

Garden Party

Eastern Shore sculpture artist Jan Kirsh takes her inspired indoor/outdoor designs to wearable art.

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D Peeking out of a driveway, along the secluded, spiraling backroads of Saint Michaels, Maryland, sits a three-foot-long, vibrantly red chile pepper. It's a cheerful greeting of sorts, a bright and bold welcome to Jan Kirsh Studio.

The landscape designer and sculptor has spent almost four decades reflecting the intimate wonder of nature within her work. Her dedication and ingenuity to both her 'daytime job' and art, along with her infectious jovial energy, have led to a thriving career. And she has no plans to slow down any time soon.

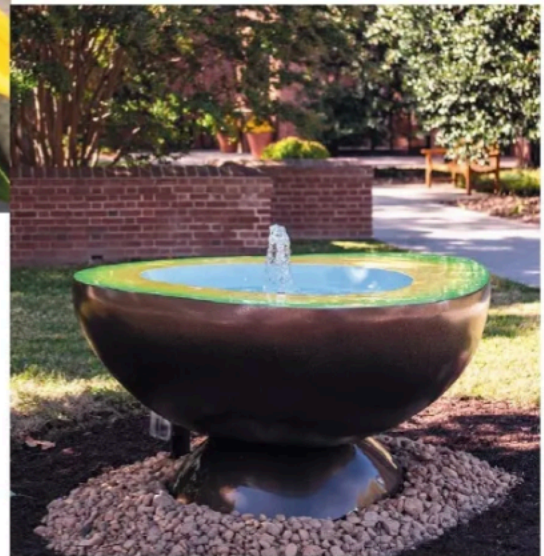
"I feel so fortunate that my work is still exciting and interesting," says Kirsh. "Retirement is not on my mind, yet I will be altering my practice by focusing more on the creative design and artful aspects."

Kirsh says she's always had a fascination with nature. As a 19-year-old art student, studying in Tallahassee, Florida, she would photograph grocery store produce, observing the lines and shapes. She'd create still lifes of eggs and stack avocado shells on the windowsill, captivated by their forms.

While enrolled in a ceramics program, she began working at a plant nursery. She quickly fell in love with horticulture, mesmerized by the lush shrubs and blooms of the Sunshine State.

"Looking at the succulents and tropical evergreens and ferns, the foliage spoke to me," she says.

When life landed her on the Eastern Shore in 1978, her passion for art and landscape continued to intertwine, as she taught ceramics through the Academy Art Museum in Easton and worked as a freelance gardener throughout the Mid-Shore. A serendipitous mentorship with a former Vassar professor who practiced landscape architecture prompted her to pursue her own landscape design company in 1983.





Jan Kirsh is best known for her outdoor sculptures, like these Carrots and the Avocado Bubbler at right. She's expanded her artistry with a sculptured jewelry collection, including these Fig Earrings, that builds on her love of nature and landscapes.

Jan Kirsh in her studio, where she crafts everything from oversized ceramic Peppers, to sculpted Fig pendants, to custom Garden Screens.



Kirsh still recalls the anxious excitement of her first project—a walkway and a small planting. Her client loved it and Kirsh was hooked.

“And that led to another project, which led to something else, and I never looked back,” she says.

The process is a collaborative one that starts with conversations between Kirsh and the homeowners. She meticulously balances function and aesthetics, observing the garden’s natural surroundings and architectural cohabitants, so that she can enhance its existing beauty and not distract from it.

“It’s a lovely dance,” she says. “I’m painting with plants.”

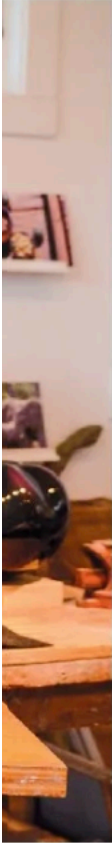
In any project, she considers the house as the lead, and the garden its supporting actors. And, over the last decade or so, she’s started to ‘dress’ her cast with her art.

Like costumes in a play or movie, Kirsh’s colorful, oversized sculptures often set the tone of a space and add depth and interest. They also help to create a flow or connection between a property’s structural and natural elements. And they’re lively and fun, particularly in the dormant winter months when gardens are quiet.

“It’s whimsical,” she says, using a word that has almost become synonymous with her art. “I wanted to treat sculpture as forms that would complement the plants and provide interest all year round.”

Since her college days, Kirsh’s sculpture has imitated fruits and vegetables. Her very first sculpture, produced for an art class assignment, was a giant platter with a dozen ears of corn stacked on top.

“I wanted to treat sculpture as forms that would complement the plants and provide interest all year round.”



"It was an early lesson in patience. Forming each kernel of corn took hours," she says, with a laugh.

Today, her portfolio spans almost the entire farmer's market, from onions and eggplants to tomatoes and cherries and beyond. With recognizable forms and bold hues, these eye-catching pieces have quite the cheerful personalities.

It's almost impossible to look at her sculptures without a smile creeping in. Have you seen the six-foot-long avocado half, sitting outside of the Talbot County Free Library in Easton? Its dramatic stature and vibrancy are difficult to miss among the traditional architecture and streetscape.

Appropriately named the 'Avocado Bubbler', this piece doubles as a water feature, providing a joyful sparkle and soft soothing sounds to passersby. Kirsh also hopes the fountain will appeal to a variety of birds, encouraging them to rest on its lime-green ledge and take a drink or dip in the water.

"It's a plus to have more opportunity to engage with the community in art," she says, explaining that her work is often displayed at private homes and businesses. "Too often art feels removed from daily life and it's great fun to share with everyone."

A slight departure from the Seussian playfulness of her sculpture, Kirsh's modern garden screens feature shapes and forms inspired by Mother Nature's creations. Initially, a hand-drawn pencil illustration, the designs are then digitized and cut into aluminum Corten steel or weather resistant plywood via water jet.

They're practical, yet still exude a healthy dose of her signature merriment.

"It's an opportunity to use a piece of art to step in for a fence or hedge," she says of their function. "It's a four-season, 24-hour art object in the garden."

Eager to spend more time in her home studio this year, Kirsh currently has a few projects in the making. A succulent-themed privacy screen for a property on the Mid-Shore and a three-foot pomegranate that's "on the drawing board" for a public art installation.

But it's her recent endeavor—a jewelry line—that she sees as a way to bring more of her art into the everyday.

Miniaturized versions of her Avocado, Chile, and Fig sculptures, these pendants and earrings are 3D-printed in a combination of stainless steel and bronze and finished with hand-set Swarovski crystals.

It's wearable art that, just like its oversized counterparts, is centered in nature and provides the perfect dash of whimsy. 🍷

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