

Art **Reviews**

Tamara Kostianovsky Envisions a Whimsical Slaughterhouse

The animal carcass sculptures are gruesome yet their materials — the artist's own discarded clothing — lend them some gentleness.



by Louis Bury
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Installation view of Tamara Kostianovsky, *Between Wounds and Folds*; foreground: installation of works from the series: *Nature Made Flesh* (2017 – ongoing), clothing belonging to the artist's father, textiles, wood, dimensions variable; background: installation view of works from the series: *Actus Reus* (2008 – 2018), clothing belonging to the artist, meat hooks, iron, chains, dimensions variable (image courtesy of Smack Mellon; photo: Etienne Frossard)

At Smack Mellon, Tamara Kostianovsky's *Between Wounds and Folds* offers the most expansive overview to date of the artist's moving and inventive oeuvre. Similar to

her recent mid-career survey at the Fuller Craft Museum, this exhibition encompasses five sculpture series, spanning 15 years, each of which cobbles together used textiles into pillowy Frankenstein versions of objects such as animal carcasses and tree stumps. Smack Mellon's airy, industrial main gallery not only affords room for an ample cross-section of the artist's work but also serves as an apt backdrop for the art's tender brutality.

One of Kostianovsky's earliest and best-known series, *Actus Reus* (2008-16), Latin for the objective evidence of a crime, encapsulates this tension. The sculptures depict hacked up meat carcass remains that hang from metal hooks, as in a slaughterhouse. The works' surprisingly realistic forms (mutilated rib cages and leg bones) and colors (gory reds, pinks, and whites) are gruesome, yet their materials (the artist's own discarded clothing) are gentle. This disarming contrast exacerbates, rather than softens, the visual impact of the grisly evidence, hinting at human culture's all-too-comfortable intimacy with violence toward animals.



Installation view of Tamara Kostianovsky, *Tropical Abattoir* (2019 – ongoing series), left to right: “Tropical Rococo I” (2021), discarded upholstery fabrics and other textiles, acrylic nails, motor, chain, 85 x 28 x 13 inches; “Heal the World” (2020), discarded upholstery fabrics and other textiles, acrylic nails, motor, chain, 67 x 29 x 20 inches; “Seeded Belly” (2021), discarded upholstery fabrics and other textiles, acrylic nails, motor, chain, 90 x 54 x 14 inches; “Cow Turns into a Landscape” (2021), discarded upholstery fabrics and other textiles, acrylic nails, motor, chain, 68 x 30 x 17 inches; “Big Carcass with Inner Tropical Landscape” (2021), discarded upholstery fabrics and other textiles, acrylic nails, motor, chain, 87 x 21 x 13 inches

The sense of intimacy derives from Kostianovsky's ingenious choice and use of textiles. It's not just that she incorporates close-to-the-skin materials from her personal life, such as discarded clothes, towels, and linens. It's also the zany energy and care — the thrifty glee — with which she transforms those materials into mimetic amalgams. Traces of the artist's hand are visible everywhere, from the countless segments and strips of fabric that comprise the sculpture's patchwork surfaces to the awkward and oversized stitches holding those fabrics together. The heterogeneous textures, colors, and patterns, as well as fabric weights and translucencies, are best appreciated up close, where the contoured textiles assume a topographical quality.

Take the *Tropical Abattoir* series (2019–ongoing), in which tropical flowers, birds, and vines inhabit the cavities of dangling and slowly rotating meat carcasses as though those cavities were tree hollows. The carcass's interior in “Cow Turns into a Landscape” (2021), for example, resembles that of the carcasses in *Actus Reus*, with chunks of frayed red and pink yarns evoking loose, bloody guts and sections of pink corduroy and red and yellow candy-cane-striped cloth evoking organs. Yet a teal- and midnight blue-feathered bird has perched on one side of the carcass's cavity, and variously textured and colored green tendrils grow on the opposite side, hinting at the brightly patterned floral upholstery that Kostianovsky uses to depict the obverse side of all the carcasses in this series. The incongruously vibrant details inject elements of whimsy into otherwise macabre imagery.

This droll streak is best understood as a form of gallows humor told from the perspective of the reluctant perpetrator rather than the doomed victim.

Kostianovsky's *Still Lives* series (2015–ongoing) — sizable bird carcasses that hang upside down from meat hooks with their feet bound and their wings splayed — illustrates this dynamic. The details are again clever and winning, such as the jazzy cornucopia of upholstery fabric feathers that comprise “Every Color in the Rainbow” (2021) or the fuzzy, white bath-towel neck of “Big Vulture” (2017). Yet the sculptures reference somber historical iconography, as in the crucifixion of Christ and the dead birds that served as hunting trophies in Early Modern Dutch still life paintings. As with Kostianovsky's other art historical allusions — to Chaim Soutine's animal carcass paintings; to the Pattern and Decoration movement's domestic effusiveness — history repeats itself here as farce.



Installation view of Tamara Kostianovsky, *Still Lives* series (2015 – ongoing), left to right: “Big Vulture” (2017), discarded textiles, chains, motor, 52 x 86 x 53 inches; “Every Color in the Rainbow” (2021), discarded upholstery fabrics, meat hooks, 57 x 38 x 41 inches; “Butchered Bird” (2016), discarded upholstery fabrics, meat hooks, 30 x 19 x 7 inches; “Dead Bird with Open Chest” (2017), discarded upholstery fabrics, meat hooks 36 x 30 x 10 inches; “Polka in Gold” (2018), discarded upholstery fabrics, meat hooks, 29 x 28 x 8 inches

The artist’s most recent series, *Fowl Decorations* (2020–ongoing), likewise reprises historical imagery, with a campy bent. The works depict 18th-century French wallpaper designs that exoticized the country’s colonial territories, a creepy and seemingly obscure cultural relic that nonetheless has been reimaged by a handful of contemporary artists including Lisa Reihana and Rachelle Dang. Kostianovsky’s version consists of full-bodied textile birds — each of which is alive in the wallpaper’s fictional scene — that jut out from fabric-covered, wood-supported picture planes portraying flowers. The flowers’ heavy striations have a camouflage effect on the more dimensional birds, which causes the latter to appear less stark and jarring than the deceased animals that dangle and loom elsewhere in the room.

Kostianovsky’s tragicomic, quasi-taxidermic sculptures are perhaps best suited to represent death’s bodily implications, and nowhere is this tendency more subtle or poignant than in her series of tree stumps and branches made from her late father’s wardrobe, *Nature Made Flesh* (2017–ongoing). The series shifts the artist’s typical subject matter (from animals to trees) and materials (from her own clothing to her father’s) but maintains her characteristic blend of realism and surrealism. The

stumps' outer barks and mosses are plausibly represented by patches of wide-waled, brown and green corduroy, while their inner rings are rendered in fantastical pastels. The trees' bright, hacked-open middles appear arterial and oddly vulnerable, as if exposed in states of undress.

That sense of vulnerability comes across in so much of Kostianovsky's work, particularly through her use of soft materials to convey hard existential truths. Yet series such as *Nature Made Flesh* and *Fowl Decorations* demonstrate her willingness to find dynamic variations within her potent signature style. When artists are known for a distinctive brand of work, that can sometimes become a trap in which they are content to reproduce what they already know how to do. *Between Wounds and Folds* makes clear that Kostianovsky is constantly challenging herself, testing out new forms and ideas, as she gives artistic afterlives to the garments our species uses to negotiate the boundaries between our own and other bodies.

Tamara Kostianovsky : *Between Wounds and Folds continues at Smack Mellon (92 Plymouth Street, Brooklyn) until October 31.*