

## Crushing fashion, art, business and brand into a storm of pattern, surface design and wearable art. Meet the complex kHyal™

By Kari Britta Lorenson



kHyal in Pink Cyclops Mickey dress at Wynwood Walls in front of Maya Hayuk mural, Miami Art Week. Photo: ©Karl Heine

*“A tour de force of energy and creative vivaciousness. kHyal is an innovator impervious to boundaries. The work pulsates with infectious energy deftly combining visual cues that strike many chords.”*



Photo: ©Texa Gaya, Design Miami/

Fashion is irrational, expansive, a semiological beast that floods, pushes and escapes, adaptive to constraints and free expression. To use the term fashion in the broadest sense, far from just the runways of high fashion and more specifically fashion as a term referring to a philosophy, as a reflection of cultural, sociological and psychological significance that moves far beyond clothes and reflects our perceptions of change and importance. As such fashion bellows the sails of Art (pun intended); subject to its logic and governed by its insistence on innovative supplementation, cyclically caught in the act of forgetting and remembering. Every snapshot branding the hyper-ecstatic beauty of its temperament.

The field of fashion philosophy is young in comparison to the philosophies of art. Bookishly exciting for the multi-faceted connections and histories shared whether as dusty as Kantian questions of beauty, the function of the art object, or in Walter Benjamin's anxieties for technology's impact on the reproducibility of art and

the tendency of photography to beautify the object to Anne Hollander, who states categorically "Dress is a form of visual art, a creation of images with the visible self as its medium" yet never answering why clothes are traditionally excluded from the domain of Art. Roland Barthes's theories on the fashion system serve as a foundation for the field of fashion philosophy and is a critical read for anyone interested in this arena. Contemporary fashion theorists such as Lars Svendsen whose text *Fashion: A Philosophy* points to many issues that have arisen in the decades post Barthes's era. A case in point, the fashionable fascination with reality that overtook fashion, art and entertainment in the 1990's (think of the beginning seasons of MTV's *Real World*, Benton billboards, Calvin Klein ads, heroine chic, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger and YBA-er Tracey Emin in their 90's glory). Glamour to be found in the everyday and in the appearance of a stripped down truth. Today's Instagram and social media sharing culture a perfect innovative supplementation of this fascination.



kHyal at Pulse VIP Preview in Ghost of a Dream installation. Photo: ©Guido F. Castellanos

location of where the performative act is taking place slapped aside the image like a fashionable ad, or her location seemingly cues an exotic editorial destination from the pages of an edgy fashion magazine. She acts as a beacon with her charismatic presence spotlighting people or a place harnessing the re-contextualizing to contextualize power that fashion and art share.

Art and fashion are intertwined, connected like twins separated by birth but living with parallel urges and definitions of self. At art fairs and biennials this relationship is most apparent. There is one artist who is especially adept at playing on these tensions that underbelly art, fashion, celebrity and branded reality. To name this artist is slightly complex. kHyal, whose original name began transformation in 1981 from Kyle Ann Braun to eventually the trademarked pseudonym kHyal™ also uses the naming “kHyal Kouture” on social media and “MegaGlam” as an umbrella identity for all her creative work. Her process of trademarking and branding her identity began in the 90’s. It is not just her name, which is complex. She has created a labyrinth of creative work the seamlessly blends design, art and fashion through the use of bright graphic characters and patterns that fill space like an emoji rainstorm. Her characters and patterns are a visual library transferred into composite images, posters, stickers and wearable art. kHyal is photographed in her eye-popping sporty ensembles often with the

At Art Basel Miami Beach this year kHyal and her partner/collaborator Karl Heine, exploded on the Miami scene with public art installations in the Wynwood Art District and creating a whirlwind of images of kHyal’s new line of wearable art. Art fairs, biennials and gallery openings are certainly not devoid of eccentric dress or charismatic personalities, however moments captured in the resulting images from kHyal and Karl’s collaboration is very interesting. Where play starts and seriousness begins is uncertain which creates a tension for viewers. Images occasionally capture onlookers who carry the look of awe that anyone does when they see a celebrity or something so out of the ordinary it lends a pause to their actions. The deeper this work goes into the inner caverns of the art world, the greater it gets and similar to our guilty pleasure of our favorite celebrity’s Instagram account, kHyal’s cool capture merges thought provoking obsessions that beg for constant updates.

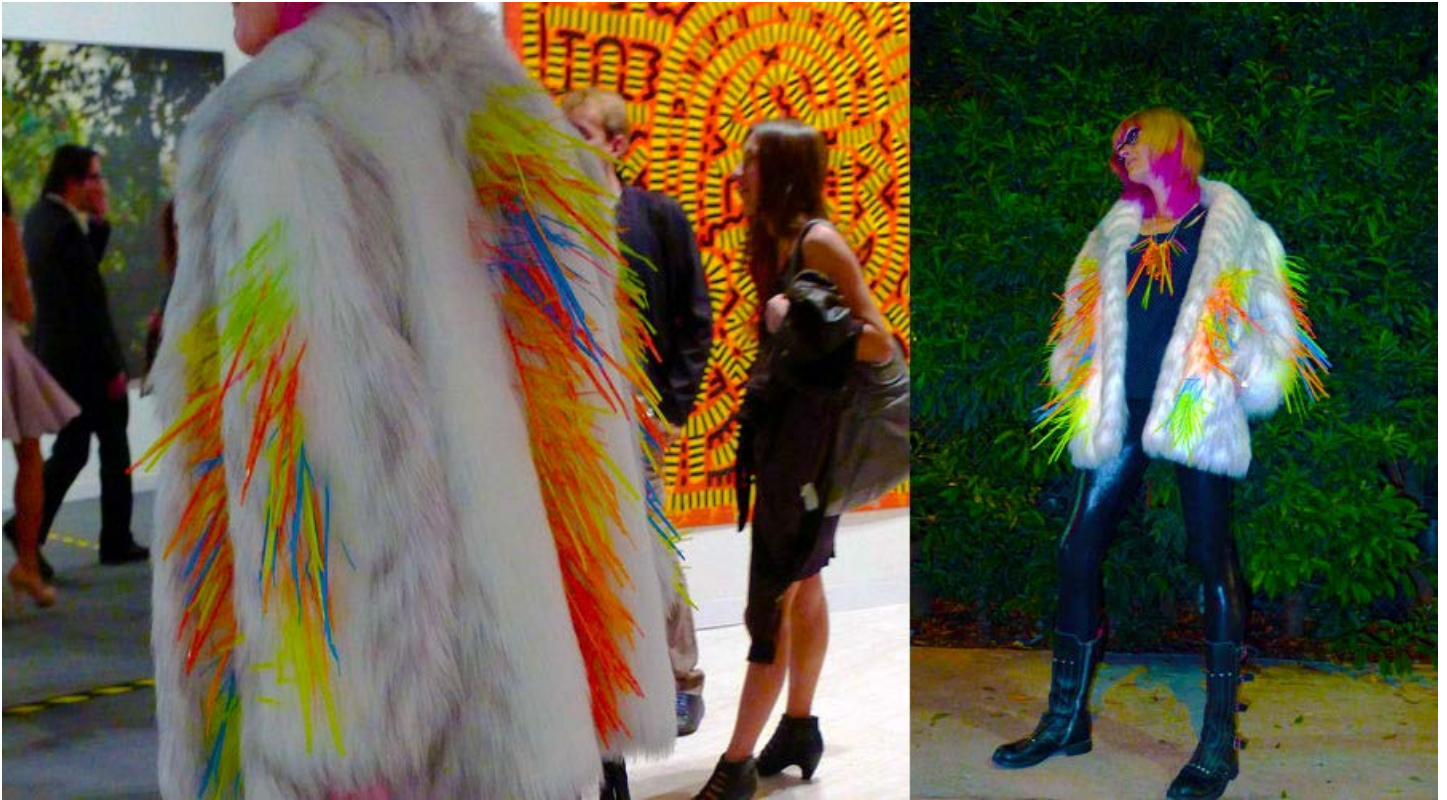


Pulse Art Fair VIP Preview, Miami Art Week. Photo: ©Karl Heine,

Q: Your work delivers so much punch! It also merges together many different elements (i.e. art, illustration, surface, product, textiles, and fashion design). This is a mixture that not many artists successfully bring together. How did MegaGlam begin?

A: I have always been a multitasker. Since early childhood, I can remember writing and illustrating my own books, painting, drawing, collaging, making dioramas, dressing up in costumes of my own design, and creating temporary installations inside and out using whatever materials were at hand. Nearby, at my grandmother's house where I often stayed, there was always a sewing machine and workshop awaiting my creativity. Having access to these tools, and ordinary supplies, equated to my freedom from the bland structure of everyday life.

Fast forward to when I officially launched MegaGlam. I first tried to focus on one area of my output, but very quickly realized that it was destined to be a repository of multiple disciplines, blended into a cohesive sphere with a strong imprint. My psyche is best soothed by conjuring worlds that integrate cross-platform interconnectedness.



*Space Age Yeti Jacket* and accessories launched at Art Basel Miami VIP Preview. Photo: ©Karl Heine

Q: Vanessa Friedman of the New York Times recently wrote an article on Beyoncé and the idea of her as a fashion icon. In the article, Friedman critically questions what designates a fashion icon versus an icon period. Friedman defines fashion icon as someone who inspires designers (basically as a muse), has large impact influencing fashion, is loyal to a label, whose name sells fashion, and whose fans emulate her through clothing. I relate this article to your work because there is celebrity/icon play is such a powerful and poignant part of your MegaGlam work. What are your thoughts on this?

A: This is fascinating. I hadn't read it and I know very little about Beyoncé because I don't watch commercial television or listen to popular music. It would seem that in Beyoncé's case, a very deliberate attempt for escalating celebrity and financial reward is being made by implementing the most fruitful marketing strategy for personal gain. I would categorize it as smart business. While I can see and appreciate that as a life designed for career success and super stardom, I am more interested in transforming the power of the ordinary into the exceptional. How amazing would the world be if we could teach every individual how to meet his or her true potential? And, to value themselves enough to be up for the challenge.



Design Miami/ VIP Collectors Preview  
Photo: ©Gesi Schilling



*Target Rainbow.* Image courtesy of the artist.

Q: What is the greatest piece of career or personal advice you ever received?

A: I moved to Los Angeles when I was twenty, and got a job doing art restoration and period framing for clients like LACMA and The Getty Museum with Richard Tobey in Beverly Hills. He owned the building we worked in, and rented an upstairs studio to the artist Mendij\*. Mendij and I became good friends, and I still am indebted to him for the wisdom he shared with me. Much of it was philosophical, but practically, the advice that has changed my own life as a creator was to be careful with my time. That social pursuits take away time that is better spent developing work. Although, by my social media feeds, it may look like I am constantly out socializing, 99% of that time I am participating in learning and/or industry events. Otherwise, I prefer to be working.

Q: If you could collaborate with anyone (living or no longer here on Earth), big wish list kind of thing (and you can't say Karl:), who would it be?

A: Ultra Violet (who I've already worked with in some capacities), Yayoi Kusama, Jeremy Scott, Karim Rashid all come to mind.

\* Mendij was Russian artist. His paintings are in many big mansions in California. He was a personal friend of Priscilla Presley and sold many paintings to Elvis. His work has been purchased by the Guggenheim Museum. Mendij's Atelier on Sherwood Drive and N La Cienega Blvd. in Hollywood was the 2nd floor of Richard Tobey's building.

# FASHION

Street Style, Miami: Art Basel 2013

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHIL BIRNBAUM



FASHION Magazine, Canada. Photo: ©Phil Birnbaum

\*\* The violet ray machine was designed for basic home use: it was manufactured by the Master Electric Company of Chicago, circa 1920.

Q: How has your performance art evolved in recent projects? What are your primary concerns when you are in the act of performing? Has this changed over time?

A: I think it's important to understand the full evolution and background of my need to perform in order to put context to recent projects. I was born terrified of other people. My social awkwardness was crippling, even in college. So I forced myself to overcome this anxiety by taking public speaking courses and putting myself in situations where I could practice interactions, and speaking in front of crowds. My art had been a silent shield throughout my childhood, but I knew that in order to move forward and thrive interdimensionally, I needed to go beyond the written word and visual communication.

In the 80s, I started a band called "The Ultra Violet Rake." I was the sole member, and would record multi-layered MIDI soundtracks in advance. I would perform in elaborate vintage ball gowns that I bought on the cheap at thrift stores, with a boom box playing my prerecorded audio, in front of a backdrop I painted, or sometimes a more elaborate installation including video and animation. One performance consisted of running a device up and down my arms that I found at a flea market, which was also the namesake of my band, a wand with a glass rake-shaped light bulb that emitted electricity and mild sparks when it came in close contact to skin. So, in a strapless ball gown I made violet light softly crackle in streams across my skin. Doing so, made me comfortable in front of a crowd. That device, by the way, was from the 1920s and was called the Violet Ray Machine\*\* — marketed for electrotherapy.

Later, I did other offbeat performances, including one at the renowned La Mama Experimental Theatre Club in the East Village. Over time I streamlined these forays into what became public self-portraits, which were then shown in galleries and museums as still photographs, often heavily collaged. After decades of that work, I stopped. Around 2008, I began the work known under the MegaGlam brand, which combines all the components of fine art, design and fashion I'd ever done and blends them into a commercially viable, though sometimes avant-garde, conglomerate.







Outside NADA Preview, Miami Art Week. Photo: ©Karl Heine

Q: From a design standpoint, what inspires your pattern work and illustrations? The color palette is very vibrant in both your abstract or character designs. Looking at designs such as Rainbow Target Mutli or Sausage and Egg Smiles verses the MegaGlam Bubble Creatures or Weather sKwirls?

A: I'm not sure why I oscillate between characters and patterns. As a child, and young adult, I created characters as "friends" when I needed them. They took many forms, but the connecting thread is that they made me feel part of something, like family.

I have always loved color. I equate it to energy. Color fuels my brain and brings me happiness, it's like the sun for me. I know a lot of people who feel that way about music. And, although I love music, I get obsessed with working and forget to turn it on most of the time, but I never forget to turn on the color. It's the center of my natural ecosystem.

The color pink, and squirrels, have been driving forces in my life since young adulthood. I didn't care about anything pink as a kid, only later. The Weather sKwirl came about one day after a conversation with Karl over weather, another topic I am obsessive about. He made a comment something to the effect, that if I felt so strongly about weather and squirrels, I should do something about it. So I went immediately to my computer and created The Weather sKwirl. For two years straight I drew and posted a different comic with this theme every day. It led to Weather sKwirl themed art, products and public art commissions. But, this weather-obsessed squirrel's chief task was to relieve my anxiety. The expression on his face clearly illustrates that, as if passing it onto this character relieves my own stress.

Targets are double rainbows, and rainbows are targets split in half. I like to play with and invert imagery. I have been a target, and under a black rainbow, and this illustrative play helps me work out these ideas with a visual spin while bringing the color back in. It resolves conflict.



Installation at Look In The Windows, SoNo, image courtesy of the artist.

Food related icons, like eggs, sausages and bacon are a long-time compulsion. I have always loved breakfast, and in my early twenties I was a model and anorexic. I was trying to disappear and reduce my visibility by not eating, but this backfired on me. I seemed to have starved in an aesthetic way that made me more attractive, which is why the modeling agencies hired me for runway work. So, back to sausage and eggs smiles. I love images of breakfast foods, then and now. And, though I don't eat meat, I like drawing my own versions of it.

Q: How did you get your start in illustration, pattern and surface design?

A: My father was an artist and illustrator. In my formative years, I witnessed the process of creating as part of what some people did. I learned to use it as a language I felt comfortable communicating in. I was much better at making art, or consuming art and design magazines and books, than I was trying to interact with people.

Q: The I Do What I Want action apparel performance art is brilliant, you debuted the performance at Art Basel in Switzerland in June, how would you describe your process from idea to execution?

A: The “I Do What I Want” mantra comes from surviving my youth. When I was younger it meant a lot of rebellion, which led to friction in areas I no longer need to combat. Now, it stands for being my authentic self, living honestly and compassionately.

The Art Basel Switzerland action apparel was a uniform of truth, staking my claim without pushing it on anyone who doesn't choose to take it in. It also breaks down the hierarchy of what art is, and who can show it. So much of the art world is about exclusion, and I have always felt that quality makers can come from anywhere, using any media. It shouldn't be about money, popularity, trends, taste or who you know. It's about the power of the work you make. My work is always an attempt to demonstrate that concept. In this case, by creating and wearing my work, I am my own performance, and I become part of the art fair, without permission, without caring about other people's opinions or judgments. And, I can decide to place myself in these settings articulated in any number of ways, and become sculptural. I have always felt like my body was made to be a kinetic sculpture. And, so fashion is the way I demonstrate that, and action gives it liftoff, whether subtle or intense. When I am being true to myself in this way, I reach a place of absolute confidence, and so it's really just a remedy for anxiety. The fact that some people seem to react positively is a bonus, because if what I'm doing as a life hack to problem-solve for myself helps other feel good, even momentarily, it becomes even more meaningful because my language is being understood at some level. Of course, there are many people in these environments that look surprised, confused, even fearful of the way I present myself, and I have to laugh, because it's just color and pattern. But, I make a mental note and use that reactional data to fuel my next initiative. I would have liked to have studied science, but my natural aptitude is in art. Still, I treat life like a science lab.

My favorite quote best encapsulates the work I do: “Art does not lie down on the bed that is made for it; it runs away as soon as one says its name; it loves to be incognito. Its best moments are when it forgets what it is called.” —Jean Dubuffet

Q: Undoubtedly, the power of the image is paramount to your work. The resulting image from your performance work, critically folds the different levels that you are conceptually hitting, i.e. branding, social media, art industry, fashion industry, the fashion icon, or just icon itself, art as social interaction/commodity, intervention in public spaces etc. What would you describe as the main influences that you are conscious of when you perform and in choosing resulting images?

A: I crosscut along a wide breadth of industries and issues, but my ambition is in building strength of character. My work is often a personal demonstration of the power of the individual. I refuse to be derailed or categorized by the typical judgments of society. Though much of my visual work can be applied benignly in a commercial aftermarket, it was born a suit of armor.

Q: Who are artists that you are interested in watching the trajectory of their careers?

A: I've already watched one that couldn't get much more trajectory. I was a Matt Groening fan since the early 80s, long before The Simpsons. However, I'm always happy to hear success stories for artists I think do great work. Even when it's not in line with my personal taste. There is already too much mediocrity in the art, design and other worlds, so it's a win when true originality surfaces and is rewarded.

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