



"Simon," a bearskin rug made of gummy bears, is part of YaYa Chou's series of sculptures about food, class and nature. Courtesy of YaYa Chou

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They're chewy. They're colorful. They starred in their own 1980s Disney cartoon. And now they're inspiring a new generation of artists.

Gummy bears, the fruity, translucent candies, are appearing in artwork displayed at contemporary galleries and museums around the world, as a generation of gummy bear fanatics comes of age.

Nicole Vogelzang, a Canadian painter, earned critical raves for the gummy still lifes she displayed at Toronto's Pari Nadimi Gallery in 2003. At the Portland Art Museum's Oregon Biennial in July 2006, Chandra Bocci made headlines with her "Gummy Big Bang II," an explosion of gummy candy — bears, worms, sharks and spiders — filling a 120-square-foot space. And images of the 45-pound gummy bear chandelier created by a Los Angeles artist, YaYa Chou, are making the rounds on the Web, thanks to a posting on Boing Boing, a blog specializing in wacky Internet ephemera.

Gummy bears' ubiquity makes them an attractive subject for artists, said Jennifer Gately, curator of Northwest art at the Portland Art Museum. "It's something we all have an affiliation with, a personal connection to," said Gately, adding that Bocci's gummy installation was one of the most popular pieces in the biennial.

Ever since Marcel Duchamp submitted a urinal to the 1917 Society of Independent Artists exhibit — calling it "Fountain" — artists have incorporated everyday objects into their work, said Tyler Green, a Washington art critic. That trend has accelerated in the past decade, leading Green to coin the term "Wal-Martists" to describe a group of artists, including Dan Steinhilber and Tony Feher, who frequently work with commercial items — from duck sauce packets to Styrofoam.

For younger artists especially, gummy bears are a prominent part of the world around them. In the

1980s, the German company Haribo introduced the first gummy candies in the United States. Shaped like bears, they quickly spawned legions of generic imitators, as well as an ever-expanding variety of gummy goodies, including frogs, alphabet letters and strands of sugary spaghetti. In September 1985, "Disney's Adventures of the Gummi Bears" premiered on NBC, followed by a line of books and action figures.

"I've always wanted to make something out of gummy bears," said Chou, 32, who spent two months stringing candy onto monofilament line to make "Chandelier."

"I think it's the nostalgia. A lot of 20- and 30-year-olds grew up eating those things."

Though the piece is almost two years old, it has retained its soft consistency, and bugs don't seem interested in it, she said. "Chandelier" is one in a series of seven gummy sculptures exploring the relationship between nature, food and class. One of the sculptures, "Joy Coated," features a child-size mannequin covered with the candies — Chou's take on the childhood obesity epidemic. "The kid is struggling to get through the sugar and can't break through," she explained.

By using gummy candy in unconventional ways, artists raise questions about consumerism, capitalism and nature, said Gately, the curator.

"It's a comment on the ludicrous nature of commercialism and capitalism today," she said of Bocci's "Gummy Big Bang II." "The gummy industry has gone completely wild with the types of gummy they're creating."

Bocci, 27, said she also used the piece to explore the power of consumer marketing. "They do all sorts of studies to find the exact ways to seduce someone really fast," she said. "I like to distill those techniques and use them in an art context."

Even she underestimated the addictive qualities of gummy bears. As she glued together 60 pounds of the treats in preparation for the Oregon Biennial, the candy's sweet scent wafted throughout the Portland museum, so powerful that the security guards bought bags of gummy bears on their lunch breaks. Eventually, the museum gift shop started selling the candies.

"If you take gummy and light it and add the fruity smell, it's really hard not to react," Bocci said. "It's like a Britney Spears song, or a McDonald's hamburger."

Vogelzang, an M.F.A. student at the University of Guelph in Ontario, began painting pictures of gummy bears to practice her still lifes. She liked posing the bears in human positions and the way the gummy material reflected light. Unexpectedly, the paintings, priced at \$1,000 to \$2,100 a piece, sold faster than she could paint them.

"People knew me as 'the gummy bear girl,'" said Vogelzang, 28. "It became a bit irritating, actually."

Though gummies virtually guarantee that a piece of art will be popular, the candies aren't always easy to work with.

When Bocci made an earlier version of "Gummy Big Bang" for an exhibition at the Portland Art Center,

the candy melted under hot lights. After the show, the piece ended up in a Dumpster. The second time, she used a fan to cool the gummies and mounted them with sturdy Plexiglas rods instead of fishing line.

Chou's chandelier is lighted with a low-watt bulb, so her gummies haven't melted. But the candy is so gooey that she had to clean the needle every time she finished threading a line of bears.

And there's another unpleasant side effect. Chou, who once loved snacking on the fruity candies, can't eat them anymore.

"I can't stand the smell," she said.