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Sugar-coated couture invites questions about consumerism



Jon Bolton

Charlotte Kruk uses consumables ranging from candy to sugar packets to create fashion with a statement.

By **Mary Louise Schumacher of the Journal Sentinel**

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It is that time of year when the windows of department stores come alive with twinkle lights and marked-down turtlenecks, beckoning us in to buy, buy, buy.

But a different kind of window shopping awaits in Racine, where California artist Charlotte Kruk wraps up the idea of femininity in a pretty package — to serious and satirical effect.

With her own idea of "eye candy," Kruk has created gorgeous garments from candy wrappers, tubes of toothpaste and sugar packets, among other consumables.

She, along with friends and family, carefully unwrap, consume and stockpile the sweets and other products used to make the impossibly pretty frocks, which have the silhouettes of handcrafted throwbacks and the seductive, buy-me-now colors of right now.

From these garments, Kruk has created vignettes for the windows at the Racine Art Museum, 441 State St., Racine, along Fifth St.

The outfits are as fun and cheery as a package of gum, but are loaded with ideas of disposable culture and notions of femininity. How many times have you called a woman sweet?

One can't help but think about the mass manufacture of foods, too, the ways food gets turned into un-food-like substances and delivered in strange, man-made containers.

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Kruk uses high-profile brands such as Hershey's, Colgate and Big Red, making the connection to large corporations and consumer culture. How are our identities tied to cultural trends, what we wear and what we buy? These are the seditious questions embedded in Kruk's sugar-coated couture.

The artist comes from a family of seamstresses. While she's trained as an artist, she's become quite the self-taught garment maker. She completed her first wearable sculpture when she was 23 and has been at it for 20 years since. One of her earliest pieces was a Bit-O-Honey bikini and a Bubblicious dress.

By accumulating the wrappers and packages she uses in her work, she's pondering the pile-up of waste that normally disappears to the landfill. She chewed all of the gum for her Bubblicious dress, for instance.

"In her mind, she offset the grueling nature of her 20-mile-a-day bike ride to school with the 'fun' of blowing bubbles," the art museum's website says. "In both concept and practice, she was tapping into the complex relationship many people have with their diet and health."

Mary Louise Schumacher is the Journal Sentinel's art and architecture critic. She brainstorms ideas for this design column with other design-minded Milwaukeeans on Pinterest (www.pinterest.com/artcity). Follow her coverage on Twitter (@artcity), Facebook (www.facebook.com/artcity) and Instagram ([marylouises](https://www.instagram.com/marylouises)). Email her at mschumacher@journalsentinel.com.



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Mary Louise Schumacher is the Journal Sentinel's art and architecture critic. She writes about culture, design, the urban landscape and Milwaukee's creative community. Art City is her award-winning cultural page and a community of more than 20 contributing writers and artists. Follow her on Facebook and Instagram.

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