



Who's Who In Crochet

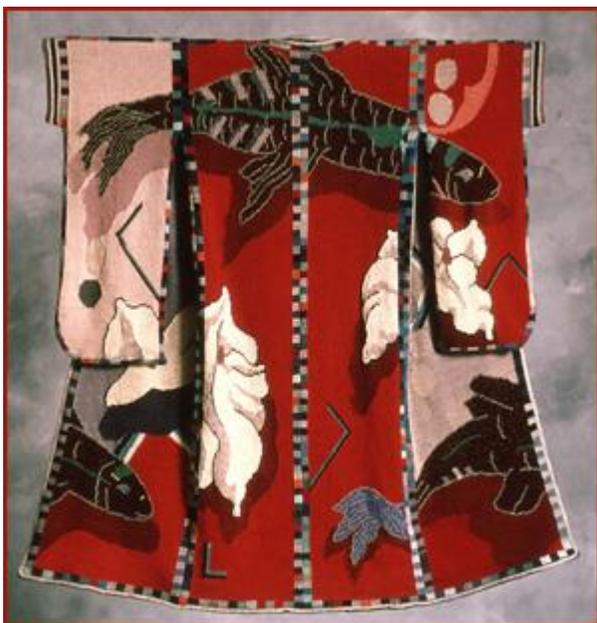
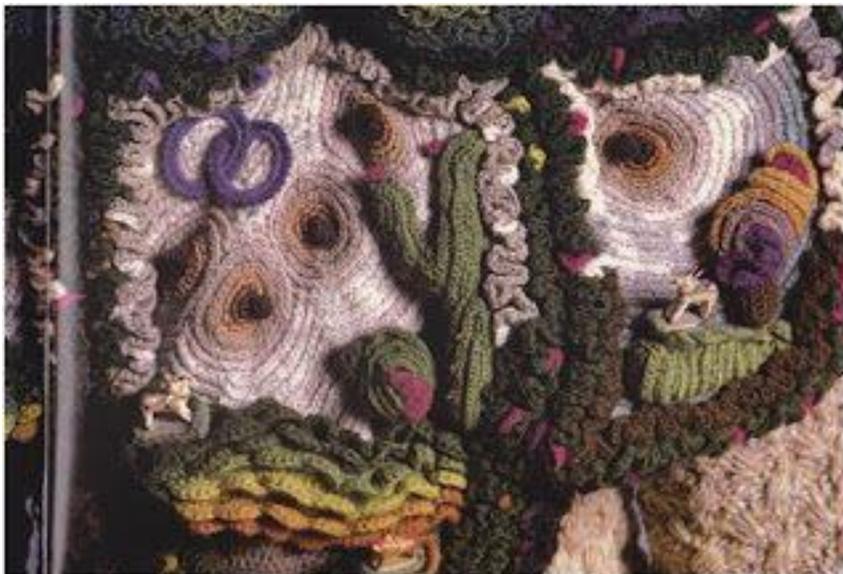
A focus of interest on those that have inspired crochet

Marika Contompasis

Through May 17, 2020 the Philadelphia Museum of Art *presents Off the Wall: American Art to Wear*, a major exhibition that highlights a distinctive American art movement that emerged in the late 1960s and flourished during the following decades features the work of Marika Contompasis. "It examines a generation of pioneering artists who used body-related forms to express a personal vision and frames their work in relation to the cultural, historical and social concerns of their time.

Tracing the roots of her creative instincts to the Pratt Institute, Marika more accurately honed and explored that which could never have been learned during that period. From 1966-69 as a student of industrial design, she was taught from an aesthetic point of view to make art pieces that functioned.

During a course of form study, she conceived an idea to make a chair that incorporated its own blanket. To execute the piece, she learned to crochet; and the result was a tulip-shaped form with crocheted petals dropping over the edge as a blanket.



With only knowledge of the chain stitch, roommates Jean Cacicedo, Janet Lipkin and Marika enjoyed the feel of yarn: 'so comfortable and so good.' With no technical guidance, they approached the chain as a line that could be used to draw in space. The support they gave to each other was critical; and within a year, their group also included Sharron Hedges and Dina Knapp.

Marika preferred the texture of yarn to the flat surface of paint. She also appreciated its historic overtones and historic references to other cultures. She developed a kinship with this less hectic, pre-industrial age.



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Wanting to make something that would sell, the transition to wearables was logical. In Berkeley in 1970, she and Janet explored ways to create art for the body. One of the first generation of major artists in the wearable art movement, her clothing is now prized by those who value the unusual, yet beautiful designs, found in specialty stores.

The same techniques to design a chair could be applied to designing a coat. After buying her first kitting machine in 1971, Marika was turned on to the idea of creating images in yarn. The clean flat quality of the fiber surface invited two-dimensional graphic design. The breakthrough was the basis for *Garden Triptych Coat*.

Working alone in her studio surrounded by yarn, making eccentric work seemed mythical and strange. The drawback was feeling detached from the world. Her transition from fiber artist to clothing designer required her to put her artwork aside and shift to a rather different set of high pressure, business-related priorities.

Marika credits that period for allowing her to grow as an artist, giving her the confidence to move into fine art and create conceptual work. Her pieces took the form of tiny kimonos in imaginative environments and vague ethereal kimonos constructed as collages from fragile pieces of organza and found objects.

Her new focus related to her original interests, express at Pratt Institute back in 1969. 'I had heard,' she says, 'that people don't continue to be artists. They must take other jobs to support themselves. I wanted to do something that would sell. I knew I had a fashion sense.' She began to design commercially-both in response to a personal need to enter the real world and simply to survive.

For Marika, the distinction between art and commercial art is clear: 'When I do artwork, I am trying to explain the way I perceive things, which is different from the way everyone else does. It is really defining who you are with a kind of honesty that is self-expression. For commercial purposes you are trying to find out what other people like. It is saying, This is what you like; I am just describing it to you. In art you are describing your soul. It is not possible to mass-produce a spiritual experience.'"





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Today, Marika is co-owner with her brother of MA+CH, an international fashion brand in Schenectady, New York. MA+CH will show its designs at the upcoming Electric City Couture fashion show.

Images:

1-Garden Tritych Coat, detail: crochet, wool yarn, wood; 1975.

2-Trout Magnolia Coat; wool yarn, silk, crochet, loom knitted; 1979

3-MA + CH (Marika Charles) T-shirt, retail

Resources:

Goebel, Erica. "Marika Contompasis: Transition from Fine Art to Fashion." *Ornament Magazine*; Vol. 11, No.4, 1988; pp. 43-48

Schaffler Dale, Julie. Marika Contompasis. *Art to Wear*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1986; pp. 54-59.

Schaffler Dale, Julie. "The Kimono in the Art to Wear Movement."

www.marikacharles.com