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## One city's garbage is one woman's treasure

### It's official, Camille Hempel owns the ugliest couch in America and her roommate says it has 'the glow of victory'

By Jim O'Grady

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Camille Hempel photographs, paints portraits of, and writes poems to the couches she sees and sometimes snatches from trash piles on the curbs of New York.



Camille Hempel won the award for the ugliest couch in America with the monstrosity pictured above.

PHOTO: NY TIMES

Old couches. Stained couches. Hideous faux-Baroque, bowlegged, foam-sprung couches that are the grandmothers-in-the-attic of the household furnishings world.

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It is an obsession that has earned her begrudging tolerance from her family in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, and threats of summary furniture disposal from her roommates in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, a neighborhood with a normally high regard for the urgent pursuit of unusual art and other dubious behaviors.

"I got really jealous when my cousin married a guy with the last name of Couch," Hempel said last week, explaining how her passion has invaded all parts of her life. "Then I thought, 'Maybe I'll marry a Davenport. It'll be more dignified.'"

Hers has been a lonely infatuation. Until now.

On Tuesday, as millions of viewers watched on live television, Hempel won a nationwide search for the ugliest couch in America.

It started in early August, when she photographed the couch that sits in the communal kitchen of the 1899 house she shares with three roommates in Brooklyn. The couch has many traits that Hempel, a 35-year-old jewelry maker, holds dear in a reclaimed sofa: Its upholstery is pink, its cushions are a lumpy mismatched brown and its front right side is propped up on a cinder block.

She entered the photo in the ninth annual Ugly Couch Contest, a marketing gimmick organized by the Sure Fit slipcover company. Maris F. Thalberg, an executive with the company, said the contest received more than 1,000 entries this year and registered 50,000 on-line votes, far more than in past years.

"We used to ask people to include themselves in the picture of the sofa," she added. "But some people sent pictures of themselves

naked."

Hempel's couch, demurely posed, was a hit. It attracted enough votes to be named one of three finalists to compete for a small metal trophy and a US\$5,000 prize. The other two finalists were a red velvet number from Virginia and a plaid monstrosity from Iowa.

Voting for a winner fell to the studio audience on Tuesday at the *Live With Regis and Kelly* show. Hempel arrived at the studio on the Upper West Side in black leather pants, a pink V-neck cardigan and blue flip-flops. The couch came, too, with its cinder block.

"I'm totally in it for the glory," she said in a hallway outside the green room.

She wistfully recalled the day 15 years ago when she put an old couch on the curb because it had been torn to shreds by her boyfriend's cat. "Not an hour later, it ended up on a porch across the street," she said. "I got kind of jealous. Every time I went out the door, it was facing me." So she took a photo of it, the first in a series of hundreds of portraits she has made of discarded couches.

She brightened at the memory of the night four years ago when a friend called with a sofa sighting in Queens. It turned out to be the pink and brown couch, which she carried back to Williamsburg in the cab of her red El Camino.

On Friday, flush from their triumph, Hempel and the pink couch were back in the kitchen, surrounded again by her paintings and oddly juxtaposed secondhand things, like an ancient fan she has mounted on a hat stand and a teapot caramelized with so much grime it

looked as if it had traveled west with the Okies.

She paused to gaze affectionately on the ugliest couch in America. "I'm starting to refer to her as she," she said. "Before it was sexless. But now she's been out in the world and done stuff."

Sean Kennerly, a housemate who once idly plotted to get rid of the couch when Hempel was on vacation, said that he, too, had come to see it with new eyes.

"I love it now," he said. "It adds to the luster of the neighborhood. It's got this glow of greatness about it, the glow of victory."  
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