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Violated Bodies: Confronting Wounds of the Natural and Human Body | Tamara Kostianovsky

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Tamara Kostianovsky



Portrait of the artist at work, 2022 Photo by JC Cancedda

Tamara Kostianovsky is an artist whose work explores the intersection of body, identity, and environmental issues, particularly through the lens of consumption and violence. Using recycled clothing, fabric, and organic materials, she creates powerful sculptures and installations that engage with themes of the violated body and its connection to broader cultural and environmental concerns.

By manipulating discarded materials, Tamara transforms them into thought-provoking art that critiques consumer culture and its damaging effects on the planet, while also addressing the violence inherent within these systems. Her approach to art speaks to the urgency of rethinking our relationship with nature and the embodied experiences of consumption, inviting viewers to reflect on the scars left by a society driven by exploitation and disregard for both the environment and human dignity.

In this interview, we explore the inspirations behind her creative journey, the pressing issues that fuel her passion, and how her art continues to spark important conversations in today's world.



Venus, 2011 Discarded clothing, meat hooks Photo: Sol Aramendi



In the Shape of Home, 2024 Discarded clothing, meat hooks Photo: Leo Sano

How does your hometown influence your work? Was there a particular childhood memory or experience that shaped your artistic approach?

I grew up in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in the 1970s and 1980s. It was a charged violent and political period with a big imprint left by the military dictatorship. It was a time marked by fear which rendered the middle class silent. There was an eerie air to everyday life. It is in this context that I saw a cow carcass for the first time.

I remember vividly walking to school early in the morning and catching a glimpse of a man with a carcass on his shoulder, coming out of a van, bringing in into a market. I became smitten by the pinks and cream colours of the animal body, hooked by a curvilinear silhouette reminiscent of the female form. That image continues to haunt me to this day.

Your work often incorporates natural and recycled materials. Can you tell us more about your creative process and how nature influences the material you choose?

My primary medium is fabric—discarded clothing, to be precise. Taking in the detritus of consumer society, my work poses the question if it is possible to create a type of “new nature” made from the remnants of our material culture. The subject matter revolves around trees, birds, carcasses, etc., but the material is man-made.

Are you exploring the body as a factor that can be represented and symbolised through various combinations?

My only topic is the violated body. I follow a tradition of artists interested in seeing flesh as subject and object, as the locus to explore the limits, nature, and the voracious needs of the body. In recent years, prompted by climate change, I have expanded my focus from carcasses to severed trees, transposing my interest in the physical and metaphorical wound to the natural landscape.

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Second Skin, 2024 Discarded textiles, wood Photo: Theo Pitout

In your work, how do the animal bodies involved in their staging actually testify to human existence?

The animal and tree carcasses that I make are “dressed” in human clothing. Textiles act as a mantle that swaddles all bodies, pointing to a shared nature among all living things. I am interested in ideas that promote ecological awareness, pushing the identification between the body and the natural environment.

The concept I am after is that the body is the landscape.

How do you select materials for your installations? What drew you to second-hand clothes or fabrics specifically?

I started using my own clothing as media for making works at a time of economic necessity, when purchasing art supplies was out of my budget. It was during the default of Argentina’s economy in 2001, just as I had arrived in the US to study art. Within a year, I cannibalised my wardrobe to make sculptures of animal carcasses. The gesture was also performative: through the clothes, I was present in the work, like in the work of other women artists of previous generations who had made their bodies the main media for their work.

By working with textiles, I give visibility to materials that are proof of the economic exchanges between consumers and producers, that are imprinted with the histories of workers, labour unions, immigrants; materials that are made of natural and synthetic fibres, the materials of men intertwined with the materials of the Earth.

What significance do fabrics hold for you and what role does time in your practices?

Fabric is second skin to me. As a Fine Arts student in Buenos Aires, I interned at a cosmetic surgery office, where I discovered the richest of the visual worlds—right underneath the skin. The colours and textures I saw in this operating room had a direct impact on my studies. The red in my painting class wasn't just red; it was the colour of blood. It was during that time that I learnt suture techniques that I still use in my fabric sculptural works.



Mesmerizing Flesh, detail of the installation, 2023 Discarded clothing, meat hooks Photo: courtesy of Ogden Contemporary Arts



Quarter with Tropicalia, 2023 Discarded clothing, meat hooks Photo: courtesy of Ogden Contemporary Arts

As an artist who works with textiles and clothing, how do you feel about the growing trend of upcycling and repurposing in fashion? How does this resonate with your own work?

I always hoped that my reuse of textiles would be inspiring to others to rethink the possibilities of waste materials. The potential of industrial, artistic, and DY applications of discarded clothing is endless. I am pleased to see that both thrifting and upcycling are being normalised within certain populations, especially with young people in Europe and in the US, as this is mainly a problem of excess in wealthy capitalist economies.

The experience in South America is different. Used clothing doesn't go to waste; it is passed on to others who need it. And there's always someone who does.

Your works often evoke powerful and sometimes unsettling emotions. How do you approach the theme of violence in your art, and what role do you believe it plays in raising awareness or sparking conversations about societal issues?

I objectify to an extreme the violated body to reveal violence's architecture and its most tragic and grotesque nature. By creating what could be considered details or close-ups from a massacre—one of the many that we read about daily in the newspaper—I want to act towards confronting the viewer with an uncensored example of what is really at stake every time a violent action is performed.

We all live in an interconnected ecosystem, and our stories are inseparable. Do you consider your creations to embody this universal approach?

My work uses a palette reminiscent of human anatomy, an exaggeration of human-like forms, which I hope resonates with our universal bodily experience. We all know clothing; we know what it feels like on the skin, so there is an instant sense of intimacy and familiarity in the presence of these 3D forms.

I hope that in these trees, in these animal bodies, people will recognise themselves.



Second Skin, detail, 2024 Discarded textiles, wood Photo: Theo Pitout

Words by Tamara Kostianovsky

Introduction and Interview by Virginia Passaro