Tamara Kostianovsky talks consumerist culture through textile sculpture

Between Wounds and Folds on view at Smack Mellon New York initiates a difficult conversation around meat and global warming.

by Shraddha Nair | Published on: Nov 08, 2021

Tamara Kostianovsky is a textile installation artist who tangles with themes of violence, and its appearance in consumer culture and the relationship we hold with our natural environment. Kostianovsky works primarily with textile, favouring discarded material to create vividly coloured sculptural installations. Her works, although rather cheerful in appearance, reveal a deeper and more difficult conversation centered around our collective way of living. The South American artist has been the recipient of several grants, fellowships and awards - the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant (2008) and the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship (2010) being two of the most noteworthy. Kostianovsky, who took the time out recently to speak with us at STIR, recently had her work on view at a solo exhibition titled Between Wounds and Folds at Smack Mellon in New York City. The exhibition was on view till November 7, 2021.
The Israel-born artist focuses, with concern, on the plight of the livestock industry and its part in shaping the consumerist culture of our food today. Her material of choice is intrinsically a vote against today’s cruel meat industry - reused fabric discarded into the crevices of the city she lives in, Brooklyn, New York. Kostianovsky tells us about the origin of this practice in her work saying, “I make sculptures and installations using discarded clothing which come mostly from textiles I find in my home, like old t-shirts, kitchen rags and worn-out sweaters. I started working with this unusual material through my own experience of immigration from Argentina to the US about 20 years ago. In fear of the winters in the East Coast of the US, I had brought many sweaters and warm clothes which I accidentally shrunk in the drier within the first few months of living here. The shrunk clothes had memories imprinted in them and I saw them as a potential material to make art with.”

Her body of work uses cloth to reflect forms of decay seen in nature, wood stumps and cow carcasses to name a few. She continues to say, “Over time, the use of this media became political: I was not buying art supplies and was instead ‘up-cycling’, something that otherwise would end up in a landfill. Most importantly, I saw clothing as a surrogate for my body, a type of second skin. The inclusion of my clothes gave a performative aspect to the work.”

Words like up-cycling, recycling and reusing are quickly associated with the conversation around climate change. It circles the topic of overconsumption, an industrial conditioning of the masses. The discussion begins at fast food, fast fashion and fast living and continues on to the export of garbage from industrially developed ‘First World nations’ to less commercially developed countries. I use the word ‘developed’ lightly here, in recognition of the skewed perception of the idea which has pervaded our economies. Kostianovsky tells us about her experience coming face to face with the exploitation of consumerism. She says, “One of the most shocking aspects about emigrating from Argentina to the US was becoming immersed in the extent of the American consumer culture. I am still appalled by the number of discarded items I find on the street in the city during my evening walks and have a hard time reconciling the enormity of that waste with the scarcity of pretty much everything that I witness growing up in South America. For that reason, I work with textile items that I ‘save’ from ending in the trash, asking the question whether art has the power to transform garbage into something critical and redeemable.”

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Kostianovsky brings a gentle and graceful aesthetic to a difficult conversation using bright colour schemes and detailed imagery. The narrative woven into her work is a continued effort, making the presentation at Smack Mellon a recollection of over a decade of work. Kostianovsky reiterates the critical aspect of the meat industry repeatedly. Generating 7.1 gigatonnes of greenhouse gases, the meat industry by itself is responsible for over 14 per cent of emissions per year. The urgency to move to plant-based diets is imminent, bordering on desperate. Kostianovsky’s keen works make the chaos of the situation more approachable. She tells us about the oeuvre on display at the New York gallery saying, “Between Wounds and Folds draws together threads from the past 15 years, connecting issues of gender-based violence, personal memory, and ecological destruction through consumption. These soft, brutal sculptures combine discarded fabric with industrial materials, often borrowing forms from mutilated fauna and flora in various states of decay... As I mentioned earlier, the fabric covering the surface of her works first originated from my own cannibalised wardrobe, and I later used material from my late father’s clothing and upholstery remnants. In this exhibit, I viscerally position the plant and animal forms in relation to human bodies, connecting the destruction of the earth by consumer waste to bodily harm. By creating immersive environments out of the remnants of consumer culture, the work goes beyond trauma to encompass the pervasive destruction by capitalist consumption on the natural world. The works create a visual proposition for a future in which images of desecrated bodies are transformed into receptacles of regeneration and rebirth”.

Another showcase by Kostianovsky titled Fibrous Landscapes is on view at Galerie RX, in Paris, France, till November 14, 2021.
About Author

Shraddha Nair
Contributor

Shraddha is a writer and curator based in Bengaluru, India. Her curatorial practice is a method by which she negotiates with and navigates the complexities of human behaviour, an interest which flows into her writing as well. She believes that art and collective experience hold immense capacity in the cultivation and development of action and emotion.

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