Butta Love

Palazzo Vendramin ai Carmini
Dorsoduro 3462, Venice

7 May – 30 June 2026

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friends


Révolution

It may seem unnecessary to point this out, but a piece of clothing tends to be rather the same size as the body that sits inside it.

That (un-)stupendous realization came to me as I stood in Angela Brandys's studio, high up in Oltrarno in Florence, taking in her most recent works—images of female figures assembled from fragments of clothing she has worn, now sewn together into tall hangings. And it just so happens that, according to an important body of research about to be published by the art historian Alexander Nagel, much of the history of Western fine art since about 1500 has been built around paintings that match the people shown in them to the size of real bodies, as has barely been noticed by earlier scholars. If Christ, for instance, was conceived as being 180 cm tall, an artist working after 1500 was likely to render him as a patch of paint about that tall on a painting's surface. Ditto a living court dwarf who was in fact only 65 cm tall. The same "life-scale" rhetoric, to use Nagel's term, governed paintings of dukes and princesses, saints and merchants.

What that means, for Brandys, is that by assembling her works from her discarded clothes—clothes that, as eventually dawned on me, are inherently human-sized—she has given them deep roots in the foundational art of modern European culture, and especially of the city where she now works. The Mona Lisa, painted across the Ponte Vecchio from Brandy's studio, was one of the first works to promote what Nagel calls Europe's "life-scale revolution."

The Brandys hanging called "Source" in fact channels Leonardo's lost "Leda and the Swan," and other hangings of hers are built around images of women by his Florentine peers. In photos of those hangings in progress, the charcoal sketches that Brandys lays down first, to guide the textiles that eventually get sewn overtop, often look strikingly like enlargements of Renaissance drawings. (Even when Brandys enlarges one of her figures to over life-size, as she sometimes does, the fact that it's made from clothes implies some relation to a real body—as though it's not so much an enlarged image as a life-scale rendering of an oversized being.)

As cloth hangings, Brandys's new works have roots that stretch back beyond even the Renaissance and its painters, since some of the very earliest examples of European artworks at life scale were tapestries. Decades or even centuries before the West's painters had fully caught onto the returns paid by human-sized pictures, tapestry makers had already learned to cover the walls of their patron's chambers and chapels—the way Brandys covers a gallery wall—with images of people woven at the same scale as the real people who feasted or prayed before them. The great Unicorn tapestries at the Cloisters museum in New York gave their original viewers a sense that the tapestries' hunt for the fabled beast might spill into the room that audience stood in. Or viewers might be tempted to step into the woven scenes, joining a chase whose hunters seemed to match them in size.
That invitation to enter a scene, and especially to identify with a figure in it, is central to Brandys's art. It's there, automatically, in that art's re-use of its maker's cast-off clothes, which inevitably tempt female viewers, at least, to imagine having them on their own bodies, or climbing right "into" the hangings to put them on. What happens to the figure in a hanging—we'll get to that in a moment—is thus felt as happening to its viewer, as well.

Brandys said that she "reduced" her former fashions "to their baseline fabric." But that gesture wasn't just formal, a search for new materials with new visual impact. It inevitably came with personal, expressive and even political and economic implications.

The great tapestries of the Renaissance were the most perfectly conspicuous consumption anyone could ask for, costing as much as a battleship; the wildly deluxe fashions that Brandys has cut up to make her art—an ostrich-skin coat by Prada; sequined boots from Yves Saint-Laurent; an Alexander McQueen dress—put her textiles in the same sumptuary category as those earlier treasures.

The crucial difference is that Brandys attacks and mostly destroys the garments she once cherished—slicing into the McQueen, worn once, "was quite painful," she said—which means that she cancels their previous, conspicuous, value. In some sense, her hangings thus become anti-tapestries, rather than simply giving new life to that exclusive genre. If Brandys's Saint-Laurent boots mostly survive, lying on the floor of the studio like a brace of shot pheasant, no fashionista would want them now that slices have been cut from their uppers to become part of the artwork called "Last Laugh".

Brandys calls her hangings "covert self-portraits," and that's an inevitable interpretation, given that they are made from the clothes she's lived with over the last decade and more—right through a divorce that, like all such separations, must have caused pain. "I'd shared a beautiful life with someone but couldn't wear the clothes anymore," Brandys told me. "This was my life and I had to do something with it." Brandys said she felt a responsibility to "process my own predicament," and the result of that "processing" (almost in the Cuisinart sense) is available in the near-rags that became her eight new hangings.

In "Offering," Brandys's very modern, of-the-minute fashions got processed into the famous figure of Venus from Botticelli's Primavera, but the result has such a splintered, almost Cubist surface that it fractures the Renaissance harmony of the original, suggesting that it can't be regained, by Brandys or possibly anyone else. Below the figure float the words "uprising" and "revolution," cut from Marc Jacob garments whose pseudo-radical stylings seem to have a more genuine force in their new context. In Botticelli's painting, Venus stands passive in her deluxe Renaissance fashions; "Offering" seems to take apart that role model.

In another hanging, a classic Botticelli Virgin and Child gets a similar treatment, with a similarly fractured result. Next to the hanging's Virgin we see two stiletto-shod women's legs reaching up, feet first, to the top of the composition; they derive from a performance in which Brandys was photographed standing on her head—a position that many of her female viewers have had to adopt, at least metaphorically, in their dealings with the world.

By recomposing today's fashions into some of art's classic images of women, Brandys brings those images into the present. She also calls their stability, and validity, into question. If her Venus and her Virgin seem about to fall into rags — likewise, the shepherdess borrowed from François Boucher in "Out of the Blue" — the imagery in "Last Laugh" is so completely fragmented that it conjures an explosion in some fashion victim's walk-in closet, her clothes reduced to fragments that can no longer carry meaning.

During my visit with her, Brandys referred to her taste for "beautiful disintegration," but in her hangings, and especially in "Last Laugh," the disintegration may trump the beauty, since the carefully constructed splendor of her designer clothes is visibly undone when Brandys cuts them up to become mere art supplies.

Brandys knows that disintegration also awaits the works those art supplies have become. Textiles are more subject to the ravages of time than many artistic media, and Brandys's hangings, which mix all kinds of unstable fabrics in a fragile appliqué technique, are even less likely to survive old age than other textiles. But she said she prefers running that risk, or even courting it, to seeing fashions preserved in museum vitrines—saved, maybe, for posterity, but kept eternally unworn and deprived of what Brandys called the "vital force" they once had on people's bodies, and in their wearers' minds. In a kind of paradox, Brandys hopes that, by "processing" her beloved fashions into artistic imagery, the disintegration she's imposed on them will, for a while at least, also guarantee them new life.

Blake Gopnik *is a contributing critic to the New York Times and has published comprehensive biographies of Andy Warhol and Albert Barnes. He has a PhD in Renaissance art from the University of Oxford.*

The Warrior, 2025
mixed-media textile work
360 x 400 cm / 141.7 × 157.5 in

Source, 2024/25
mixed-media textile work
370 x 303 cm / 145.7 × 119.3 in


Révolution
Uprising

Offering, 2024
mixed-media textile work
367 x 282 cm / 144.5 × 111.0 in


Revolution
Uprising


friend

Devotion, 2025
mixed-media textile work
365 x 295 cm / 143.7 × 116.1 in

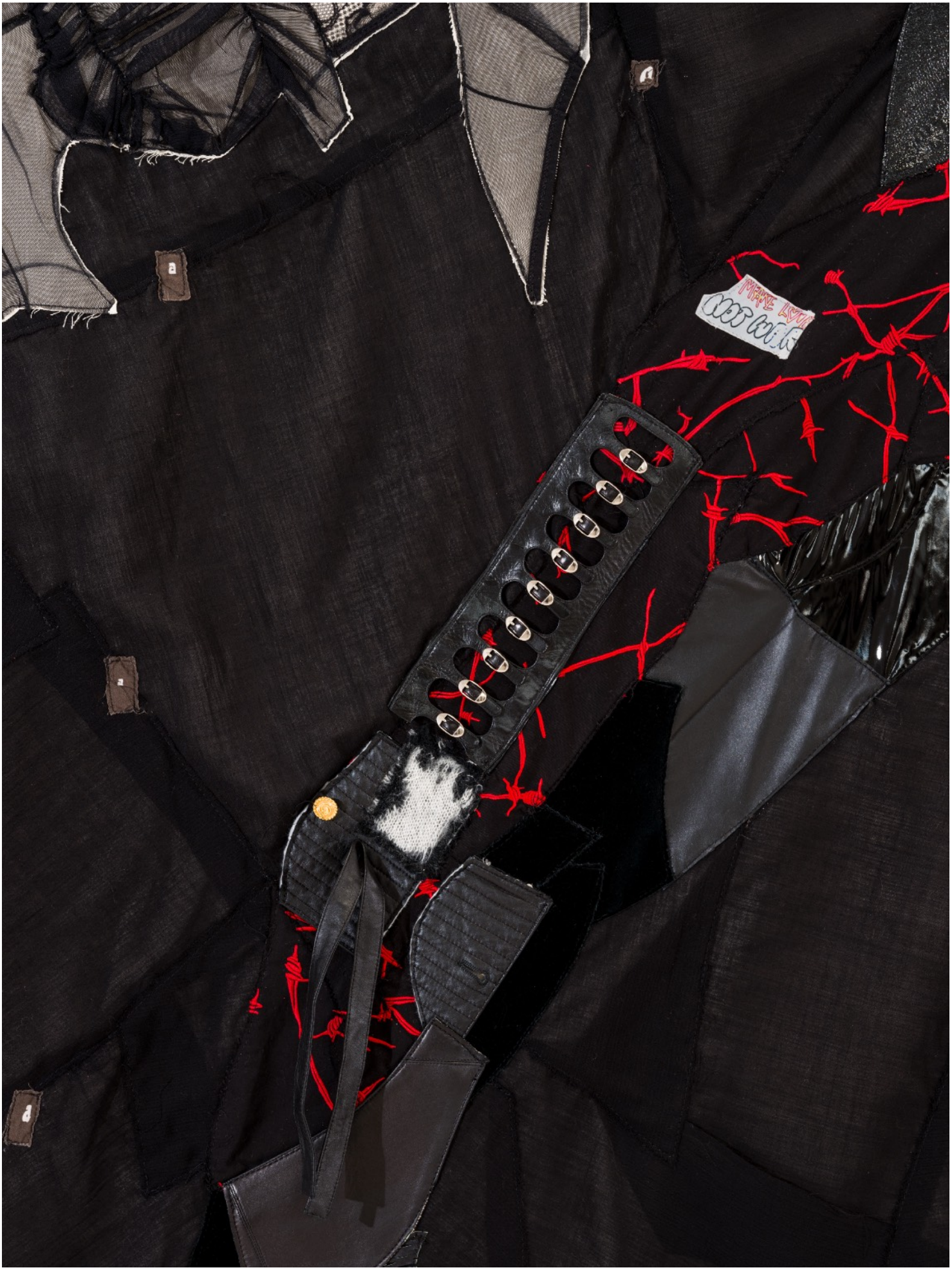
Infinity, 2025
mixed-media textile work
363 x 330 cm / 142.9 × 129.9 in

Out of the blue, 2025
mixed-media textile work
358 x 293 cm / 140.9 × 115.4 in

Last Laugh, 2025
mixed-media textile work
360 x 260 cm / 141.7 × 102.4 in


YKK

Destiny, 2024
mixed-media textile work
364 x 531 cm / 143.3 × 209.1 in

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