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The art world once dismissed Pat Oleszko — now her inflatable sculptures are a museum sensation

The 78-year-old artist's madcap creations — previously bound for the dumpster — are

Pat Oleszko models her 'Hand/some Apparel', created from her mother's collection of leather gloves. Portrait by Heather Sten for the FT



Julia Halperin

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Five years ago, the artist Pat Oleszko was preparing to throw away her life's work. Next week, one of the sculptures previously bound for the dumpster will be shown at Art Basel Miami Beach.

The 78-year-old American artist created more than 60 madcap inflatable sculptures — from a bright green octopus to a 37-foot-long rocket ship — out of nylon between the early 1980s and the late 1990s. As they aged, their synthetic material began to break down. They started to smell a bit. Nobody wanted to buy them.



'Octopussy' (1999) by Pat Oleszko © Pat Oleszko, courtesy of the artist and David Peter Francis, New York

With storage costs mounting, Oleszko searched for a company that would be able to dispose of the sculptures in an eco-friendly manner. But she couldn't bring herself to book a pick-up. "Thank god," she says now, grinning at me conspiratorially in her fourth-floor walk-up in downtown Manhattan. She is wearing bracelets up to her elbows made out of dominoes and dice. Six feet tall and striking, she looks like a Valkyrie who went to art school.

Oleszko's 13-foot-long inflatable "Big Foots" (1995) will take over the booth of David Peter Francis gallery at the fair. It comprises two legs, each taller than a door frame, sticking out from the wall with striped tights and pointy shoes — like an oversized Wicked Witch of the East, crushed by a farmhouse in *The Wizard of Oz*.



‘Big Foots’ (1995), Oleszko’s 13-foot long recreation of the death of the Wicked Witch of the East in ‘The Wizard of Oz’ © Charles Benton

The surreal presentation represents a moment of vindication for an artist who, with little support from the art establishment, has created a genre-busting oeuvre that skewers all manner of dogma, from politics to gender roles to religion. “It has taken a long time in the art world to accept the fact that humour is actually a viable medium,” Oleszko says.

In January, more than 20 of Oleszko’s inflatables will take over SculptureCenter in Long Island City for *Pat Oleszko: Fool Disclosure*, her first major institutional solo show in 35 years. Yet another giant sculpture — the head of a jester blowing into a horn — will hold court at the highly anticipated Whitney Biennial in New York, which opens in March.

“These inflatables defy so much of what we think sculpture is,” says Jovanna Venegas, SculptureCenter’s curator. “They are not solid, they take up so much space or so little.” Until recently, “institutions didn’t know what to do with it.”



Pat Oleszko designs all her own accessories, including jewellery made from dominoes, dice and old View-Master reels © Heather Sten for the FT

In addition to inflatables, Oleszko works in a variety of forms that the market has historically not known what to do with: costumes, installations, performance, film, writing. Her career represents a commitment to creation without compromise.

Rather than take a boring day job in order to make her art, Oleszko turned her day jobs into forms of radical self-expression. As a student at the University of Michigan in the late 1960s, she worked as a burlesque dancer, sewing outlandish costumes and gaining the skill and confidence to command a stage. When she moved to New York in 1970 and began waiting tables, she inhabited a different persona every night. There was the Little Old Lady, the Biker Chick, and the Super Server, who had every conceivable condiment to hand. “I got a fan base that would come in just to see who I was,” she says.



Oleszko wears an outfit from her sartorial tableau 'Know Ah's Art', in which coupled animals traverse a long walkway 'through writhing waters and enter the ark to triumph' © Heather Sten for the FT

At the same time, Oleszko was developing more elaborate characters, like the Upper East Side Swinger and Sally the Sexy Secretary, that debuted in a project called "New Yuck Womun" at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts (now the Museum of Arts and Design) in 1971. "It gave me a kind of a power that as a young woman, it's hard to grasp," she recalls. "I empowered myself by becoming anything that I wanted."

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When she pitched herself to the legendary Sonnabend Gallery — tripping over a Mel Bochner stone sculpture on the way in — she was laughed out the door

Raised outside Detroit by immigrant parents from Poland and Germany who prized hard graft, Oleszko always had a puritanical work ethic. But in art school, she struggled to learn to weld. Sick of watching her steel constructions fall over in front of her mostly male peers, she began sewing at home. She realised that if

she made her visions out of fabric, her body could become the armature. With that, she says, "I walked out as a pedestrian sculpture."

At a time when the term "performance art" was just beginning to enter the lexicon, the blue-chip art world was sceptical, if not outright contemptuous of

Oleszko, this Amazonian woman wandering around New York in a cloud of patchouli. When she pitched herself to the legendary Sonnabend Gallery — tripping over a Mel Bochner stone sculpture on the way in — she was laughed out the door. Later, when one of her artist heroes, Claes Oldenburg, asked to visit her studio, she thought she had finally found an ally who recognised her potential. It turned out that he wanted to hire her; his first wife, who sewed most of his soft sculptures, had recently left him.



Oleszko as Lady Liberty in 'Libertease A Broad' (1992)
© Pat Oleszko, courtesy of the artist and David Peter Francis, New York



Oleszko's 'Liberty Tug A Luggin' (1975) © Pat Oleszko, courtesy of the artist and David Peter Francis, New York

Oleszko wasn't too bothered by these dismissals. She simply found other ways to circulate her work. For magazines like *Esquire* and *Ms.*, she became a kind of three-dimensional illustrator, dressing up as the characters relevant to their coverage, like the Statue of Liberty, for photo shoots. Her inflatable sculptures were fixtures at museum galas and fundraisers. There was rarely a parade or costume contest she wouldn't enter.

In this context, Oleszko came to think of her work as something to be experienced, but not necessarily preserved. In the late 1980s, she began to conduct ritual performative burnings of her costumes in order to clear space in

her studio and storage units. (The inflatables were initially spared because they pack up small and release damaging gases when burned.)



‘Patty’s Inferno’ (2008)

“It kills me that so much of it is gone now,” says the former Gourmet editor Ruth Reichl, who has been close friends with Oleszko since they met in a college art history class. “If you do this for 60 years, and you don’t get taken really seriously, it’s hard to believe that your work is valuable.”

The financial strain has been a challenge. Oleszko once opted to have both knees replaced at the same time because it was cheaper. “I didn’t have a leg to stand on,” she jokes. During our interview, there is a torrential downpour outside, and we listen to the drip-drip-drip of her leaky roof.



Installation view of 'Pat's Imperfect Present Tense' at David Peter Francis, New York, 2024 © Pat Oleszko, courtesy of the artist and David Peter Francis, New York



‘The Coat of Arms’ (1972) © Pat Oleszko, courtesy of the artist and David Peter Francis, New York

But the tide has begun to turn as a new generation discovers Oleszko’s distinctive vision. In June 2024, David Peter Francis opened her first commercial gallery show. It included costumes like “The Coat of Arms” (1972) a tailcoat and top hat made out of styrofoam arms, and films such as “Where Fools Russian” (1985), in which Oleszko dons layers upon layers of clothing and jumps in the ocean. (She says the film is both a commentary on Cold War-era paranoia and a “reverse striptease”, a nod to her chapter as a burlesque dancer.)

Works in the show found buyers in New York, Chicago and Florida. Oleszko's dealer David Pagliarulo believes it resonated during a somewhat morose moment in contemporary art. "Her work uses humour and joy in this way that still allows for the political to be front and centre," he notes. At Art Basel Miami Beach, Pagliarulo and his staff will don sculptural hats designed by Oleszko, available for between \$5,000 and \$8,000.

Back at her loft, Oleszko expresses concern about finding the right hats for the gallery team; they must be light and breathable enough for extended wear by novices. Most people couldn't pull off something like the "Dump Trump" hat she created for a recent "No Kings" protest, in which a puppet version of the US president sits on a gleaming white toilet. "You have to take breaks to let your brains breathe," she explains.



Inside Oleszko's apartment in Tribeca, New York. She moved here from Ann Arbor, Michigan in the early 1970s © Heather Sten for the FT



Oleszko dons a hat entitled 'Uh Oh, She's In Treble Now' © Heather Sten for the FT

Oleszko and Pagliarulo are still figuring out how exactly to present her work in rarefied art spaces. They have to strike a difficult balance — simultaneously celebrating the virtuosity required to make it all by hand, preserving it for the future, and still retaining its wildness.

Oleszko is "one of the realest artists to ever live", says Pagliarulo. Her fateful run-in at Sonnabend, in which she crashed into a minimalist sculpture, "feels

like such an encapsulation of Pat. She is going to run over it because she can't help it. It's her MO: run it over."

*December 5-7, David Peter Francis, Art Basel Miami Beach booth S17,
artbasel.com*

January 29-April 27, sculpture-center.org

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