enjoys social commentary or is the reverse true?

Conceptually relevant artwork is so much more than a “pretty picture”. Objects worth looking at should provoke curiosity, question the times in which the work was created, and hopefully elicit future significance that inspires the next generation of creatives.

How do you source and select the wrappers you work with?

I collect almost everything that moves through my hands. If I eat it, I certainly try to preserve the package. Occasionally, someone will help me collect, which is wonderful. If I notice something in multiples, it usually catches my eye and a story begins to develop in my mind. Backstory is important to me, and often so is wordplay, color, and concept. Each piece is uniquely personal, usually nostalgic, and sometimes my curious research takes me to a place I never considered.

Do you work in any other mediums?

I have habits of working predominantly between the mediums of textile, clay and metal. Papier-mâché and other mixed media solutions find their way into my practice as well. My ideas challenge me to innovate and acquire new skills and materials regularly. I’m committed to lifelong learning as the creative vision is revealed to me and obstacles with concept or materials need overcoming.

What influences and experiences inform your work?

Raised in the church, my inherent moral compass guides my guilty conscious to expose any possible sins of gluttony. If it isn’t inherently obvious, I have an insatiable desire for sweets. A meal feels incomplete without a treat. Beyond the physical flavor of “sweet” is a definition or character trait that I strive to share; sweet is empathetic and kind, observant of the needs of others.

Raised between sets of maternal and paternal grandparents I curiously weighed the similarities and differences between families. Where one Grandma would lavishly pay to have packages elaborately wrapped, the other would insist that opening a package was in and of itself a thing of beauty; slow and cautious removal of the tape, careful attention not to rip, tear or defect the dressing. All that decorative paper, ribbon, and bows that were saved, stored, and reused next holiday. It was in seeing the paper recycle back and forth between the houses that my curiosity was formulated. Observing and honoring the differences that connect and bridged two unique worlds.

What were some mistakes you’ve made during your creative process that you’ve learned from?

Mistakes...? You mean “a-ha” moments. Thousands of those...too many to recall or even mention....they’re integral to the process. My job as artist is inventor; false starts are important baby steps to generating unique content. I’ve committed to this time in exploration as one of the most meaningful elements along the path. Success doesn’t just happen; it is work in progress all the time that eventually yields fruitful outcomes.

In your opinion, what role does the artist have in society?

I've often felt that as an artist it is my role to be the author of experimentation, persistence and resilience. I am a creator of content, expressing my observations, sharing my hopes for the future and acting as a responsible partner to my creation. My goal through the artwork is to generate smiles in my audience, to make work that causes a fresh thought in others.

Tell us about your childhood, where did you grow up? Were you always creative?

I was born in 1971 and grew up in Campbell, California. I was fortunate to spend quality time with both sets of grandparents during my formative years before kindergarten and through grade school. My amazing mom straightaway sought employment when my father's life was cut short at the age of 25. In 1975, a hang-gliding accident terminated the nuclear family unit I was assigned and fashioned a journey which allowed me to experience depression era conservatism through the values relayed by my maternal grandparents.

Those years of attention, guidance and commitment to my development are profound in what shapes my practice today: thought process, work ethic, habits of saving, collecting and repurposing. I remember countless hours playing with my sister outside, inventing games, roller-skating the private road, and trolling through the woods of Monte Sereno collecting feather in the trees... only to be called back to the house to wash up for dinner. Any idle time inside the house was quickly filled with creative tasks conjured up by Grandma to keep us from "stirring up the dust;" modeling clay, needlepoint, coloring - crafts, crafts, crafts! Anything that kept our hands busy, our minds productive, and our mouths quiet.

Do you remember any candy related incidents from your childhood that may have informed your current work?

One of my very first memories is of the day my father died in a hang-gliding accident at Ed Levin Park. I distinctly remember the lifesaver candy that my grandma shared from her purse as she sat me on her lap in the backseat of the car.

Do you come from a creative family?

Both my maternal and paternal grandparents were critical early influences in my life. My maternal grandmother, who took care of my sister and me after school, would consistently work in her sewing room altering the clothing of her friends from church. She worked tirelessly repairing hems and seams, and adjusting the style lines of their garments. She has a real gift and continues to this day, in her 90s, to create quilts for her friends. My maternal grandfather would come home from a hard day's work, and after washing up would sit at the organ and fill the house with music.

I remember, for a significant portion of my childhood, my paternal grandmother picking us up and driving us to the store. Singing silly songs on the way, she would encourage my sister and me to find a whole bag of whichever candy suited us that day. At her house we would stay up way past our bedtimes to watch *The Love Boat* and *Fantasy Island* while eating as many sweets as we wanted. What a glorious time! My paternal grandfather was another jovial character; forever smiling and playing with us. He was an upholsterer by trade and worked cheerfully late into his life, despite the arthritis that clearly gnarled his hands, never complaining of pain or frustration. All of the furniture in the house was work that he had done, mostly reinventions of antique pieces hand-picked by my grandmother.

Is there an artwork you are most proud of?

After receiving a cease and desist letter from the candy giant M&M/Mars in 2001, constructing “el M&Matador” as my sculptural response has been a prideful moment of self-discovery. Assurance that there would be no question in a judge’s mind about trademark infringement or copyright violation caused me to fabricate the artwork rich with conceptual layers beyond the obvious recycling of post-consumer product packaging.

If I were called to defend myself in a court of law, my artwork would need to defend itself through its unique craftsmanship, inimitable conceptualization, and commitment to the soul of the artist. “el M&Matador” is lavishly embellished with porcelain M&M beads and the extravagantly sequined epaulets highlight bezel-set, metal-smithed elements. Each and every element of gold within the suit is hand beaded; a labor of 5 years, tons of research and countless hours of love.

Does your work influence your teaching style for your high school students?

I’m curious about subjective and arbitrary choices in material solutions. [High schoolers] often want the shortest, most direct path to success without the necessary curiosity and exploration it takes to deeply learn. At that age (14-18) they’ve often experienced art by copying, repeating or tracing, and feel that identical duplication of something in the known world is “making art”. I don’t see it that way; perhaps it’s a necessary building block, but it lacks perspective and a unique voice reflecting on life’s experience. I ask my students to think a little bit sideways about what they think they already know and may have seen. My favorite students are the ones who trust me through the learning process and are willing to take risks, and step into the unknown.

What has been a seminal experience?

In 2010 I had the rare occasion to travel to Paris for a photography course. In the months prior to the journey I poured every ounce of myself into the fabrication of a period Rococo gown, [a fashion] famous during the reign of Marie Antoinette, fabled French queen. Racing the countdown before the trip, I replicated the costume using all of the refuse packaging it takes to bake a cake. Voila!: “Let Me Bake Cake”. Complete with rows [of packaging and labels] of C&H sugar, baking powder, salt (I made great new friends in my neighborhood going door to door with an X-acto knife and Sharpie pen scavenging for salt and baking powder labels) milk, salt, butter, flour, vanilla bottles, complete with faux eggs in the wig. The occasion to be “on location” in the space of provenance and historical context for the artwork was epic. The most fun and rewarding benefit, traveling with photographers - instant paparazzi!

What can we expect from you in the next year?

I make no promises about what will happen next. Many artworks are in process at various stages of finishing. I have a Lunar New Year Red Carpet Qipao partially completed in my studio. I feel a need for fresh inspiration, a trip [perhaps to Egypt]...it’s time for an investigation of place; have dreams about the great Pharaohs.