

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Studio Visit: MK Guth by Amelia Rina

The art of destruction.

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MK Guth, *Ghost Kitchen*, 1999. Photo by Amelia Rina.

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Art and creation are inextricably linked. Creativity involves making something, revealing unseen potential, and enabling new experiences of the world. But art is also about omission, removal, and, sometimes, destruction. Without a critical faculty making value distinctions—keep this, exclude that—art wouldn't exist. This editing process applies both to individual works and to an artist's career more broadly. For this reason, I recently visited MK Guth's studio in Portland, Oregon, not to look at new work but to watch her destroy one of her early sculptures.



MK Guth destroying *Ghost Kitchen* (1999), 2021. Photo by Amelia Rina.

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There was a pleasing symmetry between Guth's studio location—above a second-hand furniture store called What's New? Furniture—and the doomed work. A life-size resin cast of a mid-century refrigerator, sink, table, and two chairs, *Ghost Kitchen* (1999) feels haunted with nostalgia. The translucent, yellowish-greenish-cream color of the resin, glowing in the afternoon light streaming through south-facing windows, made it look like a specter. The resin's precision in recording the original objects also added to the ghostly quality, as with, for instance, the perfect impression of the GE logo on the freezer door inside the fridge. The title *Ghost Kitchen* takes on further prescient significance, as though Guth unknowingly predicted its death when she named it.

Despite its ethereal appearance, the damn thing was strong. I imagined spending the afternoon being enveloped by a cloud of resin dust and shrapnel. Instead, even as Guth took a hammer, mallet, and all her considerable might to the objects, the pieces only dented, broke apart, and sometimes cracked. It was like the sculpture was fighting for its continued survival. Still, it had to die.

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Destroyed *Ghost Kitchen* (1999), 2021. Photo by Amelia Rina.

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In between attacks, Guth would pause to reflect on the sensation of destroying her own work. She's attached to the piece because of how much labor it took to make, and she's proud of the final product's refinement (all the fridge's moving parts work; even the freezer door opens). Guth decided to condemn the piece because she deemed it conceptually paralyzed: kitchens, especially mid-century ones, are just too loaded with references to domesticity, female labor, and housework. Though these are important and still relevant topics, Guth isn't focusing on them. By destroying *Ghost Kitchen*, Guth exorcised a spirit that wasn't necessarily unwanted or malicious, but had overstayed its welcome.

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MK Guth studio, 2021. Photo by Amelia Rina.

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There are a few famous examples of artists destroying their own work: Banksy's recent self-shredding painting, Agnes Martin destroying her early work, John Baldessari's *The Cremation Project* (1970), and now Guth. Each artist's impulse arose from a desire to assert control over their practice and their lives. After spending the past few years heavily involved in teaching and academia, Guth recently transitioned back to focusing on full-time artmaking. Her farewell to *Ghost Kitchen* acts as a way to leave the past in the past and make room—both literally and figuratively—for the present and future.

[MK Guth: Touching Matter](#) is on view at Elizabeth Leach Gallery in Portland, Oregon, until December 31.

Amelia Rina is a writer, critic, and editor based in Portland, Oregon, on the unceded territories of the Clackamas, Cowlitz, and many other Tribes along the Wimahl (Columbia) and Whilamut (Willamette) rivers. She is the founder of [Variable West](#).