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## Wearable art

*JC artist's charming creations are inspired by memories*

**By: Madeline Friedman**  
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Some might call Jersey City artist Ruth Mikos' work child's play, and that's fine by her. "I don't want to grow up," said the 38-year-old photographer. "There's so much stress in every day life. You've got to have fun." And Mikos' work reflects that attitude. She photographs toys and other images evocative of childhood and converts them into jewelry featuring resin, glass and silver charms.

It all started when Mikos made the long journey from Iowa to Manhattan, to complete an M.F.A. in photography at the Pratt Institute.

Her professor, Arthur Freed, sent the artist - who was working mostly on self-portraits at the time - out on the street to photograph what she saw in the city. "I ended up going and shooting lots of flea markets," Mikos said. "That's when Sixth Avenue between 24th and 26th streets had awesome flea markets. I got to know a lot of the vendors."

Back in Iowa, Mikos' father had a furniture store, so she found herself gravitating toward retro furniture from the '40s and '50s.

She also started photographing toys, which both her mother and older sister collect.

Mikos herself has become a bit of a collector. On display in her Jersey City home she has over 10 complete sets of Fisher Price collections, from the Amusement Park to the Farmhouse.

She has dozens of "Baby Alive" dolls, and several old lunch boxes. Most of the toys are subjects of her photographs and part of her "charms" jewelry line.

### From portrait art to wearable art

Mikos majored in photography at the University of Northern Iowa. After she graduated she became a children's portrait photographer with a company that worked with big discount stores.

"I literally traveled with Wal Mart, staying in glamorous Motel 6s," she recalled, laughing.

"That's when I decided to go to graduate school," she said. "I thought, 'what am I going to do with photography in Iowa?'"

She said she knew the only way she could make a living with photography was to continue to do portraits or to get in to wedding photography.

So Mikos made the move from Fort Dodge, Iowa (estimated population, according to Mikos, 28,000) to New York City, to study at Pratt in 1992.

**Advertisement** "I came sight unseen," she said. "A lot of it was I wanted to be closer to the art world, a lot of it was I just wanted out."

### Common ground

Mikos first moved to Jersey City in 1996, living in the Heights from 1996 to 2000, before moving into Manhattan for a couple of years. She has been back in the Heights for the past three-and-a-half years. She began making her jewelry a little over a year ago, incorporating mostly pictures she had taken of her family's toy collection, or pictures of toys she remembered from her childhood.

But, she added, she also uses images that she finds in flea markets or other places.

"Not every object has a meaning for me personally," she said. "It's just something that strikes me." Mikos said the appeal of her jewelry, which is becoming popular in museum stores and boutiques across the country, is its common base.

"It's the commonality of [the fact that] we all grew up," she said. "It's so fun to see people come up and



say 'Oh my god, I had that...' and 'do you remember?'"

Mikos has a library of over 200 images which she incorporates into the charms for her jewelry collection, and keeps adding to it. She is now expanding into a home line, starting with glass tiles.

**CHARMING ART – Mikos' charms collections features pictures of toys and other cute, kitschy objects.**

For all of the pieces, customers can choose between her ready-made pieces, or they can custom make their own. They can combine images that are funny and funky. She described one piece that has a charm with a picture of a toilet with the seat up next to a charm with a picture of a toilet with the seat down.

Although the project began as a part-time thing, she has spent the past six months working on the jewelry and tiles full-time, doing everything from the photography to the assembly in her Jersey City studio.

"I am a one-woman show, kind of like that guy you see on the street with the drums and the guitar," Mikos said. But, she adds, she does farm one part out - she has someone who cuts the glass for her.

After choosing the pictures, Mikos prints the images through a computer printer onto waterslide decal paper. "It's like the old temporary tattoos," she says. They are printed in reverse, and she applies them to glass. She then seals it with a resin spray and strings the charms onto the leather straps or silver chains.

### **Cult of personality**

Mikos sells her pieces almost exclusively to stores such as Signals and Uncommon Goods. The jewelry and tiles, which range in price from \$32 for resin jewelry to glass for \$48, to tiles for \$56 and silver for \$96, are popular not for their price, but for their personality.

And that comes from Mikos' own independent sense of style, which she said, stuck out more in Iowa than in the New York area.

"I grew up in Iowa. It didn't take much to be an oddball," she said.

"Boy George was my idol. I was in love with him. In Catholic school I'd do what I could to express myself. I'd wear weird hats and socks. I'd wear curly extension chords as belts." But now the woman who makes jewelry with pictures of toys and toilets, says she has calmed down - at least a little bit.

"Right now I'm wearing knee-high socks," she said, "and they may very well be striped."

*To find out more about Ruth Mikos' collection, log onto [www.ruthmikos.com](http://www.ruthmikos.com).*

*Comments on this story can be sent to: [mfriedman@hudsonreporter.com](mailto:mfriedman@hudsonreporter.com).*

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