

The Legend of Frugality

by Lloyd E. Herman

New England thrift is legendary. Pieced quilts and rugs hooked from fabric scraps are the most familiar historical examples of giving second chances to worn-out clothes. Today, the legend of frugality is given new meaning by contemporary craft artists who see creative potential in trash. Though the artists whose work is shown here are from Eastern states as far south as Florida, most live in New England.

Having researched art from recycled materials for a 1998 traveling exhibition and book, *Trashformations: Recycled Materials in Contemporary American Art and Design*, I was pleased to be invited by my old friend, Gretchen Keyworth, Director of Fuller Craft Museum, to select fresh work for a sequel with a smaller geographical focus. It is especially poignant-and appropriate-that funds from the Jennifer L. Atkinson Memorial Fund support this new exhibition because Jennifer, as guest curator for a recycled art exhibition at Clark Gallery, was especially helpful to my finding regional artists for the original *Trashformations*.

Is there a regional style in art objects made from discards? No, not really. Sources of inspiration, and the availability of materials for recycling into art, are pretty much the same throughout the United States. Most urban communities recycle paper, glass, metal and some plastics with the aim to reduce the ever-growing cost of trash collection and disposal, and to encourage the return of once-used resources back into the manufacturing stream.

Why do artists choose the cast-offs of others with which to make art? Some are attracted to the colorful patterning of grocery store packaging, or magazine photos, or playing cards. Others like the texture of old shingles or chromed car trim. And some will see in the form of pencils, bedpans or clock hands new possibilities for them in art. Sometimes a shape will remind them of something else, but almost all makers like found objects for their art because such discards are usually free.

More than 350 artists sent images of their art objects for my consideration. And, from approximately 1400 slides, I selected objects created by 106 artists. Works on view in this exhibition were chosen because they were fresh,

imaginative, ironic, witty, and/or because they exemplify the tradition of making art from trash.

There are long traditions in America, and elsewhere, of castoffs in both mainstream sculpture and in folk art. We need think only of the uses that Louise Nevelson made of ten pins, wood shoe forms, and other familiar wood shapes in her wall assemblages. Or the witty toys made from coffee can tins for which Alexander Calder was revered. The creative re-use that Robert Rauschenberg, John Chamberlain, and Mark DiSuvero brought to refuse also come to mind.

Though the Watts Towers in Los Angeles are well known as a prime example of recycling by a self-taught artist, nearer Boston is the Paper House in Pigeon Cove, built by Elis F. Stenman with the help of his family. Beginning in 1921, they prepared copies of Boston newspapers for the construction of this unusual home. When the 22-year project was finished, the walls consisted of two hundred and fifteen layers of newspapers. The tourist attraction is furnished with a clock, piano, desk, table, and chairs also made from rolled newspapers. Almost all states have such roadside attractions, whether they are houses made of bottles, hubcap "ranches," or menageries of gigantic animals forged of cast off farm tools. All are examples of creative use of others' trash.

Both functional things and objects for contemplation and visual enjoyment are part of this exhibition. Their makers may hold advanced university degrees in art, or they may be entirely self taught. Emphasis in this exhibition is on objects with a certain refinement-of form, workmanship and/or idea-rather than on funky assemblages that might more correctly be considered folk art. You will notice that a number of objects do not use only discards for their shape, pattern or malleability. Some use brand new "finds" but with an aesthetic approach akin to those who rely exclusively on found materials. A noticeable number of makers have incorporated particular found objects because of the associations we already have with them.

Lace-trimmed handkerchiefs may remind us of our grandmothers, setting us up for wistful references to a suggested past. Combinations of several such nostalgic elements suggest small shrines, tribal cultures, or funerary remembrances. In this exhibition, Joanne Francis' choices for her assemblage, "Magpie Landscape," remind me immediately of Joseph Cornell's use of birds, maps, and place references in his boxed assemblages half a century ago. She has created both a sense of melancholy and nostalgia through pairing picture postcards and the seemingly-wistful bird gazing at them as its only scenery.

Critic Dore Ashton called Cornell's boxes and collages "palaces of dreams and associations." Francis follows admirably in his footsteps.

Another group of objects recalls the Dada movement born nearly a century ago. Perhaps most famous in a group of artists both in America and Europe was Marcel Duchamp, who combined both new and used objects to create new, enigmatic objects. He also sometimes exhibited a new industrial object unchanged, as sculpture. In this exhibition, familiar objects are combined with others whose meaning may also have associations for us, and the results may puzzle us, make us smile, or simply ponder a new meaning. Look at Jehanne-Marie Gavrini's "Tiara" and Jill Dalton's "Panty Runner" as examples of Duchampian ambiguity.

Here we can also find jewelry, clothing (though some is of questionable comfort), furniture, lighting and even a couple of schools of fish!

Boris Bally is well-known throughout the United States for his creative re-use of reflective traffic signs, making from them bowls, furniture, and jewelry. But here he has made a silvery necklace from the trigger housings of dozens of guns, to be worn around the neck like "trophies" of firearms no longer able to kill. Likewise, Kathy Buszkiewicz has specialized in making jewelry from shredded U.S. currency, poking fun at the preciousness of jewelry as wearable wealth. J. Fred Woell has made serious fun for years of America's fascination with icons. For decades, he has incorporated political campaign buttons, images of Colonel Sanders, automobiles, photographs, and other found objects in jewelry that never fails to provoke thought (if not out-loud laughter). And, if you want "funny," Florida jeweler Holly Ann Mitchell uses comic strips instead of gemstones for color and wit in her bracelets, pins and necklaces.

Ingrid Goldbloom Bloch's "Trashy Lingerie" -skimpy undergarments woven of soft drink can strips-would be pretty uncomfortable to wear. While revealing and sexually provocative, this underwear would also function as an impenetrable chastity belt. The mixed message seems to say "desire me, but don't touch me!" Perhaps these undergarments would be worn under Katherine Cobey's "Danger Dress" made of plastic warning tapes used by firemen and police. Another form of "protection" shown here is Diane Savona's "Domestic Armor," a garment made of oven mitts and pot holders.

Alyce Santoro has woven fabric from used music cassette tapes, and has fashioned from it garments that can not only be worn, but played-and have been, by Phish percussionist Jon Fishman, using recordings of his own music and that which has inspired him.

How about clothing a tree? Sarah Hollis Perry has knitted sweaters from recycled plastic bags to give trees a dash of style (if not warmth) with water-repellent color. Hers is only one of several examples of artists using discards for large-scale installation works of art. Besides the "schools" of fish devised from trash metals by Charles Gibbs, and of colorful plastic detergent bottles by David Edgar, gigantic moths made by Michelle Stitzlein also seem to have invaded Fuller Craft Museum during this exhibition -- not to mention the rampant, vining wild flowers made from colorful plastic discards by Elizabeth Wintress-Moore.

While these installation works are fresh and original, precedent does exist for recycled materials in large, environment-scale constructions. Spanish architect Antonio Gaudi is famous for his colorful benches and sculptures encrusted with broken ceramic tiles in Barcelona, and in Los Angeles, the complex of nine tower sculptures made over thirty-three years by Italian immigrant Simon Rodia known as the Watts Towers also brings a second use to broken tiles and dishes. The same technique was used in much more portable sculptures by Bette Ann Libby in her "Hip Chick" and "Planet Rooster."

Another large-scale example of recycling in this exhibition, the structures of waste (paper?) tubing devised by John Osorio-Buck as an Artist in Residence at Smith College, recalls in a totally contemporary way, the rolled newspaper tubes of the Paper House in Pigeon Cove cited earlier.

Furniture in this exhibition, however, seems to be made of everything but paper like the furniture in the Paper House. Kathy Neustadt has made a chair from crutches, Khader Humied from tire rubber and Rick Frankosky from skis. Daniel Mack, long respected for the "memory chairs" he makes from recycled objects, and the rustic furniture about which he has written books, is here with an elegant assemblage chair incorporating tools.

Mack is not the only maker who has become soundly identified with the creative re-use of discards represented in this exhibition. Stephen Whittlesey, John Marcoux and Mitch Ryerson all are nationally respected for their unique furniture incorporating castoffs. And theirs aren't the only familiar names in this recycling universe: Leo Sewell-one of the Philadelphia Dumpster Divers, along with fellow exhibitor Neil Benson-here contributes one of his life-size human figures made of junk. Donna Rhae Marder -- always inventive with trash -- demonstrates yet another take on recycling with her "English/Irish Teapot" made of teabag wrappers. Even Josh Simpson, one of New England's

most distinguished artists in glass, surprises us to discover that he uses reclaimed glass in his elegant "Blue New Mexico Mega Vase."

Familiar names or not, all of the artists represented here have successfully mined the detritus of our "throw away" society and given new life to once used resources. And, if you can't tell by looking at their work just what has been recycled, the labels describing what each object is made from might just surprise you!

Americans comprise only 5% of the earth's population, but we produce 50% of its solid waste. Artists alone certainly can't make much of a dent in our landfills, or keep much refuse from the trash stream. Peter Danko's "Cricket" chair is designed for production in multiples, and it is made from tire rubber and sheet stock formed from recycled plastics. It is but one example here of replicable creativity that truly can help reduce society's detritus.

All of the artists represented in this exhibition remind us that we each have an important mission on planet earth. Buy less, and use it up. Buy products that are recyclable or that are already made of recycled materials. Reuse, repair, and recycle to thrift stores. The future depends on every one of us.

About the author

Lloyd Herman was the founding Director of America's national craft museum, the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC, from 1971 until 1986, and continues to write about American crafts, and organize exhibitions that travel internationally. He lives in Seattle, Washington.

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