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Ars Longa, Except When MoMA Throws It Out



The artist Pat Lasch, whose 1979 cake sculpture was commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art as part of its 50th-anniversary celebration.

Credit

Jaime Kowal for The New York Times

By Randy Kennedy

The New York sculptor Pat Lasch has spent her career making work that plays with the distinction between ordinary things and things belonging in museums: realistic-looking ball gowns made from dried acrylic paint; plaster eggs; towering decorative cakes fashioned from wood and paper.

Her fascination with cakes grew out of a notion of them as markers of time's passage, through birthdays, weddings and other occasions. And cakes have also helped her remember her father, a German-born pastry chef who gave her some life advice when she worked in his bakery as a teenager, piping the icing: "If you make a mistake, put a rose on it."

Recently Ms. Lasch, 72, discovered a mistake that even the loveliest rose is unlikely to fix: The Museum of Modern Art, which commissioned a 5-foot-2-inch-tall cake sculpture in 1979 as part of its 50th anniversary, appears to have discarded the piece, which Ms. Lasch wanted to borrow for [a retrospective of her work](#) opening in March at the Palm Springs Art Museum in California.

Ms. Lasch, a first-generation feminist who started working in the early 1970s, said she contacted the Museum of Modern Art last fall after the curator in Palm Springs, Mara Gladstone, was unable to find records of the cake sculpture in the archives at MoMA. "Mara said, 'Pat, I don't know how to tell you this,'" Ms. Lasch recalled in a recent interview.

Ms. Lasch, who has [another work](#), a paper wedding veil from 1978-79, in MoMA's collection, said she had trouble getting museum officials to respond to her queries. And then last fall, she received an email from MoMA's head registrar, Stefanie Ruta Atkins, which said: "I regret to inform you that, following a thorough review of paper records and a physical search of our storage locations, we have not been able to locate the object." Ms. Ruta added, "Please accept my sincere apologies as well as my very best wishes for the success of your show in Palm Springs."

MoMA has a sterling reputation as a protector of art, art books and [hundreds of thousands of documents](#) relating to its collection. Officials at the museum said records showed that the sculpture had never been accessioned into the permanent collection. But it remains unclear why the piece was not returned to Ms. Lasch if the museum intended it only to be displayed during the anniversary celebration. In a statement on Friday, the museum said: "The Museum of Modern Art commissioned this object as a decorative element for its 50th-anniversary celebration. While it was not intended for the collection or future display at the Museum, it was kept in our storage facilities for many years. Our recent research indicates that by the late 1990s it had deteriorated beyond repair, and was subsequently discarded."

Attempts to reach Kynaston McShine, a prominent curator at the time, who commissioned the piece, were unsuccessful.



An image provided by the artist of a 5-foot-2-inch-tall cake sculpture she created in 1979 as part of MoMA's 50th anniversary.

Credit
Pat Lasch

Ms. Lasch has not had a prominent commercial career, though her work has been critically lauded and included in collections like that of [the Metropolitan Museum of Art](#). [She](#) considered the 1979 sculpture an important early work and found it hard to believe that it had not been safeguarded.

“I’ve just presumed for the last 30-something years that the piece was safe and sound, because it’s the Modern,” she said. “How can you lose something that’s 5-feet-2-inches tall? It’s like losing my mother.”

She said she believed her relatively low profile in the art world might have contributed to a lack of consideration for the piece after it was commissioned by Mr. McShine.

Another factor, she said, could have been that female artists — particularly those like herself, making pieces perceived as decorative or domestic — struggled mightily in those years for recognition by MoMA, which has recently been playing historical catch-up, as have many museums, focusing intently now on art by women.

“Yes, my art sometimes looks like food,” Ms. Lasch said. “But I wonder if they’d ever let a Claes Oldenburg hamburger or [pie sculpture](#) go missing. I highly doubt it.”

She said she spent months making the sculpture in her studio at the Westbeth artists’ housing complex in the West Village. Mr. McShine, who retired from the museum in 2008, was a fan and asked her to make a cake sculpture for the anniversary celebration. (The sculpture was mentioned in an [article in The New York Times](#) in November 1979 about a MoMA anniversary party attended

by luminaries like Lillian Gish, Berenice Abbott and Blanche Rockefeller.)

Ms. Lasch said she was given complete freedom to make what she wanted. Mr. McShine visited her studio once, and asked her only to make the piece — a slender cake form, white with gold, accented with pink flowers made from piped paint — slightly taller. “It was a very rococo piece,” she said. “It was meant to mark a momentous occasion.”

Ms. Lasch was an early member of the [A.I.R. Gallery](#) in SoHo (now in Dumbo, Brooklyn,) a pioneering cooperative for women. She has been in exhibitions at the SculptureCenter and P.S. 1 (now MoMA PS1) in New York, and was included in the influential [“Bad Girls”](#) show of feminist-inspired art at the New Museum in 1994. Her work often mixes the pleasurable with a political bite and wicked wit. A 1985 piece is titled “Box of Poison Cookies for Past Lovers,” and a 1981 work refers to a Middle Eastern princess who was stoned to death on orders of her grandfather.

Ms. Gladstone, whose retrospective is the first full survey of Ms. Lasch’s career and includes work made as recently as last year, said “we still have many wonderful representations of her work from” the late 1970s. She added that Ms. Lasch’s work “is unabashedly about emotion and about beauty, and there’s power in that.” Ann Sutherland Harris, an emerita professor of art history at the University of Pittsburgh who has followed Ms. Lasch’s work for decades, said: “Pat is a survivor. She has

kept at it and stayed true to making very ambitious but in some ways very quiet work that transforms things we think we know.”