

Shopgifting

A conceptual artist's retail strategy: buy clothes, return art.

Zoë Sheehan Saldaña routinely returns merchandise to stores. But that doesn't mean she collects a refund.

Ms. Sheehan Saldaña, a West Village artist and Baruch College art professor, is a shop-dropper. Shop-dropping, also known as "reverse shoplifting," involves the addition of hand-made imitations of generic merchandise to a store's stock. It is a nascent artistic phenomenon with a nationwide network of devotees.

"The first few times I did a drop, I was pretty nervous, and afraid of getting caught," Ms. Sheehan Saldaña said. "But now it's like a breeze. My fear was irrational, I realized, because store security is focused on stopping people taking stuff out."

An exhibition of her work, at Real Art Ways in Hartford through Oct. 16, (realartways.com) displays two complete outfits (shirt, pants and an accessory) bought from a Wal-Mart in Hartford over the summer, alongside life-size photographs of the almost identical reproductions of each piece she made by hand. After carefully attaching the original labels and price tags to the new pieces, she "returned" them to the correct racks.

"I'm interested in projects where art and everyday life intersect," Ms. Sheehan Saldaña, 32, explains, "in particular moments and experiences where you can't really tell one from the other." After finishing a project, she said, she generally does not keep track of the reproduced merchandise. "But I did look one time, you know," she said, "when I went back to a store to drop something else off, and the other items were all gone."

And what does Wal-Mart think about all this? The manager of the Hartford store where Ms. Sheehan Saldaña bought the items said he was not authorized to make public comment, referring inquiries to corporate headquarters in Little Rock, Ark. Jacquie Young, Wal-Mart's spokeswoman for the arts, was unavailable for comment.

Safety concerns have been raised about shop-dropping food or toys, but Ms. Sheehan Saldaña said she did not see anything illegal about what she was doing. "To my knowledge I don't think there are any regulatory or consumer protection issues being violated here because I only reproduce clothing," she said. "There is no danger to the consumer involved."

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