

# BROOKLYN



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## Yo! Artist Deborah Kass goes from the canvas to the catwalk with new collection

Oy!

By [Jessica Robinson](#)

Does it say “Yo” or does it say “Oy?” Depends on which side of things you stand on.

Once upon a time, in a distant 2015, a fluorescent banana-colored aluminum sculpture landed in New York’s Brooklyn Bridge Park. If you viewed it from Manhattan, it shouted out a saucy “YO.” But if you glanced at it from Brooklyn, it read a rather disappointed “OY.”

Eight-feet tall and 17-feet wide, the three-dimensional “OY/YO” is the work of Brooklyn-based pop culture artist Deborah Kass, her first-ever sculpture. From its original perch at Brooklyn Bridge Park, it was later moved to the Brooklyn Museum, where it is now part of its permanent collection.

“I created OY/YO thinking about the American promise of equality and fairness and our responsibilities to make the country a better place for all,” Kass tells Brooklyn Magazine. “With hate and division now on the rise, it’s urgent to see our commonalities, what we share and what brings us together.”



Grace Roselli, Pandora BoxX Project

The giant piece, to use Brooklyn Museum’s words, “seeks to evoke joy and unity in its playful monumentalizing of classic New York slang.” It expresses the collective pride and exasperation of living here by pairing the Yiddish cry “oy” with the omnipresent New York greeting “yo” (which is also the Spanish pronoun for “I”).

“How much more succinct and iconic of a New York and Brooklyn phrase can you get than ‘oy’ or ‘yo?’” asks Lisa Kim, director of cultural affairs for the sculpture’s commissioning agency, Two Trees Management Company.

So popular is the sculpture that in 2022 a duplicate was commissioned by Philadelphia’s Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History to sit on the grounds of Independence Mall and become, as the museum puts it, “part of Old City’s cultural fabric and a destination for tourists and locals alike.”

Kass is a multifaceted artist famous for a little bit of everything, from updating Andy Warhol’s signature celebrity portrait series by replacing his subjects with her own idols — in one case substituting Warhol’s Elvis Presley for Barbra Streisand — to designing billboards, printmaking, and now a signature apparel collection for alice + olivia. More on that later.

“I saw Barbra Streisand take the world by storm when I was a 12-year-old Jewish girl from Long Island,” explains Kass. “That meant I could do it too.” Yo!

### **‘If I had me as a kid, I’d be fascinated’**

Kass, who identifies as a “total, absolute, 100 percent New Yorker,” was born in San Antonio, Texas, in 1952. Her family moved to Long Island soon after, where she was raised in a suburban Jewish household. At 14, Kass began taking classes at The Art Student’s League in New York City, funded with money she made babysitting.

In the afternoons, she would go to the theater, often sneaking in for the second act. “My whole middlebrow attachment to middle- class entertainment is to me one of the more radical things I do in art,” says Kass. “In my generation, our parents weren’t interested in creative children. They just said, ‘Turn off the light and go to sleep.’ They didn’t care that I was interesting, which I was. But if I had me as a kid, I’d be fascinated.”



Kass received her BFA in painting from Carnegie Mellon University (Warhol’s alma mater) and studied at the Whitney Independent Study Program, where she created her first major riff on another famous artist: a six-by-eight-foot rendition of “Ophelia’s Death After Delacroix,” a small sketch by the French Romantic artist Eugene Delacroix.

Her earliest exhibitions were at Baskerville + Watson in New York in the 1980s, a gallery that was famous for showing the work of such groundbreaking artists as Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince and Carroll Dunham, which in turn led to exhibitions in museums and galleries from New York to New Orleans, Berlin to Prague.

“I was a lucky young woman painter, due to my arrival in New York at the height of second-wave feminism,” says Kass.

But it was in 1992 that she grabbed the art world’s attention with a radically new approach. She calls it “appropriation,” the idea being to take the most famous pop artist of all time, Andy Warhol, and replace his portraits with her own heroes and heroines, which took no small amount of chutzpah. (Though, to be fair, it was not her first artistic heist: “I stole crayons in nursery school. My first act of appropriation.”)

Through the Warhol series, Kass, who is gay, explores themes of celebrity, gender and identity. “In my own work, I replace Andy’s male homosexual desire with my own specificity: Jew love, female voice and blatant lesbian diva worship,” she says.

Among the icons Kass has canonized with the Warhol treatment (aside from Streisand) are Gertrude Stein (whom she turned into “Chairman Ma” as a wink to Warhol’s Chairman Mao), Elizabeth Taylor, and, significantly, Kass herself. In so doing, she emerged as a trailblazer for female artists in a male-dominated art world.

“Deb is an expert at putting a smile on her viewers’ faces, but she packs a wallop behind those smiles,” says former Warhol Museum Director Eric Shiner, who is currently president of Powerhouse Arts.

### **Feel-good fashion for feel-bad times**

While Kass is perhaps best known for “partnering” with Warhol, she also dabbles in a little musical sampling. She plucks phrases meaningful to her from the lyrics of musicals and her favorite pop songs of her youth and incorporates them into her paintings. It’s perhaps no surprise that music enters into her work. Her father was an amateur musician who played sax and clarinet. (“I have a memory of dancing on my father’s feet to all the music my parents listened to.”)

Such paintings include “Daddy, I Would Love to Dance,” from the Broadway musical “A Chorus Line.” Another is “Just a Shot Away,” which invokes the Rolling Stones’ legendary 1969 protest anthem, “Gimme Shelter,” composed in response to the violence of that era. Kass made this piece during the first wave of Black Lives Matters protests; its color palette — black and blue — references police violence against people of color.

Similarly, her “Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times” is a series of neon works and large-scale paintings drawing from Broadway musicals, Yiddishisms, art history and pop culture, using text such as “c’mon get happy,” “you made me love you” and “save the country now.”

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It was this series that caught the eye of fashion house *alice + olivia*’s founder and CEO, Stacey Bendet, who wanted to put a bit of that good feeling into her latest collection. After inking a licensing deal with the high-style, global fashion house, Kass has taken her wordplay from the canvas to the catwalk.

Collaborations between designers and painters are certainly nothing new — as far back as 1937 Elsa Schiaparelli worked with Salvador Dali to create the infamous Lobster Dress, among others. While *alice + olivia* is not known for scandalous couture, they are recognized for juxtaposing sexy and mature with whimsical and hip. You may have spotted their clothes on Angelina Jolie, Gwyneth Paltrow, Michele Obama and others.

Kass’ *alice + olivia* collection features pieces like a silk button-down top in pink and orange with the word “Sweet” written on the pink side and “Thing” on the orange side, reflecting the same colors and same wording as the original painting that inspired it.

The piece-de-resistance of the collection is the “Cody Moto” black-and-blue-leather motorcycle jacket. The chic color-block design, spelling out “Good Times” in Kass’ distinctive style, adds pop art flair to an already edgy piece. Crafted in butter-soft lamb leather, this jacket comes with a hefty \$1,595 price tag.

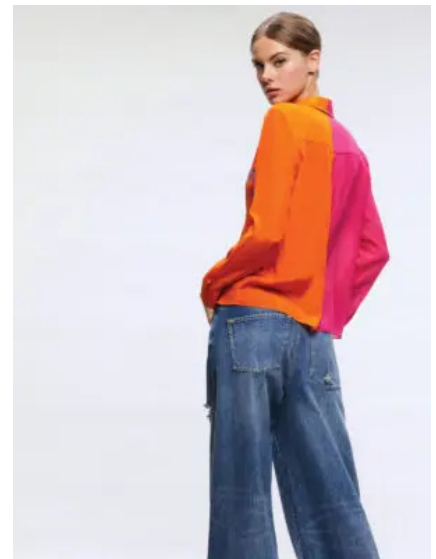


While the collaboration with alice + olivia marks Kass’ first licensing of her name to a clothing brand, her art has been licensed for years, popping up on everything from tote bags to jewelry.

Stacey Zaleski, director of retail for The Jewish Museum, which carries a large variety of Kass’ licensed works, tells us that “in addition to Kass’ totes, posters, cuff links, socks and tees, her OY/ YO — especially the jewelry crafted in 18-karat gold over sterling silver — is a fun and well-received addition to our shop offerings.”

For those who are really serious about their love for Kass’ work, there’s the 7.5-inch-tall “OY/YO” polished silver sculpture, mounted on a polished aluminum base, for a cool \$12,000, signed by the artist and numbered.

It’s enough to make you say “Oy.” Or “Yo!” ... depending on where you stand.



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