

How About a Knitted Sardine?

The British artist Kate Jenkins crochets and knits almost anything you can imagine.



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By Rachel Felder

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In mid-June, when Hermès opened a new boutique on London’s fashionable Bond Street, the store’s windows were filled with an unusual tribute to the brand’s equestrian roots. It depicted a beauty parlor for horses, with grooming items such as a hair dryer, shampoo and conditioner, and the nail essentials for what might be called a “hooficure” all knitted or crocheted in lamb’s wool and many accented with embroidery.

The woolen salon, displayed through Sept. 3, was the creation of Kate Jenkins, an artist in Brighton, England, known for making unusual knitted goods with character and, frequently, an irreverent, smile-inducing whimsy.

For the Hermès windows, she said, “I kind of went into character, method acting, going, ‘If I was a horse that would go shopping in Hermès, what would I like it to look like?’”



Ms. Jenkins makes playful knitted and crocheted items in her studio in Brighton, England. Jeremie Souteyrat for The New York Times

She was speaking by phone from her studio in the Kemptown neighborhood of Brighton, about 50 miles south of central London. The work space is, appropriately enough, in a 19th-century complex of buildings originally used as stables and to store coaches.

For the Hermès installation, called Rocabarn, she crocheted around glass and plastic bottles of human grooming products and then embroidered on fanciful labels like The Main Event Shine Serum, Hot to Trot Hoof Oil and High Horse Tail Spritz. (The Rocabarn was a nod to rocabar, a striped Hermès motif derived from 19th-century horse blanket designs.)

There also was a Scent of the Stable diffuser — a woolen bottle filled with woolen sticks and a couple of pencils — and crocheted versions of horse-adored treats like sugar cubes and apples. A chandelier hung above the scene, with 250 hand-crocheted wool carrots dangling where the decorative crystals usually would be.

Overall, Ms. Jenkins said, she spent about three months creating the roughly 600 items for the windows.



Ms. Jenkins crocheting a food-themed item in her studio. Jeremie Souteyrat for The New York Times

Interspersed throughout the display were actual Hermès items, such as a Picotin Lock handbag filled with hair rollers made of wool and gold-plated Athena bracelets wrapped around a woolen horse's mohawked mane.

Throughout her career, Ms. Jenkins, 55, has worked on many commissions for brands, often with a similar wry approach. For example, there was a sequin lobster Christmas tree ornament sold by the retailer Anthropologie and a holiday wreath of woolen seafood, including an octopus and a smattering of mussels, sold by the London boutique Koibird.

And on her website, there are playful items for sale, including a wool croissant and pain au chocolat, with angry faces embroidered on each one (60 pounds, or about \$80).

Food is a frequent theme in Ms. Jenkins's work. She often gets inspired, she said, while grocery shopping. "I look at something and I think, 'How can I make that out of knit?'" Over the years, it's gotten to be more and more of an addiction."



One of Ms. Jenkins's food-themed creations: the long, thin breadsticks called grissini.
Jeremie Souteyrat for The New York Times

Ms. Jenkins grew up in Wales, in the Rhymney Valley, about 20 miles north of Cardiff. Her mother and maternal grandmother were prolific knitters and crocheters and, by the age of 9, she had begun crocheting granny squares.

“I was a kind of frustrated artist,” she said. “I wasn’t an amazing person who could draw beautiful still lifes and things, and I just found that I was really good at making things out of yarn.”

She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1994 from the University of Brighton and then moved to London. For a decade, she knitted prototypes of sweaters and other garments later produced by well-known designer brands (which she declined to identify).

Ms. Jenkins said that what she calls conversational sweaters — pullovers with the type of cheeky motifs on ugly Christmas sweaters — were especially well received. “That’s when I started thinking, ‘There’s something else I could do with this,’” she said.

She eventually returned to the Brighton area and in 2006 presented her first exhibition, called Comfort Food, as part of the annual Artists Open Houses initiative in the city. The lamb’s-wool collection depicted quintessentially British dishes like fish and chips, baked beans on toast and bangers and mash.

When all the items sold out, she said, “It gave me the confidence to go, ‘There’s a market for this and nobody else is doing it and I can just see where this takes me.’”

Ms. Jenkins’s wool comes from Z. Hinchliffe & Sons, a firm in West Yorkshire, in the north of England, and she has six Silver Reed fine gauge SK830 knitting machines. For the lamb's-wool sardines, which she frequently produces, she uses a jacquard stitch to resemble scales. Each fish then gets a thin layer of foil, pressed on with a hot iron and sequins are stitched on by hand.

A single sardine, she said, can take about an hour to make from start to finish, with larger pieces taking considerably longer. (Tinned Sardines With Tomato, which has four sardines in a recycled can and a crocheted tomato on the pull tab, is sold in a white box frame for £585.)

A large vase of tiger lilies in the Hermès windows got her signature crochet approach. For the lilies, she used lamb’s-wool yarn and a 1.75-millimeter crochet hook to create the stems and petals around wire. While she crocheted, Ms. Jenkins said, she kept an eye on a vase of actual flowers, to ensure the size and length of each flower was correct.

Beyond its vibrancy, the Hermès display seemed to aim to tap into current luxury shopping trends.

“Nowadays consumers and audiences in general, they expect more from brands than just the delivery of products and services,” said Federica Carlotto, the founder of the consultancy Salt Cultural Intelligence, who is also a program director at Sotheby’s Institute of Art and the author of “Luxury Brand and Art Collaborations: Postmodern Consumer Culture.”

“They want to be wowed,” she added. “They want to see that there is a story behind the product and also a sort of universe that the brand is able to create together with somebody else.”

Ms. Jenkins has been working on her next exhibition, “Kate’s Knitalian,” scheduled to open Oct. 30 at the Air Contemporary gallery in London. The show is to transform the space into an Italian deli stocked with woolen versions of pizza, pasta and focaccia studded with olives and rosemary.

At the moment, she said, her studio is scattered with empty tins of Rio Mare tuna and Chianti bottles that will be covered with wool for the show. Periodically, her work space also includes everyday items that serve as models.

“It’s like knitting a still life,” she said.