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Making a meal of it

Prawns, pasta, sardines, salads and even a Sunday roast: textile artist Kate Jenkins transforms food into astonishingly lifelike works of wool

In a converted Regency coach house in Brighton's Kemptown, textile artist Kate Jenkins has spread the spoils of a recent Italian food trip across her worktop: ornately shaped pasta, jars of plump olives, glossy Calabrian onions and bottles of Prosecco. Soon, she'll take them home for dinner (one of the perks of her job), but first she is knitting and crocheting meticulously detailed replicas of them for her next London exhibition: a life-size Italian delicatessen made entirely from textiles. Its name? *Kate's Knitalian*.

Today, she is busy making the onions' fine, whiskery roots. After two days of experimenting with fibres, she has finally found the solution: shredded raffia, teased into dry, straggling wisps. "Virtually anything can be made with textiles," says Kate. "Mix the right threads, colours and techniques and you can create almost any effect."

In her studio (or "laboratory", as her partner, Maurizio, calls it), Kate conjures a playful, nostalgic pop-art world from yarn and thread, creating

fibrous feasts so convincing that, at first glance, you might be tempted to take a bite. Creamy or crumbly, crackly or crunchy: in Kate's hands, textiles are transformed into uncannily lifelike creations, from a shimmering sardine to a pillowy pastry. Wool is brushed into fine strands for candyfloss or snipped into tiny flecks to resemble cocoa powder; beads become seeds, roe and sugar sprinkles; sequins flash like wet fish scales; and metallic threads mimic tins, labels and the foil packaging of iconic brands.

A nod to nostalgia

Kate has worked for more than two decades in this gated mews, where her neighbours include a ceramicist, a painter, a picture framer and a letterpress printer. In her studio, more than a thousand jewel-bright spools of wool line wooden shelves, jam jars brim with beads, bags bulge with shimmering sequins and towers of boxes are filled with samples, sketchbooks and empty food packets.

The sea is moments away. "Brighton has such a creative buzz; I'm never bored. I can finish work ►



There are more than 1,000 spools of wool in Kate Jenkins's Brighton studio, where she turns yarn, thread, sequins and beads into exquisite pieces



THIS PAGE AND
OPPOSITE Kate
creates food-focused
treats of all sizes
and styles, including
large ice-cream
cones and cute
caviar canapés

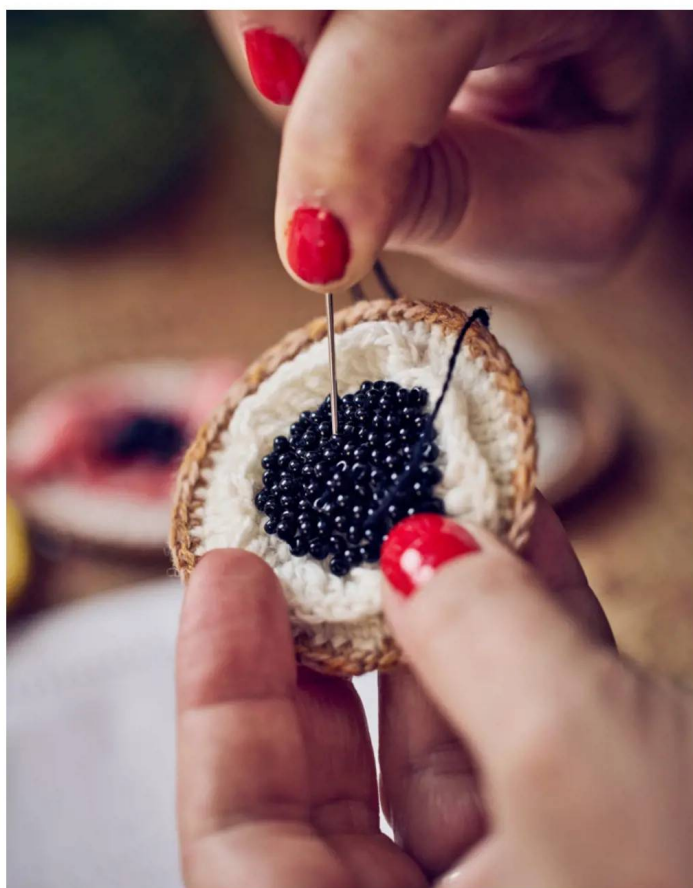


◀ and be on the beach in two minutes or wander into Kemptown village.” The city’s kitschy seaside nostalgia naturally lends itself to Kate’s work, as she turns sticks of Brighton rock, ice creams and fish and chips into quirky souvenirs for visitors. But her inspiration extends far beyond the seafront.

By her own admission, Kate finds it hard to switch off. Meals out spark new creations, food shopping becomes a research trip and, on holiday, she leaves half her suitcase empty for edible finds. “Whenever I eat something new, I feel compelled to recreate it in wool,” she says.

That urge began early. Growing up in the Rhymney Valley, south Wales, Kate was taught to knit and crochet by her mum and grandmother in a home where making was simply part of life. Inspired by children’s art programmes, including

“Whenever I eat something new, I feel compelled to recreate it in wool”



Blue Peter and *Take Hart*, she spent hours practising stitches and, at 14, completed her first granny-square blanket. “I used to sit for hours, completely engrossed,” she recalls. Her mother’s and grandmother’s cookery and craft books still sit on her studio shelves.

After graduating from the University of Brighton with a degree in fashion textiles, Kate entered a difficult job market and returned home to Wales. She began working from her childhood bedroom on a knitting machine bought with money lent by her mum. After numerous unsuccessful applications for knitwear-design jobs, she started working with a design agency that sold her work to clients worldwide, including Ralph Lauren and Donna Karan. She found a creative niche developing and selling knitwear ideas, from new Fair Isle motifs and cable-knit concepts to embroidery treatments and entirely original stitches.

Kate then moved to Brighton in 2000 and, three years later, launched her own label, Cardigan, producing items such as scarves, gloves, hats and accessories. “I didn’t actually sell cardigans,” she explains. “I just loved the word!”

Running a fashion label alone, however, was punishing. Manufacturers demanded large minimum orders, which required substantial ▶

“Everyone relates to food, so it’s very accessible as an art form”

◀ upfront investment. In the days before slick websites and social media made small brands easy to discover, Kate knew she needed a bold idea to entice people into her showroom.

Food for thought

On a whim, Kate knitted and framed a full English breakfast. Its popularity inspired her first exhibition, *Comfort Food*, a range of favourite British dishes wittily rendered in wool, including fish and chips, a Sunday roast and sausages and mash. Every piece sold. “It was a real conversation starter,” she explains. “Everyone relates to food. It holds nostalgic memories of what we ate growing up and the meals we share with people we love, so it’s very accessible as an art form.”

Since then, Kate has created textile cafés, supermarkets, fish counters and a New York diner, as well as a bakery filled with more than 1,000 pastries. Her work has been exhibited around the world, and her seafood pieces hang in restaurants aboard six Viking ocean ships. Most recently, she created a window display for Hermès’ New Bond Street flagship store. *Rocabarn*, which finished in September, was a whimsical Hermès-style equestrian beauty salon complete with braided manes, painted hooves and a crocheted carrot chandelier.

Kate works quickly and intuitively, beginning with a rough sketch before instinct takes over. “I get so energised that I forget to write things down and get caught up in the moment,” she explains. Making a pattern slows her down, so, instead, she builds each piece by eye, mixing yarns to match exact shades and shaping them around the contours of the real object. On larger installations, assistants film her hands as she works so her methods can be replicated. Large ▶

RIGHT Kate begins her original designs with a rough sketch, then builds each piece by eye







◀ forms are machine-knitted, while Kate crochets smaller, sculptural details because she finds the technique faster and more flexible than hand-knitting. Embellishments are often the most painstaking part; a hand-sequined sardine tin with embroidered lettering takes three days to make.

Kate's search for the perfect materials can be equally painstaking. She spent years hunting for exactly the right shade of pink sequin to capture the gleam of a freshly cooked prawn. When she finally found it in Hong Kong, she bought four

kilograms on the spot. On another trip, to India, she returned with 20 kilograms of sequins in colours she couldn't find in England. "When those run out, I'll start panicking," she laughs.

Aperol Stitch, anyone?

Wit and wordplay thread through her work. What began as a way to sidestep potential trademark issues has become a playful signature. Tomato ketchup, for example, becomes Tomato Stitchup; Aperol Spritz becomes Aperol Stitch: "If it makes me laugh, I hope it will make someone else laugh. And if I'm in doubt, I still ask my mother!"

Some effects require less orthodox methods. Kate has used a blowtorch to create convincing scorch marks on a knitted *pastel de nata* and a griddle to singe a woollen chicken burger, which promptly caught fire. "I like pushing yarn, and my imagination, to their full potential," she explains.

So is there anything Kate can't make with wool? "Yes: glass. I'm desperate to create a fully stocked cocktail bar. But I'll have to wait for someone to invent completely see-through yarn for that!"

Kate's Knitalian runs from 30 October until 5 December 2026 at Air Contemporary in Ham Yard, Soho, London (air-contemporary.com). For more details on Kate's work, see katejenkinsstudio.co.uk; @kjcardigan.

THIS PAGE, ABOVE Hermès' New Bond Street flagship store recently hosted *Rocabarn*, Kate's playful equestrian beauty salon BELOW LEFT AND OPPOSITE Designed to bring a smile, Kate's creations all offer a huge dose of wit and whimsy, from an anchovy pizza to a tantalising Caprese salad and a bunch of blooms for Hermès





LIVE LIKE A LOCAL

*Kate's Brighton
highlights*

Shop

Dinner by Dowse (above) is brilliant for food-themed gifts, while Peggs & Son is a wonderful independent menswear shop. I also enjoy browsing Mr Bongo Records and Audrey's Chocolates in Hove. Sadly, Brighton's yarn shops have all closed down.

dowse.design.co.uk; peggsandson.com;
mrbongo.com; audreyschocolates.co.uk

Eat

The Reading Room, just down the road from my studio, is a cosy refectory with sea views that's perfect for breakfast and brunch. I also love Open Bakery in Kempton Village. Brighton and Hove are spoilt for restaurants. My favourites include The Chilli Pickle, Tony's and Burnt Orange.

readingroombrighton.co.uk;
openbakery.co.uk; thechillipickle.com;
originaltonys.com; burnt-orange.co.uk

Walk

I take my dog, Dilys, along the Black Rock Boardwalk most days. This traffic-free walkway runs for 850 metres along Brighton's eastern seafront, from Duke's Mound to Black Rock, near the marina. The sea air clears my head and helps me gather my thoughts for the day ahead.

Browse

On Sunday mornings, you'll often find me rummaging at Brighton Marina car boot sale. Brighton Flea Market is another favourite, while Ardingly Antiques Fair is well worth the trip when it's on, even though it's 40 miles away.



Additional photography by Valerie Sadoun; Emma Wood