

THE TEXTILE ART MAGAZINE

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NATURE MADE FLESH

Anneka French meets Tamara Kostianovsky, an artist whose visceral textile works link to personal history and the wider world

Working as an intern in her late father's surgical office, while she studied for her BFA in Buenos Aires, was to have an overwhelming influence on Tamara Kostianovsky. The Argentinian-American artist describes being witness to the inside of the human body on the operating table as being both gruesome and fascinating. She notes: 'There was an immediate link between walking from his office to my painting class. Orange wasn't the colour of the sun, more the colour of the fat behind human tissue.' She is now living in New York, but Kostianovsky continues to investigate the relationship between art and the body in her sculptural textile practice. These pieces rely on organic silhouettes, derived from nature and the human form.

'I started out with textiles in a rather serendipitous manner,' explains Kostianovsky. 'I moved to the United States to study art in 2001, coinciding with the default of Argentina's economy. Whatever money I had to support me during my studies reduced significantly overnight. I didn't have funds for art supplies, but I had a lot of clothes that I had brought over in fear of New York winters.' The 'lightbulb moment' occurred when she accidentally shrunk her clothes in the dryer: 'I started thinking of the clothes as an art material very close to the skin and representative of the body. I was influenced by the works of early feminist artists who I had just discovered in the United States.'

Clothes have since become a primary source material for Kostianovsky's work: her own clothes, those her teenage son has outgrown, and clothes that once belonged to her father. The latter were used to develop a series of textile tree stumps titled *Nature Made Flesh*, influenced by the colours of the interior of the body, with layers of fabric stitched to the exterior of wood and metal armatures. Kostianovsky turns clothing into visceral 'wounded trees' asking us to ponder impermanence and the lasting imprint of loss, whether through personal grief or environmental degradation.

Working by hand and 'sculpting' with a curved surgical needle and strong polyester thread, enables Kostianovsky to form her intricate surfaces. Making is integral to the concept of each work, the process itself revealing new avenues for the artist's research.

She puts painstaking effort into creating structures that are formally successful in order for the overall sculpture, and its topmost layers, to

work. For her, the fabric is the most satisfying and final aspect of each sculpture, the form helping to give the impression that the stumps are heavy and solid while in fact they are hollow and lightweight. She likens the materiality of textiles to the peeling back of layers of a person; their tissue, fat and bone. Describing connections between material memory, the personal nature of textiles and their ability to carry the weight of a person through shed cells, she asserts: 'Textiles even carried my own self, acting as a surrogate to the body.' Earlier experiments using her hair in her work emphasise the direct bodily connection of this artist's work.

Discarded domestic textiles, such as bedsheets, curtains and her own unwanted garments are all used within her practice. 'I would say 85% of my production is still based on my own clothes; a type of cannibalism of the wardrobe,' she reflects, 'although sometimes I regret it. I don't particularly consider myself a shopaholic but the

voracious pace of consumption and disposal of materials here in the US, guides my practice.' Kostianovsky was pleased to be part of the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition in 2025, the first time she has exhibited in the UK. In the near future, she has exhibitions as part of the Chicago Architecture Biennale; at the Brandywine Museum of Art, Pennsylvania; and

another at the Musée des Confluences in Lyon, France.

More widely, Kostianovsky notes: 'I'm pleased to see how the world of textile arts has conquered the art world. Recent art fairs in New York have had a prevalence of textile works and this feels like a democratisation. I'm thrilled to be a part of that transformation.' The artist observes that recently her various projects have come together: 'For a long time, I worked in different series, including trees and animal carcasses. My recent exhibition, *Moved by Forces* at Slag&RX Gallery in New York, allowed me to create a world in which all these elements were intermingled.'

Narcissus (2025), for instance, is a 20ft-wide textile tree stump with tentacular roots that take over the floor. It creates a grid reminiscent of neurones as seen under a microscope, or of a city map. Another two works feature the transformation of a tree stump into a carcass, as if the tree is fruiting a body in textile, a host for new life. This brings multiple personal memories and broader, universal experiences of life and death to the fore. The exhibition also features works that recall large sides of meat and dead birds suspended by chains.

To put these pieces into context, the meat markets of Argentina were impactful during her childhood. Kostianovsky reflects that Argentina has an 'obsession' with beef production and that her identity as a foreigner in the US, although she has lived there for 25 years, also shapes her practice. She finds a link between the shape of the beef carcass and the female silhouette, reinforcing the idea of the portrait, while also touching upon the topic of violence against women, which remains prevalent in Latin America.

'There's something quite satisfying about making my sculptures in fabric, transforming a material completely, by taking something that gives us comfort and that we tend to associate with safety, and creating an image of something gory yet familiar,' she reflects. 'We're all made of that, in the end.'

Tamara Kostianovsky's work can be seen at Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington St., Chicago, Illinois 60602 as part of Chicago Architecture Biennale until 28 Feb. bit.ly/3K3Whlb
tamarakostianovsky.com
instagram.com/tamara_kostianovsky





Opposite page, far left: *Botanical Revolution in Polka Dots* (2024), 66cm x 43cm x 25cm. Recycled textile, rope and metal hook; and opposite left: *Narcissus* (2025), variable dimensions. Recycled clothing and other textiles, wood.

Above left: *Finding Space* (2025), 219cm x 92cm x 61cm. Recycled clothing and other textiles, wood, meat hooks.

Left: *Twilight* (2025), 229cm x 81cm x 23cm. Recycled textiles, wood.

Above: *Cavern* (2025), 208cm x 71cm x 58cm. Recycled clothing and other textiles, wood, meat hooks. PHOTOS BY LEO SANO. COURTESY OF SLAG&RX AND THE ARTIST, TAMARA KOSTIANOVSKIY.