

VISITOR GUIDE

Excerpts from select papers written by
UO graduate and undergraduate students
responding to works in the exhibition

Art History 410/510: Land and Environmental Art | Fall 2018

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PLASTIC ENTANGLEMENTS: ECOLOGY, AESTHETICS, MATERIALS

September 22 – December 30, 2018

JORDAN SCHNITZER **MUSEUM OF ART**

THE ARCHIVE



Cut Lines, 2012 | Brian Jungen

"I am simply a Mvskoke person weighing in on my relationship to the work that an Indigenous artist has made...*Cut Lines* is a tan, plastic jerry can decorated with tiny holes that form an X-pattern...At first, I was disappointed with its simplicity...But as I stood there watching people's disinterest, I realized that there is an ironic metaphor here. Over the years I have noticed that non-Native people know very little about Native people. I don't believe this is because Native people are uninviting or that people haven't tried to appropriate elements of Native cultures, but rather I think it is because non-Native people rarely have reasons to take interest in Native people. We seem to be invisible to the public until Thanksgiving or a dispute over land rights. And that's when I realized that this notion is exactly what this piece is about. Brian Jungen's jerry can represents the complex relationship between the Native and the non-native. Embedded in the plastic is war, oil, power, and colonization. Embedded in the pattern work is the existence of Indigenous people. The colonizer is obsessed with power, and there is no greater display of power than to displace and destroy anything that challenges its existence. There may be nothing more invasive and detrimental to life on this earth than petroleum and petroleum products. What this piece proposes is simple: look at what we created, look at where we are. I mean this both metaphorically and literally. Native people rarely have the opportunity to pose such questions to a larger audience, and when we do get the opportunity, it can be difficult to speak both a Western visual language and a language that your own people can understand. So maybe the piece itself is simple, but the meaning is multilayered. And at the very least the piece says: we are still here."

—Talon Claybrook, MFA student



Camel Gastrolith, 2016 | Chris Jordan

"One piece I was particularly struck by was Chris Jordan's *Camel Gastrolith*...Jordan is responsible for a considerable amount of awareness around our individual plastic use. His influence came about when his images of decaying birds—with the contents of their stomachs visible, containing predominantly plastic—spread across the art world, and more notably, social media...The 'stomach stone' [in this piece], as in Jordan's documentary-based work on birds, is composed of the same materials. The fate of the camel is presumably similar to that of the birds. Though, it is much more ambiguous as the animal itself is not depicted...[T]his specific presentation of the camel's contents allows for more interpretive opportunities. It can be something beyond the contents of the stomach. This ambiguity is encouraged by the video's simplicity and the rotation of the object in a haunting fashion. The sound adds another layer, as it is fairly abstract, not giving any indication of time or place, and the notes (at least in Western culture) invoke contemplation. These three elements, the 'stone,' the video depicting the 'stone,' and the audio alongside the video, create an interpretive and dynamic environment for viewers to think about the issue of plastic in ways beyond face value... *Camel Gastrolith* is not bound for viral attention like Jordan's other works, which arguably have had a more direct impact on the issues at hand."

—Ian Sherlock Molloy, MFA student

THE ENTANGLED PRESENT



Untitled (Blank Conical Chandelier), 2015/17 | Willie Cole

"I spent a significant amount of time experiencing the many available angles of this three-dimensional piece suspended from the ceiling of a gallery...Starting from a distance, my main impression of this work is the miraculous adaptability of plastic. Each bottle glints and interacts with light just as alluringly as any glass or more precious piece of a chandelier would...Nothing's perfect though, and...the disobedience of matter and the existence of entropy means the end result might not take the perfect form people would expect....Upon getting closer, the next level of detail becomes apparent. Within the irregularity of the layers of bottles, each individual bottle is uniquely crushed, twisted and gnarled...In the application of warped and broken bottles, the notion of plastic being immortal on a human timescale is visible...Sitting directly under the work, in the spot of direct light emitted from the center, produced a different, and more intense, experience. Once your eyes adjust to the brightness of the bulb, the glare is unpleasant, and feels much like an interrogation scene out of a movie, except now there isn't a detective to hound you, only your own environmental morals as you stare into the light, with this huge mass of discarded plastic looming directly overhead. There's an unease at the precariousness of staring up with that much plastic defying gravity directly overhead. The full reality of how irregular the layers of bottles are is only revealed by sitting underneath...In all, I experienced it as a sloppy plastic dartboard of humanity's creation, with my face being illuminated right in the bullseye."

—Alex Breuer, undergraduate student



Akpalakpa II (Weave), 2012 | Ifeoma U. Anyaeji

"Ifeoma Anyaeji is able to see plastic bags for their material composition rather than their functional use in order to give them a new purpose in textile and weave designs...The woven form makes the plastic take on a more natural material aesthetic. The viewer gets a sense of the airiness, featheriness and wooliness of the plastic material. Anyaeji chose to create a topography that gives the piece movement, as if to emulate a plastic bag in the wind. Plastic bags are crinkly, transparent, noisy, constantly moving, thin and weak. When Anyaeji applies the weave technique to the bags they take on different characteristics: flexible, soft, solid and strong. The shadow underneath the piece speaks to the amount of plastic material used for the piece, and figuratively, on a global basis. The shadow makes the piece look much heavier than it is. The weight of the material is held up by a branch that looks too small to bear the weight. Over time, the branch will decay but the plastic will not. The patterns of color and the variety of tightness in the weaves contribute to the narrative of basket weaving. Baskets are neither uniform nor are they clones of one other like plastic bags. Baskets show the hand of the maker. This art piece seems to resemble a basket turned upside down with the opening at the bottom. This, to me, signifies an emptiness relating to our use of non-renewable resources to produce non-biodegradable materials."

—Tori Murphy, graduate student in Landscape Architecture

SPECULATIVE FUTURES



Hyper Ellipsoid (Iridescent Gold), 2017 | Gisela Colón

"Stretching over three feet across the center of the gallery's main wall, Gisela Colón's *Hyper Ellipsoid (Iridescent Gold)* serves as an important anchor piece that imbues the exhibition with a final air of hope, wonder, and fantasy...For me, I envisioned a world where perhaps a group of feminist-biologists had invented our salvation in a lab...Colón's playfully elegant illusion suggests the mystery and power of natural forces while simultaneously illustrating the human capacity to harness and manipulate that power. Additionally, the work's clean lines, smooth surfaces, and metallic colors echo a modernist embrace of technology, industry, and the capacity to control one's environment. And yet, there is also something intensely feminine about the work that tempers its relationship to formal modernism and the conquest for control over nature. Perhaps it is the overt reproductive symbolism of the piece, or the way it seems to effortlessly soften the hard plastic into a fleshy substance. A reading of the work through this lens is strengthened by Colón's identity as a woman associated with the California Light and Space movement. This movement made up of scientist-mathematicians-made-artists, prevalent in the 1960s and 70s, was primarily a tight-knit boys club with few women among its ranks. Yet, Colón's work stands as a reminder that creative technology need not abandon the symbolic, communicative, even emotive potential of light in order to highlight its substantive qualities. Her engagement with plastic embraces mythical narratives while simultaneously serving as a device for mediating elemental forces through manmade technology...Generally, Colón's work offers a comforting reprieve from the apocalyptic potential that one must confront in an investigation of plastic...[I]ts bright, warm, and fantastical presence allows us to imagine that a plastic future can be a place of beauty and transcendence."

—Casey Curry, graduate student in Art History



Plastiglomerate Samples, 2013 | Kelly Jazvac

"In 2012, geologist Patricia Corcoran and sculptor Kelly Jazvac travelled to Kamilo Beach, following a tip from oceanographer Charles Moore that the beach was covered in a plastic-rock conglomerate. Moore suspected nearby volcanoes were to blame. In fact, the plastic and beach detritus had been combined into a single substance by bonfires. Human action on the beach had created what Corcoran and Jazvac named "plastiglomerate," a sand-and-plastic conglomerate... The plastiglomerate piece in the *Plastic Entanglements* exhibit is striking because it all seems so permanent now, this substance which was created to be treated as temporary. Unlike many of the other pieces in the exhibit, which were imaginings and interpretations of a plastic world, made from plastic, the plastiglomerate piece is...simply a fact...I was inspired to reflect, then, on the properties of plastic: moldable to any shape and size, flexible, fleeting, artificial, cheap, and disposable; and the properties of rock: rigid, permanent, old, steadfast, notwithstanding. I kept coming back to this idea of time. Just as plastic is at once temporary (in its purpose) and permanent (in its embeddedness in our culture and the environment), so are humans. In the grand geologic timescale, we are but a mere blip, but our culture remains, in the bones and tools of our ancestors and the plants and animals we have domesticated to our will. Our footprint on the map of time will extend far past our current moment, no matter what we do. The earth keeps a record. The general fear seems to be, among the present consequences, what will become of us, and the detritus of our lives, once we are gone? Is the future Anthropocene one riddled with our trash--the small and pointless items that surrounded our culture without the context of the culture itself to give meaning? In this sense, the collection of this object as an artwork is poignant. In itself it holds the anxiety of impermanence, the indifference of time, and the beauty of the immutable."

—Becca Perrin, undergraduate student



Plastiglomerate Samples, 2013 | Kelly Jazvac

"Artist Kelly Jazvac and her 2013 readymade piece *Plastiglomerate Samples* is perhaps the most critical piece in the exhibition. The type of stone objects that she selects and displays here, although seemingly mundane, have made a notable appearance within Anthropocene discussions, both within the art world and within other disciplines. The artist's proclamation that her piece is a "readymade" immediately references the Dada movement, a time when ideologies surrounding art were rewritten... When Marcel Duchamp coined the term "readymade" to describe his work, it was in direct opposition to the ideologies of art as beautiful and an intentional direct creation from an artist. Duchamp changed the perspective of audiences and artists. In the same way, Jazvac is changing the narrative of plastic. Artists like Aurora Robson and Christine and Margaret Wertheim, among others in the exhibition, utilize plastic in dynamic and unconventional ways that evoke plastic's relationship to waste and ocean life. However, they've limited themselves in the plastic conversation. Aesthetically, their works can be viewed as transcultural and can create connection for almost any audience, but their concepts directly relate to niche environmental issues... Plastiglomerates change the plastic narrative in a way that no longer offers a hypothetical or imagined construct, as in Robson's or the Wertheims' works, but rather showcases tangible objects that are evidence of human effect. Jazvac's *Plastiglomerate Samples* is arguably the most critical piece in the *Plastic Entanglements* exhibition because the objects, as "readymades", embody all audiences as collaborators as they offer concrete evidence to the irreversibility of the Anthropocene."

—Cassidy Schoenfelder, graduate student in Art History



Between the Waves: Landfill Dance, 2012 | Tejal Shah

"The video is set on a bright, cloudless day in a landfill outside of Delhi...It cuts between shots of one to six people...in white plastic shifts and face-obscuring headdresses performing dance-like movements at various locations on the surface of the landfill. The qualities of their outfits, combined with the setting, evoke post-apocalyptic or extra-planetary science fiction...Are they performing a ritual or doing a routine task? Do they live there or are they coming from somewhere else--not a landfill (assuming everywhere in this world is not a landfill)?...In general, this piece gives value to, and even normalizes, un-valued things like scavengers and landfills. In this future reality, the meaning of landfills has shifted so that they are sites of reverence, or at least non-menial human activity. This is a place where (if things keep going how they are going) the future has already arrived, although not in the way we usually think of it. Understanding that poor countries are being inundated with the rich world's garbage, literally and metaphorically, the hopeful attitude of this piece seems to be a slightly defiant response. Feminine and non-gender-specific figures as well as people of color are the ones who are present in this vision of the future, creating ritual, art, and culture."

—Gaby Burkard, undergraduate student



Material Speculation: ISIS, 2017 | Morehshin Allahyari

"All of these figures are replicas of a monumental sculpture depicting a historical Persian king by the name of 'Uthal.' Unfortunately, King Uthal's monument and several other important works from the same site were destroyed by ISIS in 2015. Fortunately, however, Morehshin Allahyari worked with a group known as Made by Design Lab, and her aim was to recreate the destroyed monuments through the use of 3D scanning and 3D printing techniques. Allahyari's *Material Speculation ISIS* is a perfect demonstration of how technology can aid in the preservation and recreation of history, even if the said history has been razed. Her work also demonstrates how plastic can be used responsibly. Most of the *King Uthal* figures were made with Polylactic Acid, which is a biodegradable polymer, unlike any other plastic that has been used to date. Her use of 'responsible plastics' gives the sense that we, as a society, can continue to use plastics in ways that are not purely detrimental, such as those dominating 'The Archive' and 'The Entangled Present' sections of the exhibition... Allahyari is simultaneously an artist, historian, and activist and her work indicates that technology and plastic can be both educational and environmentally conscious. The more than half a century of plastic use, in all respects, has been damaging, true. Allahyari speculates that the future of plastic is promising. *King Uthal* stands again thanks to Allahyari and, through plastic, history survives."

—Sean Robertson, undergraduate student