

THE GREEN STYLIST

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Freak-O-Bags an In Depth interview with Julie Armbruster

By Jodi Truglio on September 21, 2011



Fall is finally here the weather is starting to become cooler, leaves are starting change to beautiful shades of reds, yellows and orange. Apple season has arrived and of course that means apple cider too. With [Halloween](#) just around the corner I wanted to share with you one of my favorite vegan reusable bag companies. Freak-O-Bags are perfect to carry your yummy treats in or use for running daily errands. This bag is a must have for the fall season that children and adult are bound to fall in love with.

"I chose to make my bags vegan because I am an avid animal supporter and have been vegetarian for over 14 years. I hate the idea of using animal parts for clothing or accessories and speak up often about it. It is amazing to me the disconnect with some vegetarians between eating animals and wearing animals. I never wear leather or feathers or fur and would never contribute to any project that advocated it," says Julie Armbruster of [Freak-O-Bags](#).

Recently [Julie Armbruster](#) was kind enough to answer a few questions for The Green Stylist.

The Green Stylist: Can you tell me a little about yourself, such as your background?

Julie Armbruster (JA):

I grew up in the Hudson Valley, NY. I studied Art Education at SUNY New Paltz and then went to grad school at NYU for painting. My program was in Venice, Italy and I was able to live in the city and paint all day. It became clear to me that I wanted to continue that life when I returned. It took a few years to build up, but I currently work full-time in my art studio in Asheville, NC in the River Arts District as a painter.

I met [Kristen Daniels](#) in 2005 and she and the Kamibashi team have been wonderful about supporting my creative pursuits. Although [Kamibashi](#) predominantly sells Asian made gifts, we have joined together to bring some production to Western North Carolina. We started production of the Freak-O-Bags in 2009.

TGS: What inspires the creatures you create?

JA: The characters are based on intuitive drawing. I first learned about this process while studying Surrealism. Basically, you loosely draw with light color ink and then keep working on it until you see something. I work with yellow ink and brush on gessoed panels. The characters, titles, and the compositions are informed by social observations which tend to involve humor.

TGS: Is there a personal story behind any of the bags you have created?

JA: All of the characters have a little bit of a story. The stories, like the process, are revealed to me as I make more paintings. The most personal one is "The Swizz" which is based on my dog, a chihuahua/pomeranian mix. She has so much personality that I can't imagine not working her in.



Julie's Dog

TGS: What is the most challenging part of your work?

JA: I think the most challenging part of working in the creative industry is dealing with uninformed and ignorant people. I have an open studio 3 days a week and the general population is just not trained to talk about art. I find much of my open studio hours is spent building a foundation for conversation. It can be exhausting!

Many of the people I talk to don't understand what it requires to make something original, let alone produce a handmade product in the USA. Asheville has a strong community, buy local campaign, but I still find lots of resistance to the price difference required to make a product in the US.

TGS: What makes bags you create far trade?

JA: They are fair trade because they are made in the US. We worked hard to find a worker-owned sewing co-op where the wages are fair and the screen-printing is done here in Asheville too by a local printing studio. Although the price has to be higher, it is wonderful knowing that we are helping other artists/ crafters keep their studios open.



TGS: Was it challenge to obtain the Vegan Leather and Suede?

JA: There is a fantastic fabric dealer in Gastonia, NC that has all sorts of vegan options. There are lots of non-leather fabrics and it is always amazing to me that it is not used more often.

TGS: Why is it important to create vegan bags?

JA: It is important to be respectful of all living things and to avoid using other creatures' skin as adornment.

The re-usable shopping bag is such a great concept. The main problem I found is with the regular bags is that they are so boring that they are easy to forget. One of the main benefits of the Freak-O-Bags is the personality of the bag. It is a little stuffed animal friend to help remind you to pack it along.

TGS: How would you say your bags reflect your personality?

JA: The bags are kind of quirky and nerdy and each one has a lot of determined attention and detail. They have silly expressions and with the hand-made nature they each have a little different stance. I find that in my art and in my social life I am becoming more and more like my characters.



TGS: How has your sense of style evolved over the years whether it is with the bags you create or your artwork?

JA: I have the privilege to work with lots of stylish, creative people. Coming from rural NY and then to NYC, I had kind of a culture shock and worked more towards blending in. When I came to Asheville to visit, I was thrilled to see some adventurous style and the community here is so supportive of the unusual, it is so much more freeing! Having my FOB on my bag at all times has brought on some fun interactions. They are really cute and that gives me more freedom to integrate fun colors and more cartoon-like style.

TGS: What's in store for the future?

JA: Always a million projects going on in my head! For the Freak-O-Bags, I hope to have a new character made and keep up production. I think it would be fantastic to make the inner bag out of used parachutes and to get them out there so that everybody can enjoy them.

Courtesy Image: Julie Armbruster

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