

INSIDE ARTIST LUCY SPARROW'S PHARMACY MADE FROM FELT: 'IT'S LIKE BLUE PETER ON ACID'

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DECEMBER 7, 2020



The artist has just the antidote for hard times with her new project, the Bourdon Street Chemist. Amelia Gabaldoni enters her fuzzy, therapeutic world

Lucy Sparrow is sitting in a huge pile of cuddly bananas. "I just love objects," she says, beaming. She has been showing me around her "felt cave", a sprawling former ambulance station repurposed as a multicoloured workshop complete with fluorescent pink lavatories and a resident cat, Ogilvy. I'm not surprised when she tells me that a window cleaner thought she was opening a children's play centre. "I just agreed with him — sometimes I can't even begin to explain what I do."

Put simply, Sparrow, 34, recreates everyday objects out of felt. For her breakthrough exhibition, *The Cornershop*, in 2014, she stocked a vacant newsagents in Bethnal Green, east London, with replica goods. She has since recreated a sex shop in Soho, a convenience store in New York and a supermarket in downtown LA — she called it Sparrow Mart — that featured 31,000 felt grocery items. "When people see my work they think the person who made it is com-

pletely mad. It's like *Blue Peter* on acid. Here's one I made earlier... and another 10,000 of them."

For her next show, due to open on January 18 at the Lyndsey Ingram gallery in Mayfair, the artist is creating a fully felted chemist's shop, where you can pick up some fuzzy decongestant tablets or collect a Prozac prescription from the National Felt Service.

"I'm quite nervous about doing a show during a pandemic, but the pharmacy idea came about long before coronavirus," Sparrow says. She worried that people might think she was trying to capitalise on the situation, but concluded "there's not going to be a time where people are going to have a stronger relationship with their local chemist. The time to celebrate that is now."

Her obsession with felt started as a six-year-old in Bath, being taught how to sew by her mother and grandmother. She made pieces obsessively throughout her teens and into her twenties, but "never in a million years" thought it would become a full-time job. She left school at 17 and dropped out of an art school before spending five years as a lapdancer in London to fund her artistic pursuits. At the strip club she would make felt versions of whatever her fellow dancers suggested between acts.

Her big break came at 28 when a gallery owner paid a visit to the club and they got talking. She did the rare thing of giving him her real name and email address, and he helped her to set up *The Cornershop*. "I thought only my parents would turn up, but on the opening day there was a queue of people around the block. I never went back to normal work."

That show was partly funded by a Kickstarter campaign in which she raised more than £10,000 offering felt items in return for donations. Sparrow has had an exhibition bought in its entirety on two occasions, but likes people to be able to purchase pieces when they visit, sometimes for as little as £1. Why are people drawn to her work?

"My art lets you tap out of the real world," she says. "Felt is an escape, a route to somewhere else when normal life is disappointing or hard." She enjoys the playfulness of taking utilitarian objects and turning them into something tactile and decorative. "I don't want to offend the felt, but it's so useless. The process of making things you don't need is very therapeutic."

Sparrow is quick to correct any suggestion that her work is a critique of consumerism. "It has never been a takedown of capitalism," she says. "For one, I love shopping." She worries about the demise of the traditional high street and hopes that encouraging

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people to “play shop will inspire sentimentality. “I have a lot of love for the things I buy and own. How great is it that we apologise to the furniture for bumping into it? That’s the feeling I want to recreate.”

It would also be wrong to assume her work is mass produced. “Sometimes I wish it was. I work every weekend, especially when I’m near a deadline.” When planning an exhibition, Sparrow undertakes six months of research before she even touches the felt. She took photos of as many pharmacies as possible and collated them in a spreadsheet to design her “uber chemist.” Then, after a sample and templates of each item are made, her assistants help her to sew batches of products that are embellished exclusively by Sparrow. “It’s cheesy,” she says, “but every piece is absolutely made with love. It wouldn’t mean the same thing if it wasn’t made by hand.”

Is it important to her work that sewing and textiles are traditionally feminine art forms? “It’s almost the opposite. In the past I’ve been described as a ‘female artist’, and I think, f*** off, it’s just ‘artist’. My hands did most of the work and, as far as I’m aware men have them too.”

She has been told her work isn’t art, though usually via anonymous comments online. “The classics are ‘Someone’s got too much time on their hands’ or ‘Must be nice having a rich mummy and daddy’.” Some people think paintings of horses are the only art worth anything and that’s OK because they’re never going to like what I do.” Even so, she wants her shows to be accessible to everyone. “No one should feel shut out, it’s not elitist.”

At the *Bourdon Street Chemist* visitors will be able to buy a felt version of anything from toothpaste to Viagra. or get a prescription from Sparrow herself “I’ll sign off, as if I’m the doctor. It’s very participatory.”