

BOMB

INTERVIEW

Pat Oleszko by Michael Londres

Bawdy bodies that delight and transgress.

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Installation view of *Pat Oleszko: Fool Disclosure*, 2026. SculptureCenter, New York City. Photo by Charles Benton. Courtesy of the artist and David Peter Francis, New York City.

[Fool Disclosure](#) at SculptureCenter in New York City is a survey of Pat Oleszko's body of work over the last six decades. Her larger-than-life inflatables and handcrafted costumes, which toe the line between creature and couture, have turned SculptureCenter's two floors into a veritable Wonderland. With wordplay and dreamlike logic, these commedia dell'arte personages hold a funhouse mirror up to imperialism, capitalist greed, the climate crisis, and social injustice. In these dark times, Oleszko carries the torch of the carnivalesque, making fools of kings and alchemizing outrage into galvanizing humor and joy.

Michael Londres Most of your works were made to be performed in real time and place. How do you reconcile them as objects in a gallery?

Pat Oleszko It's difficult. But now they're existing in relation to one another, and some of them are animated, and there are films. There needs to be a recognition or presentation of the fact that my work is a lively art form and not static in the least bit, including the blowing air that if not there would cause the inflatables to collapse. It becomes a daydream made real and almost as ephemeral as that.



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ML Your costumes have taken over the basement. It's set up like a proper runway show down there.

PO It was thrilling when Sohrab Mohebbi, the director at SculptureCenter, said that I could have the whole basement. Then it's a complete thing because every aspect of the show is a different part of the practice. It is, by the way, actually something; it's not practice. So much of my work is on the street, is traveling. As I have said frequently, to some people's erudite confusion, the world is my stooge. Even if I'm doing a performance someplace else, I have to get there, and oftentimes I am in these things. This is nice because when you're walking through the basement, you get the feel of what it's like to relate to something like this on the street.

ML The titles and text elements of the works give the viewer that extra wink and nudge: *Duh Nincompope* (1999), *Udder Delight* (1987), *Resist Ants* (2025). Where does your propensity for wordplay come from?

PO My father spoke many languages, and he would drop foreign terms in conversation. It would completely flummox us. I read *Alice in Wonderland* when I was eight. There's so much wordplay in it. This is an oft-repeated explanation, but I see words as ready-made clothes in that they fit a general idea. But then you alter them, and you get more for your money. If I can do a double entendre, a triple entendre, or if I'm completely confusing someone, at least they're thinking about the words and what they possibly might mean. And God forbid you should laugh about that *something*.

“Things that amuse and also annoy and horrify me are the medium for my exchange.”

— Pat Oleszko

ML It's part of a general dissatisfaction you have with things as they are.

PO I'm looking at and finding absurdity, and conflict, and iniquity, and noting social constructs that are wildly out of balance. Things that amuse and also annoy and horrify me are the medium for my exchange. Because I'm using myself as the armature, or as the canvas, to be prosaic, then I have the added ability of being able to do it conversationally. I can look in your eyes, and I can tell whether I'm hitting it or not.

ML What made the New York City of the '70s and '80s such fertile ground for outside-the-box and transgressive art?

PO It was the Wild West. It was cheap. You didn't have to work for three weeks to pay your rent; people were living together; there was more real estate. SoHo was new. There was no name for Tribeca. Everything was kind of febrile. You made do with what you had. If you needed counterfeit goods, you went to 42nd Street. It was electrifying.

But also, there was danger like drugs and junkies. You're sitting in a restaurant, and somebody shoots it up outside. Or you get mugged on the way home from your waitressing job at four o'clock in the morning. A friend of ours got his car broken into, and then in the secondhand store around the corner he found the little figurines he had made. I said, Geesh! Buster's showing at the junk store off the Bowery. I'd better get off my fucking ass! Another time, the nude body for the girl-out-of-the-cake routine I had used so many times needed to get cleaned. I'm going through the phonebook, and I find French dry cleaning. I go in there, and they're a little too aware. The lady says, "Oh, is this a Claes Oldenburg?" God. Anyhow, she says, "We can clean it, but can we put it in the window?" And I said, "Yes!"



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ML Were you and your friends preoccupied with the idea of “making it”?

PO Didn't think about it one bit. It was all about doing what you're supposed to be doing. You're an artist, whatever that is. You'll find a way to figure it out. If somebody got lucky and got a show, then—Yippie!—we get to all go to the opening and have a great time. It was like a sharing of the wealth. And those were the times when magazines were great. *Esquire* was doing incredible literature. *Vogue* was Veruschka and Giorgio di Sant' Angelo. I took my stuff to *Esquire*, and the art director there, Richard Weigand, thought it was great and gave me a bunch of jobs. Then I got into *Ms.*, *Oui*, *Penthouse*, *Playboy*, *New York*, *Sesame Street*, and *National Geographic* magazines. I waitressed as a different character every night and got a following. I entered every contest I could think of, including Miss Subways. It was like, Well, I'm never going to have a show in a gallery. Why don't I try to weasel my way in there?

ML It seemed like there were more avenues to earn a living as an artist, whereas now everything rests on that one big break. And for young artists, there's so much pressure on the debut.

PO You can thank Andy Warhol for that. Truly, it is such bullshit. Thank God for him. He was such a seer and deep-thinking individual in the guise of this veneer. He said you're either *that* or you're teaching, and that's not how it is. Not that I didn't resent other people's success. But it's not as if I also didn't have success. Someone pointed out, Pat, you came here in 1970, and in '71 you had a big show at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, now the Museum of Art and Design. The world that I theoretically wanted to be part of, which was the buy-and-sell situation of the galleries, was completely evaded. But, you know, it didn't make any difference. There were enough people that caught my spirit—forgive the hubris. The spirit of adventure and humor have carried me through dark times like 9/11 and the one we're in now.

ML Do you make a distinction between protest and protest art?

PO The thing is, you can't be didactic because people are getting that a hundred percent of the time from the news. Art works as a separate language. You're trying to reach people in a way that's a different interpretation of the idea, hoping that will spark something. One time I was doing a performance in Boston, and it involved the audience, and a guy said to me afterwards, "I had no idea that eco art could be so much fun." The best thing that the movement can do, I think, is to deal with these cruel and corrupt murderers with humor to humiliate them. *He* can't stand that, and the rest of them can't stand it either. It's like when those people in Portland, Oregon, were showing up to protests wearing inflatables.



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ML What do you make of this new energy and interest around you and your work? Do you think of this moment as a renaissance?

PO Quite frankly, I don't know what it is. I'm just going to tell you this. I go to the poor man's therapist, which is the astrologer. It's a one-shot deal. This year's prediction: you will have a year like you've never had. Everything is opening up to you, and it will keep on happening. Life is always presenting you with new challenges. When you're young, you think you can do anything, or things can't be worse than this. Now I'm having this... You know, someone recently said I am now the It Girl!

[Pat Oleszko: Fool Disclosure](#) is on view at SculptureCenter in New York City until April 27.

Michael Londres is a writer in New York City. He holds an MFA from Brooklyn College and is at work on a collection of stories about envy and desire between artists and a novel about the man who would *not* be the national hero of the Philippines.