

# Charlotte Kruk: Consumer Couture – The Politics of Having



With her own special twist on the idea of “eye candy,” **Charlotte Kruk** uses recognizable consumer packaging—such as gum and candy wrappers, sugar and coffee bags, and food tins—to create garments and sculptures that reflect our material culture. Visually compelling and conceptually provocative, Kruk’s work questions the relationship between dress, power, gender, and consumerism. With both humor and a serious intent, Kruk has created a series of vignettes for RAM’s Windows on Fifth Gallery that explore the dynamics of a “disposable, packaged society.”

Kruk’s garments can be fun to look at (and wear!), yet they are not without a serious, prickly subtext that connects individual choice to larger intangible power structures. Kruk’s use of name brand products such as Hershey’s® Chocolate, Colgate® or Crest® toothpaste, and Big Red® Chewing Gum is purposeful—it ties her work to the consumer culture of the present day even though she references clothing styles of the past.

Clothing—like other forms of bodily adornment—can reflect personal, social, and cultural interests and issues. Modern industrialized capitalist societies—especially those that follow “Western” cultural trends—offer many options for dress. What we wear and how we wear it is inextricably linked to advertising, body image, social class, and influence. Interested in consumerism and wastefulness as well as self-image, Kruk plays with all of these concepts as she creates garments and tableaux that feature product packaging as a primary material.

Kruk is descended from a long line of domestic seamstresses, who—in the artist’s words—would “sew out of necessity.” While she has academic art training, she is a self-taught garment-maker and completed her first wearable sculpture at 23. With encouragement from her mother, Kruk has refined her construction and sewing methods over the two decades that she has created garments. In her current role as a high school art teacher in California, the artist shares numerous techniques and materials with her students—such as lost wax casting with silver and bronze, hot and cold metal fabrication, mixed media assemblage, and sculpting with both ceramics, and papier-mâché—that she also uses in her own work.

Kruk’s early garments included a Bit-O-Honey® bikini and a Bubblicious® dress. She started with Bit-O-Honey® because her collection of those wrappers was the largest that she had at the time.



In order to get materials to use as fabric, either

(above)  
**Charlotte Kruk**  
*Caffeine, It Just Feels Right*, 2008; from the installation *CaffeineNation*  
Recycled coffee packaging, cotton, plastic, coffee beans, sheepskin, fabric, and leather  
Life-size  
All Courtesy of the Artist  
All gallery guide photography: Keay Edwards

(left)  
**Charlotte Kruk**  
*I’ve Tasted*  
*at Least 31 Flavors*, 1996; from the installation *The Politics of Having*  
Recycled piano bags, Baskin-Robbins taster spoons, plastic, fabric, and wood  
Size 8

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Kruk or friends and family have to consume the product, carefully extracting it from its packaging. The care with which she has to treat what others so easily destroy and/or throw away encourages the artist to think about what we value and why. For example, Kruk herself chewed the gum needed to create the Bubblicious® dress—the bodice is made from the wrapping of each individual piece of gum while the skirt is made from the outer product packaging. In her mind, she offset the grueling nature of her 20-mile-a-day bike ride to school with the “fun” of blowing bubbles. In both concept and practice, she was tapping into the complex relationship many people have with their diet and health—often being encouraged to reward healthy eating or a regimented exercise program. Kruk admits that her own personal feelings about how these systems do or do not work ties into the context of her garments.



When there are many food products with colorful and interesting packaging why would Kruk choose candy and gum? The initial choice to use material related to “sweets” was an attempt to link the product to concepts and words that are used to describe both aspects of women and mouth-watering food in the grocery store—such as sweet, juicy, creamy, smooth, etc. Recent themes include coffee and toothpaste—items connected to consumerist trends as well as other concerns, such as environmentalism and personal hygiene.

While every gender in society is impacted by images in the media, Kruk tends to create garments/sculptures relating to women because she absorbs and applies the information to herself, and because women are the ones most often held up as “eye candy.” The connection between this phrase and her choice of material (candy packaging being a primary one) is not accidental. Kruk relays that personally she has long been concerned with body image, consumption of both food and goods, and the guilt that comes from eating what she really wants versus what she should.



#### Artist statement

*Genuinely purchased, meticulously unwrapped, consumed, and conscientiously collated, each wrapper is carefully stitched side by side to create new textiles, which beg to be evaluated...scrutinized. These wearable sculptures are designed to “slyly wink” at a culture that often compares women, particularly well-dressed women, to decorations, consumables, “eye candy.” Initiating dialogue on packaging, brand association, and power structure, these sculptures also direct a commentary on the gluttony and wastefulness of a disposable, packaged society.*

#### Artist Biography

Kruk has a BFA from San Jose State University, California, and has shown her work nationally in both solo and group exhibitions. Her work has been featured extensively in print and digital media. Kruk has been an art teacher in San Jose for over 15 years.

– Lena Vigna, Curator of Exhibitions



(left and above)

**Charlotte Kruk**

*An Even Exchange and I've Left You Some Change:  
The Wisdom Tooth Fairy, 2009 and 2012*

Mixed media

Varying dimensions

(below)

**Charlotte Kruk**

*Chewy Fruit Twins: Starburst and Miss Now & Later, 1996*

Recycled Starburst and Now & Later

wrappers, plastic, and cotton

36 x 25 x 25 inches each dress