

THE WORLD OF
INTERIORS

HOUSES

PUPPET REGIME

Pat Oleszko wears many hats – literally as well as professionally – and chances are they'll be made from something that just happens to be lying around in her madcap loft in Tribeca. From saucepan lids to pliers, there's very little she won't use to create one of her huge marionettes, sculptures or performance-art costumes

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Photography by Tina Tyrell

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A group of pedestrian sculptures stand to attention against a painted backdrop, which is entitled 'You Can Only Imagine' by John Copley. The artist says of her work: 'I make sculptures... I love objects. And it makes me comfortable to have a lot around'. From left,

the figures comprise: 'Rainbow Party Patty'; 'Every Body Is a Star'; 'Incendiary Artist: Big Little Match Girl'; 'Stumpy Enraged'; and 'Peace Piece: Caught Red-Handed'

Pat Oleszko is a performer, puppeteer, sculptor, activist and Guggenheim fellow. However, in the tradition of Buster Keaton and Lewis Carroll, the multi-hyphenate New York legend self-defines as a fool. When we first started emailing, she'd sign off with variations on her name – Pant, Prat etc – and each time I felt silly for the formality of my 'best wishes'. Several emails deep, I considered greeting 'Splat', but anticipated it would fall flat. The fool's art is to create a rift in reality that exposes its artifice. Any attempt to bridge that would require new distance to be formed. I understood my role: 'Hey Pat,' I replied. It's been a busy 12 months, with appearances at Art Basel Miami in 2025, a solo exhibition at Sculpture Center earlier this year (her first in a New York City institution in more than 35 years) and, now, work on show at the Whitney Biennial. She laments, 'soooo much to do before i rest', recalling Robert Frost's line 'and miles to go before I sleep'.

Born in 1947, the daughter of German and Polish immigrants, Pat got her artistic bearings at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. She wanted to make 'big sculptures' but couldn't 'weld properly'. So she started with a sewing machine and, looking for a 'proper armature' for her creations, realised, at six foot, 'I could hang them on myself'. This was her 'Pygmalion story... the sculpture jumped off the podium and into my life.' Alongside art school, she upheld the last vestiges of vaudeville at a seedy burlesque joint and waitressed at Max's Diner, arriving in costumes and performing for clients. This led her to the Kitchen, the avant-garde performance space in Manhattan, where she staged one of her first exhibitions.



Pat Oleszko is seen reflected in a mirror on top of the 'Chester Drawers' (her nickname). Arrayed are myriad pieces of flamboyant jewellery she has created over the years from scavenged flotsam and jetsam. These include three tiers of earrings, fashioned out of everything from animal crackers to silver milagros, shuttlecocks, Scrabble tiles, animal bones ('old boyfriends'), puppets and anything else she can dangle from her earlobes. Beyond that are the 'Clown Jewels', a plethora of bracelets, including dice and domino constructions that started the collection because she 'loves the graphic patterns, not necessarily the game – although I take my chances'. Others are crafted from shells, feather dusters, dolls, wooden miniatures, tyres, world globes, puzzle pieces, birds and snakes

When we first talk, it is the day of the Sculpture Center opening. 'I've finally had a chance to wash my hair... But I'm worried that what I'm going to wear for the opening is not fabulous enough.' Her morning attire is already pretty fabulous: from one ear a cascade of stubby coloured pencils, from the other a chandelier of paper flags. Around her rows of bangles, hats and gloves punctuate the walls – her whole room a veritable jewellery box. Come to think of it, there's little that can't be plucked off a hook and worn – even

the pliers and pans could be put to use. 'I would say that almost everything is made for or about performance. They all have a life somehow, on some stage.'



On the kitchen wall hangs a collection of Czech, Italian and Spanish plates, as well as a platter from a friend that Pat says 'seemingly represents me and my universe'. In the window is a shadow sculpture from her mentor Milton Cohen. The right wall shelves are laden with the artist's Chapeau Chap 'O' hats, crafted from diverse ephemera. She often dons a headpiece, following the British dictum: 'If you're going somewhere, wear a hat'

For a couple of years Pat lived in the Bowery, until the bodega across the street got a record player and played Paul Simon's 'Me and Julio Down by the Schoolyard' over and over. She thought: 'I love these people, but I'm getting outta here.' So, in 1972, she moved into this 'archaic Parisian-style loft' in Tribeca. The neighbourhood has changed radically: 'It used to be industrial... If I saw anybody on the street that wasn't a workman, I thought this person must be lost.' Now it's one of the most gentrified parts

of the city. To begin with the place leaked but now it is storm-proofed and rent-controlled.

The apartment is L-shaped; one quarter kitchen, bedroom and study, three quarters studio, which is maybe 7.5 by 12 metres and restrictive in terms of what she can make. Nevertheless, with a 3.5-metre ceiling and access to the roof, she's made an 11-metre rocket in there: 'I did it just like Nasa, you know, in stages, engineered it.' Limited space and a predilection for collecting don't necessarily go together: 'It just keeps getting smaller and smaller... And then I have to do some ritual cleansing.' Back in the Bowery she threw stuff in the skip but recalls, tongue in cheek, how she then saw 'bums wearing my costumes. It was so humiliating, I said: I have to make a more important exit for these things. So that's when I started planning bonfires.'



A tall chequered tapestry hanging over the bed features various characters from Pat's performances, including 'Marie Anne Toilette', 'Da Version' and 'Mike Hammer'. The 'Suite Song' violin piece was part of an array of six characters that the artist suspended from her body for a show. The bird-shaped hat on the bedside table was created to wear while she snorkelled in a lake upstate, during her attempt to infiltrate an asylum of loons

Not everything goes up in flames. Major pieces go into three storage units while granted a place at home are 'the Central Committee', some of it work, some of it soon to be work: 'I don't make any distinction between my life, my work, my home,' she says. 'If I find something that's curious, I'll bring it home. If there's a place where it wants to sit, on the walls, then that's OK. There are things that simply have to be brought home – they raise their hand.' There's little by way of the organic or natural, though she does collect shells ('because everyone does') and stops to gather feathers when running. It's mostly all manmade and multiples. Pat's greatest ecstasy is getting '100 pairs of gloves for \$1'.

It is clear she has a *horror vacui*. The idea of a minimalist white space gives her chills. As a child, her bedroom had – *quelle surprise* – 'a lot of stuff in it'. And her mother, although driven by different tastes, also collected 'lots of lovely little things'. When Pat finally chose her own wallpaper – one wall plaid, the other stripes – the family was mortified. 'I had a lot of early design choices that were controversial.' (At this point, she acknowledges: 'I'm wearing a flowery top and striped scarf, so I, you know, get it.')



Her desk enclave features a collection of curiously designed bags, including one made from an embroidered 'Tomatos' sign (sic) that she found in a junk shop. The artist has hung pictures of artworks by others, images of herself from her modelling days and, higher up, more hats, including the tall book stack constructed from cardboard



'Mister Tambourine Man' was one of six characters protruding from a structure depicting diverse disciplines that Pat created – she dubbed the installation 'Aye Support the Arts'

Last year Pat got gallery representation. She describes how the 'very charming and beautiful gallerist' David Peter Francis pursued her, convinced of the importance of her work in a canon that includes Oskar Schlemmer and Niki de Saint Phalle (*Wol* Nov 2022). They have discussed how her home might become the site for the Pat Oleszko Foundation. She finds it funny that it could become 'an iconic home, like, you know, Jackson Pollock's place, with everything preserved'. At 79, she's enjoying the attention: 'I'm the it girl in town!' Most baffling of all, though, is that her 'humble abode' is going to be – note the characteristic Pat pun – in the 'world of inferiors'.

We've spent a long time looking at objects, the things that make a home. But what makes work, and life? Her sculptures 'have to be animated by me in some way and I have to be able to see people's reactions... I'm not just into making objects, my theatre is the world. I'm in it, watching it.' If Pat's theatre is the world, then her home is a tantalising glimpse backstage.