



# Q&A Kimberly Brooks: Fashionable sculpture for historic Cooper building



Kimberly Brooks' welded steel sculpture, "Ephemerality of Manner," will remain permanently in The Cooper Building in downtown L.A.'s fashion district. (Deborah Vankin/ LA Times)

By **DEBORAH VANKIN**  
*contact the reporter*



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**T**he historic Cooper building sits in the heart of downtown L.A.'s fashion district, and now a new sculpture hangs in the heart of that heart: The Cooper announced Wednesday it has permanently acquired artist Kimberly Brooks' 8-foot-tall uncoated steel pendant "The Ephemerality of Manner," which evokes a Victorian-era hoop skirt housing a woman's muscled legs kicking outward.

The piece, the first art to be permanently added to the 1927 building, is part of Brooks' site-specific installation "Thread and Bone," which can be seen through July 24. It stitches together video, collage work, textile pieces, performance and the welded steel sculpture, the centerpiece. As it dangles from the lobby ceiling, casting shapes and shadows in the windows, the sculpture is shot through with subtle complexities and contradictions traversing fashion, feminism, architecture and art history.

Brooks, who teaches painting at Otis College of Art and Design in L.A., recently attended the Museum of Contemporary Art's [rocking gala](#), joined by her husband, the actor Albert Brooks. But more work lies ahead: She is creating four new sculptures for other fashion district buildings. "Thread and Bone," commissioned by the Cooper, was a co-production of the Do Art nonprofit public art foundation and the Sage Projects consultancy. A closing performance will take place later this summer, after which the sculptural element will remain. "It just looks like it belongs here," Brooks said during a recent conversation.

## **This is such a site-specific work. How did the space inform the piece?**

The Cooper had asked me to do a painting show. But I walked in and instantly saw an installation with this gigantic sculpture and a video. The walls are so high that a bunch of paintings, with these giant cement pillars, would just feel dwarfed. I felt like you needed something to anchor the space on a big level, and you needed textile because this is the fashion district. I knew I wanted tall, dramatic drapes to soften the cement pillars. So in addition to the steel sculpture and the video, I

bought bolts of this gray linen in the fabric mart to make the 20-foot-tall curtains around the room and used the same material to stage a performance piece the night of the opening.

**How did the people in the Cooper building, and fashion itself, factor in as you were conceptualizing the piece?**

This room, the lobby, was completely white and bare -- but the *people* were these walking works of art. So I sat down and just watched. All these people walking around here are so hipster fabulous, they're very stylish. I began thinking: What makes fashion interesting other than being a language within painting? And that is: It sort of binds us and frees us at the same time. I kept going back to this time in history when fashion was sort of at its most exaggerated with these crinoline, large forms -- they were undergarments made of wire -- so I started scouring for imagery that evoked this form.

I took my paintings from my The Stylist Project. I have very high-resolution images of them -- they were oil paintings -- and I literally cut out the fabric that I had painted and draped it over the forms. I created these digital prints of collages integrating photography and painting.

**The centerpiece of your installation, the metal sculpture, is both abstract and narrative at once, casting geometric reflections in the building's windows and nodding to fashion history. Can you tell us about it?**

It's welded steel, 8 feet tall and 6 feet wide. I worked with a fabricator to create it. But before that stage, I used metal sheets of copper that I cut into thin strips to create these little maquettes to work with when designing the sculpture. They're amazing to work with, different than wire. That's how I created the thickness and the legs and the angles I wanted them to be at. I wanted the legs to be muscular, not dainty. I wanted it to be sort of fierce. Fashion so much expresses the state of the rights of women at the time, and I wanted to tilt on its head your recollections of this era, in the late 1800s, when women didn't even vote.

**What were you trying to say with the title of the piece?**

I called it, initially, "The Ephemerality of Style." Because I loved the fact that it would last forever -- the material, itself, is so permanent and brutal, uncoated steel. Then I thought "style" isn't quite the right word. I renamed it "The Ephemerality of Manner." I wanted to remind people walking through the building that right now X, Y and Z is in fashion in their minds, but it comes and goes quickly. I wanted to show something that is totally out of fashion now -- a Victorian undergarment -- but that will be here forever, both ephemeral and permanent at the same time. And this was all before I knew they'd be keeping it in the building as a permanent sculpture.

**The video portion of the installation -- black-and-white imagery depicting giant**

**scissors in tiny hands working through ripples of gray silk -- is this sort of textured, almost sensual counterpoint to the steel sculpture that hangs opposite it. Why add the video?**

This is a historic building, the heart of the fashion district. People come here from all over the country. The video of sewing and cutting is about the root of what goes on in this building. It's a 2 minute, 18 second video piece called "Labor." I shot it on my iPhone. Those are my daughter's and a bunch her friends' hands. I bought gray and black fabric because I wanted to get that reflective quality, and I used big, thick needles and thread so you could really see it.

We're so removed from how things are made now. We're constantly looking at our devices, and I wanted to just kind of go back to the roots of the beginning of how things are made when you talk about fashion: somebody cutting and sewing. And that provides a juxtaposition to the outcome of what walks back and forth through this building, all these people wearing all this stuff -- and they get to see that.

**What are you envisioning for the new fashion district sculptures -- and what inspires you about the downtown L.A. landscape?**

Members of the Downtown L.A. fashion district BID [Business Improvement District] saw the Cooper installation and are now commissioning me to do four new sculptures at four different locations on Broadway including in front of the Ace Hotel. It's a project in partnership with the Think Tank Gallery.

I'm envisioning a combination of steel and a weather-tolerant fabric that will provide shade, even a sanctuary. What inspires me about the downtown landscape is the streamlined and curved lines of the Art Deco architecture with the rush of modern bohemia that has transformed the entire area in the last decade.

**You're also working on a book?**

I'm working on a coffee table book, a *catalogue raisonne* so to speak, that comes out in February. And I'm also writing a book about painting. I think there's a book that's missing in all the books that you buy about painting. This one is more about artists. It's about being a painter and the kinds of things that you have to work with beyond just the practical techniques in the studio, but also as they relate to the world and your mind and the whole process of making art.

**Is there another meme you're plumbing, beyond fashion, for future art works? And how is that taking shape, practically?**

I've been exploring memory as something really fluid that you can have as your own or tap into

other peoples', even people who have died. Even this piece -- dipping into another era to articulate something today, the swirling of memory, history, identity, fashion, everything. As an artist, you're building a vocabulary, always. So every language that you perfect becomes like a player on a stage in your mind. I'd explored portraiture really deeply, and that was like a character in my mind; I explored my own past, my distant past; then I explored fashion. Now memory. All of these things start to build and that's why as artists, we keep hopefully getting better and our work evolves.

In my studio, I've been working on paper lately. I'm fascinated by the way that working on paper -- with ink and wash and watercolor, even oil -- forces you to be in the moment. You can't go in and change it if you don't like it. You can't scrub it away like you can on canvas or even linen. So I think where I'm going with my artwork, is about exploring collage and paper and painting as they come together with technology.

But to me, really, the world we live in, everything, is fodder for making art, whether it's fashion or the wheels of a car. Everything on some level holds fascination for an artist.

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