

## A larger-than-life's work: Kay Kurt examines decades worth of paintings in NYC exhibit



Kay Kurt wasn't exactly waiting for New York City to call when she was contacted by a Chelsea-based gallery. It had been more than five years since her work was featured as part of an exhibition and it had been decades since her last solo show in NYC. Then, just more than a year ago:

"I started receiving these emails from a gallery in New York. 'Would it be possible to come look at your work?' " she said during a June visit to her home. "I thought 'Is this a setup?' "

The interest from Albertz Benda gallery came at a good time. Kurt, who has quietly lived and painted in Duluth since 1970, was just starting to wonder what she was going to do

Lawler, Christa. "A larger-than-life's work: Kay Kurt examines decades worth of paintings in NYC exhibit," *Duluth News Tribune*. July 16, 2017.

**albertz benda**

515 w 26th st | new york, ny | 10001  
tel 212.244.2579 | [www.albertzbenda.com](http://www.albertzbenda.com)

about her accumulation of large-scale pieces — specifically "Hallelujah," a painting of hard candies, in her signature realist style, that she had started working on more than 20 years ago.

Almost too quickly, there was a show.

"Kay Kurt: For All Her Innocent Airs, She Knew Exactly Where She Was Going" opened in January at the art-design gallery owned by Friedman Benda and Thorsten Albertz. The exhibition covered a life's-worth of work, starting with a large-scale triptych she made in graduate school before she discovered the candies, almonds and gummies that would become her lifelong subject.

The gallery keepers were introduced to Kurt's work at "Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists, 1958-1968," an exhibition by Sid Sachs in 2010 at the Brooklyn Museum showcasing the women who were making art in the pop period — but weren't attracting Warhol-ian levels of attention.

One of Albertz Benda's focuses is reintroducing artists who haven't been showing in New York, according to Rachel Tretter, a gallery associate.

"Kay jumped out as someone who was very compelling," she said. "They were curious about why she hadn't been showing more often."

Kurt was raising a family. She was teaching children to ski, fostering cats and singing with the Duluth Superior Symphony Orchestra's chorus. She was caring for her husband Klaus Jankofsky, a former English professor at the University of Minnesota Duluth who was diagnosed with dementia in the 1990s and died in the early 2000s.

Then, there was the block that followed his death.

"He had been my biggest supporter, as a helpmate," Kurt said. "I identified my working with his presence. It took me a while to adjust to a new life, a new way of being."

Lawler, Christa. "A larger-than-life's work: Kay Kurt examines decades worth of paintings in NYC exhibit," *Duluth News Tribune*. July 16, 2017.

**albertz benda**

515 w 26th st | new york, ny | 10001  
tel 212.244.2579 | [www.albertzbenda.com](http://www.albertzbenda.com)

It was about two years before she cut a path through the files from her husband's office and back to her easel.



## 'Hallelujah'

Kurt has worked on other paintings and drawings, but for the past 20 years she has kept returning to "Hallelujah," a 6-by-11 foot oil painting of Christmas candy. The textured buttons, striped ribbons and flavored pillows often seen in a grandmother's candy dish.

"She started it when we were at the studio together," said Kurt's friend, Dorothea Diver, who shared space with her in the 1990s above Electric Fetus.

When Kurt moved out of the studio, the unfinished "Hallelujah" was a constant in Diver's living room for more than 20 years, she said.

Kip Praslowicz, a photographer, friend of the family and fan of Kurt's art, said it was mind-blowing to watch her work on the same piece for so long.

Lawler, Christa. "A larger-than-life's work: Kay Kurt examines decades worth of paintings in NYC exhibit," *Duluth News Tribune*. July 16, 2017.

**albertz benda**

515 w 26th st | new york, ny | 10001  
tel 212.244.2579 | [www.albertzbenda.com](http://www.albertzbenda.com)



"It was always just there when I'd go over (to the house)," he said. "It's so huge and overpowering."

And never-ending. When Thorsten Albertz came to Duluth to see her work, Kurt finally hunkered down, intent on finishing the piece.

"I did nothing but paint, paint, paint," she said.

And even when "Hallelujah" went out her front door, she wondered if it still needed a layer of varnish.

## The Candies



Kurt, 73, still has her first box of chocolates. During a recent visit to her home in the Congdon neighborhood, she showed off the dusty, misshapen box filled with faded and chalky candies.

Lawler, Christa. "A larger-than-life's work: Kay Kurt examines decades worth of paintings in NYC exhibit," *Duluth News Tribune*. July 16, 2017.

**albertz benda**

515 w 26th st | new york, ny | 10001  
tel 212.244.2579 | [www.albertzbenda.com](http://www.albertzbenda.com)

It's a worthy keepsake.

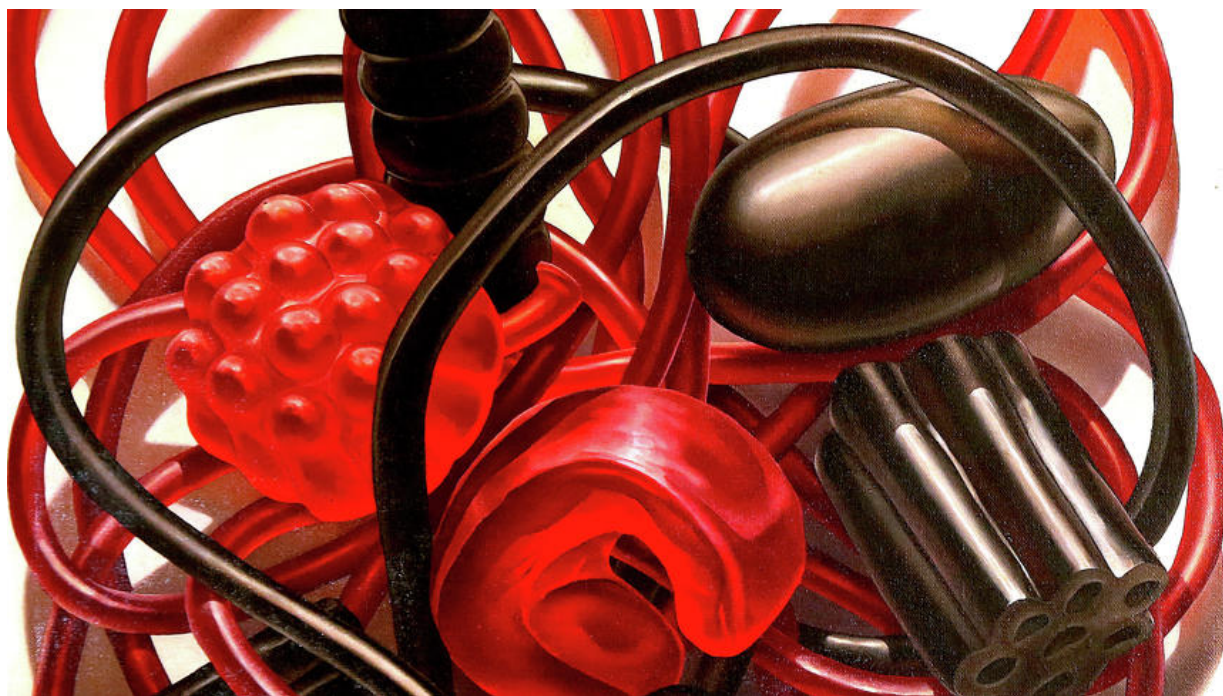
Before the box of chocolates, she was a figurative painter with no interest in painting people or landscapes. It had been done, and she had nothing to add, she said. Luckily, her pop peers had changed the face of the still life.

"It was really liberating in terms of what you paint," she said. "The subject matter was blown right open. Anything could be subject matter, depending on how you treated it."

Then she saw the box of chocolates at a shop on State Street in Madison. She painted it — then ditched everything else in favor of larger-than-life gummies, jellies and jujubes.

"I didn't know anybody who was painting candy," she said. "All I knew was that the pop artists made it OK to paint soup cans."

Within two years of painting it, she got her introduction to the New York City art scene with a solo show at Kornblee Gallery — and a semi-nod from Hilton Kramer, arts writer for the New York Times, who referred to Kurt as an interesting new talent.



Lawler, Christa. "A larger-than-life's work: Kay Kurt examines decades worth of paintings in NYC exhibit," *Duluth News Tribune*. July 16, 2017.

**albertz benda**

515 w 26th st | new york, ny | 10001  
tel 212.244.2579 | [www.albertzbenda.com](http://www.albertzbenda.com)



"As Miss Kurt renders these candy animals, they are given the dimensions of a heroic sculpture," Kramer wrote at the time. "Their translucency is brilliantly exaggerated by a flawless technique."

New York magazine said of her work: "Miss Kurt has painted her funny gumball menagerie with the deliberation and technical virtuosity of someone setting out to paint masterpieces."

The show led to more big things. She's in the permanent collection at major galleries, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Walker Art Center.



Her painting of jordan almonds belongs to the Tweed Museum of Art.

"We're extremely proud to have that work," said Ken Bloom, director. "Part of what makes it so unusual is that it's such a common object, candy, but her pieces are so seductive and astonishing. That's part of her aesthetic, to surprise you."

Lawler, Christa. "A larger-than-life's work: Kay Kurt examines decades worth of paintings in NYC exhibit," *Duluth News Tribune*. July 16, 2017.

**albertz benda**

515 w 26th st | new york, ny | 10001  
tel 212.244.2579 | [www.albertzbenda.com](http://www.albertzbenda.com)

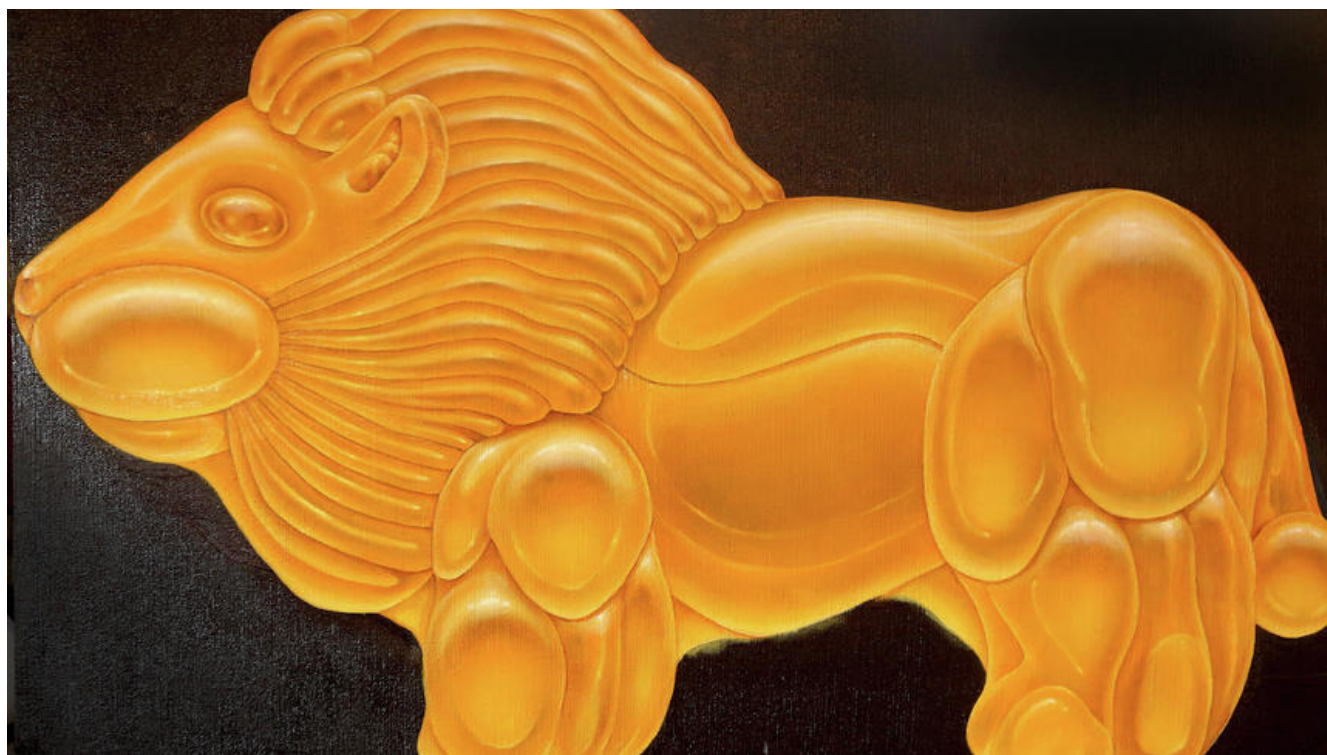
Kornblee Gallery continued to represent her until the 1980s, when it closed. The transition to another gallery never happened, Kurt said. And, based in Duluth, she wasn't able to go around banging on doors, like the New York artists.

Not to mention, tastes changed.

"People wanted politically correct work, they wanted group work, public work," she said. "Mine was the most opposite you could get. It was private. It wasn't making overt political statements. I wasn't working with a politically correct group of artists. It was just old-fashioned."

Still, she painted slowly and meticulously.

"After a while, I realized I was continuing to paint whether I had a gallery in New York or not," she said.



Lawler, Christa. "A larger-than-life's work: Kay Kurt examines decades worth of paintings in NYC exhibit," *Duluth News Tribune*. July 16, 2017.

**albertz benda**

515 w 26th st | new york, ny | 10001  
tel 212.244.2579 | [www.albertzbenda.com](http://www.albertzbenda.com)

## 'So much ego fun'

Kurt, who had rarely attended one of her own art openings, went with a whole crew of family and friends to New York City in January.

"It was a circus, it was absolutely through the roof wonderful," she said.

The show landed a feature story — from that first box of chocolate straight through to "Hallelujah" — in the New York Times style magazine under the headline "A Candy-Obsessed Pop Painter Gets Her Due Half a Century Later."

"It turned out really well," Tretter said. "People enjoyed the work. There were lots of Instagram posts in front of the main piece."

Kurt stayed at a hotel within walking distance to the gallery. At one point, she stopped while walking in the High Line and asked a friend to snap a picture of her, arms raised in the air.

"It was just so much ego fun," she said.

The people were nice, the gallery keepers treated her well, and she sold work — including "Hallelujah."

"The strain and stress of finishing it was still in me," she said. "By the time that wore off, I was OK with it being gone. It had a great introduction into society, it made its debut and now it was time to live on its own.

"And I needed to keep working."

Most importantly, Kurt said, the show offered the chance for her kids to see this other side of her.

Lawler, Christa. "A larger-than-life's work: Kay Kurt examines decades worth of paintings in NYC exhibit," *Duluth News Tribune*. July 16, 2017.

**albertz benda**

515 w 26th st | new york, ny | 10001  
tel 212.244.2579 | [www.albertzbenda.com](http://www.albertzbenda.com)



"Let's just put it this way," she said. "When the plane landed at the airport on the way back, I said to everybody, 'Well, the tiara comes off.' That's how unreal and exciting this trip was."

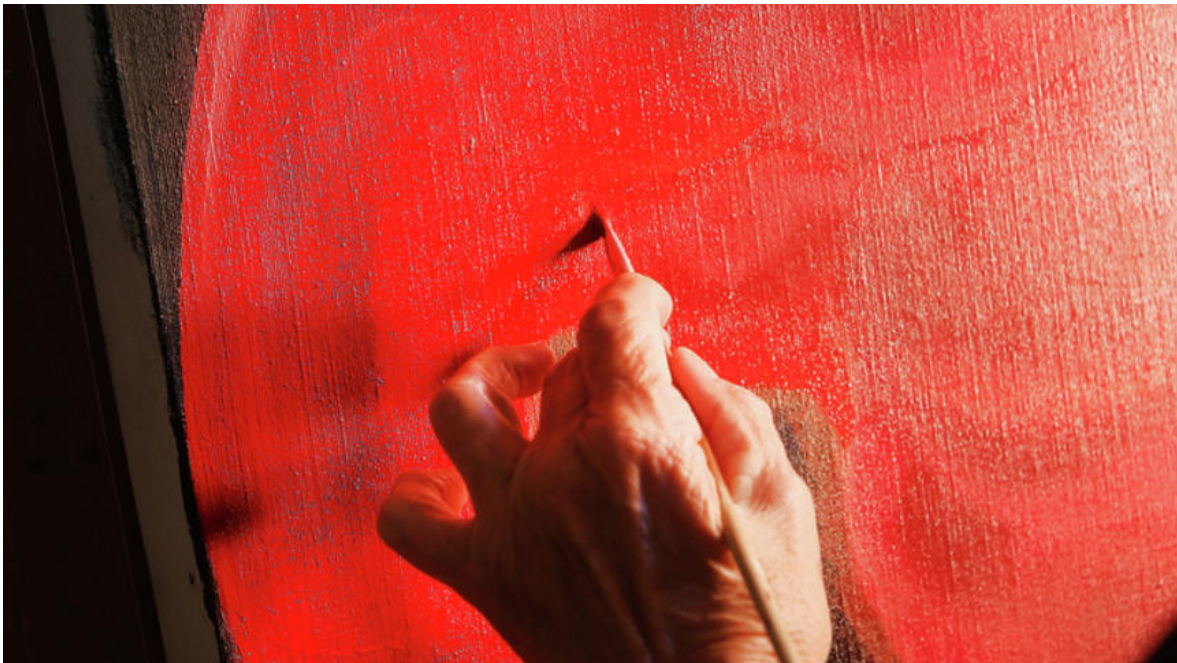
Kurt's work returned to Duluth a few weeks ago, and it took her six hours to unpack, she said. Some pieces are leaned against the bookcases in the front room where she paints.

She's not sure what she will do with the triptych — which once hung in an upstairs hallway, though she can't remember how they got it there in the first place.

Her current focus is reworking old gummy animals that no longer seem good enough. During a visit, she poked at a translucent orange elephant set against a black backdrop. A yellow candy lion, nicknamed Roar, was propped on an easel.

She is done with the enormous paintings, she said.

"If it takes 10 years, that could be it," she said. "I don't want to work on one painting until I'm not able to paint anymore."



Lawler, Christa. "A larger-than-life's work: Kay Kurt examines decades worth of paintings in NYC exhibit," *Duluth News Tribune*. July 16, 2017.

**albertz benda**

515 w 26th st | new york, ny | 10001  
tel 212.244.2579 | [www.albertzbenda.com](http://www.albertzbenda.com)