

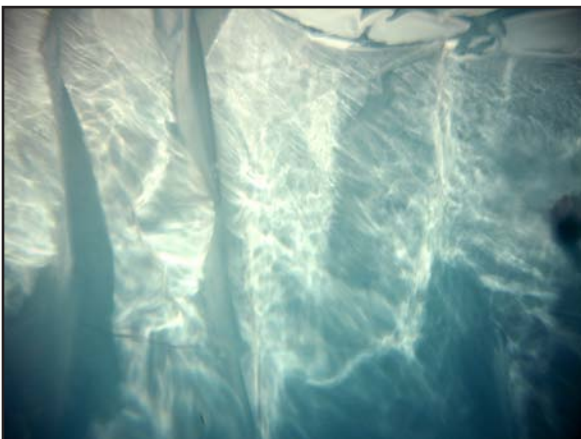


Everything Must Go Somewhere

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Senior IP Thesis

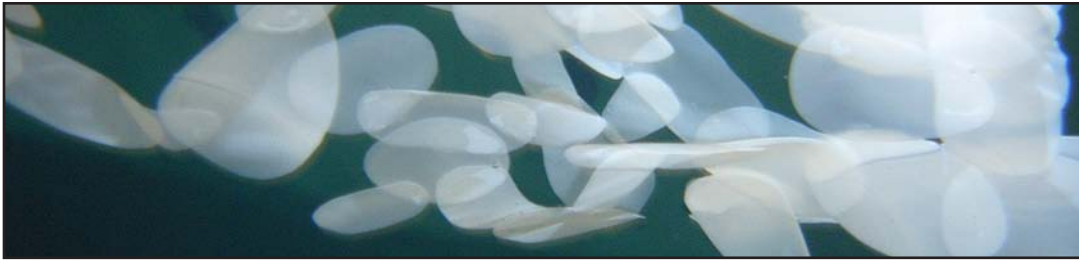
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In the middle of the Pacific Ocean, thousands of miles away from any continent, millions of plastic particles are floating in the water. This plastic has been described as snowy confetti against the deep blue waves. Vast fields of synthetic materials float at the surface, swirl within the water column, and eventually sink. In some places, a landscape of trash exists on the sea floor more than 2,000 meters down. There appears to be no place on earth where evidence of human consumption and disposal cannot be found.

The plastic amassing in the Pacific Ocean has been referred to as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and estimates are staggering, perhaps encompassing an area twice the size of Texas. This estimate is far from static as the accumulation increases each year and researchers are finding similar masses of refuse in the Atlantic and Indian oceans as well. Fifty years ago, most flotsam was biodegradable; now it is 60 – 80% plastic. The United Nations Environment Program has estimated that there are 46,000 pieces of floating plastic in every square mile of ocean. As the plastic breaks down into smaller particles it is ingested by marine organisms and enters our food chain. Introducing this material to a finely tuned ecosystem is bound to have consequences and scientists are working to figure out the complex ramifications of this problem. The fact that so little is known about the influence of plastics on marine ecosystems is frightening. As humans, we are altering our environment, perhaps permanently. The plastic refuse we create becomes a toxic species of synthetic organism, which is finding its way back to us. My work grew out of an attempt to imagine this suspended seascape.

Marine plastic pollution has become the major inspiration for my thesis, *Everything Must Go Somewhere*. I would like to show my audience the true tragedy occurring in our world's oceans, but I would also like to avoid designing an overly simplified campaign to end the problem. As a result, I have created a series of underwater plastic installations, which I photograph. The installations are made out of reused plastic materials, as plastic is the main component in our oceans' garbage patches. In the final exhibition, I reinstalled the plastic sculptures in the gallery along with a projection of my underwater images.



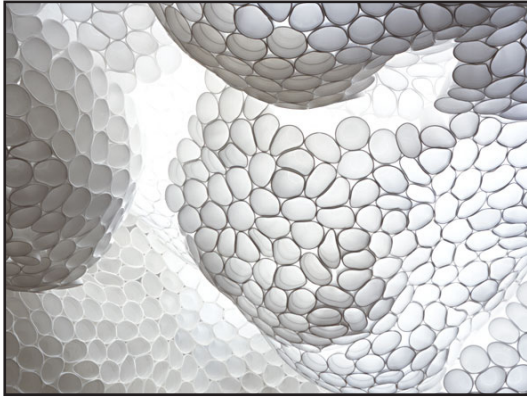
Working on *Everything Must Go Somewhere* has led me to create both sculptural and photographic pieces. As a result, my process has developed many layers. I collect materials, sort them, manipulate them, put them underwater, photograph them, edit the photographs, and finally present the photographs and sculptural forms in a gallery space. This process has evolved over the course of this year, yet there is still a lot of room for me to continue to expand and explore.

If I expect to talk about a wasteful use of resources I need to choose my materials accordingly. Using plastic that was going to be sent to a recycle center or landfill is more relevant to the work, and prevents me from becoming a hypocrite. I don't believe that I can change anyone's behavior if I am not analyzing my own resource use. This is why reusing plastic products is so important. One of the first steps in my process is gathering materials. I periodically visit a coffee shop across the street from the studios and collect all of the milk jugs they have in their recycle bin. I do not have to collect them every day in order to have more than enough material to work with. This part of the process alone has given me a better understanding of just how many plastic containers our society uses and discards.

Once I have clean milk jugs in hand, I can begin the process of cutting them into pieces and reconstructing them. I have found that I am drawn to shapes and forms with rounded edges. As I work with the material I find myself cutting the plastic into cellular shapes. While making the pieces, I often feel as if the organic shapes are taking on a life of their own. My process involves a time consuming accumulation of small pieces of material and I have begun to see that my process mimics other natural processes of growth. The first time I actually put the forms in water, the movement of the pieces reinforced the idea that I was making life-like sculptures. They would alternately float and sink, moving with the flow of the water.

Photographing subjects in this new environment provides a whole new set of challenges and ways to experiment. Within the photographic process there are so many variables to explore, including lighting, manual camera settings, and image composition. I have found that I respond to many images in which the motion of the plastic becomes evident. The motion blur allows for a change in the tone of the images and often creates abstract forms, making ordinary objects less recognizable. Materials behave differently in water. They are never static. They are constantly moving and light continuously changes and dances around them. As I photograph





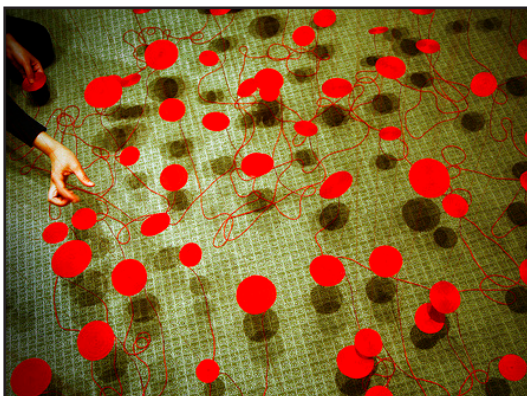
Tara Donovan



Tara Donovan



Claudia Borgna



Beili Liu

my pieces in this new environment they move like a new species of synthetic organism.

The concept of plastic as a synthetic organism also appears in scientific research about the North Pacific Gyre. Charles Moore, the founder of the Algalita Marine Research Foundation studying plastic pollution, describes the issue in a similar way. “Ironically, the debris is re-entering the oceans whence it came; the ancient plankton that once floated on earth’s primordial sea gave rise to the petroleum now being transformed into plastic polymers. That exhumed life, our ‘civilized plankton’, is, in effect competing with its natural counterparts, as well as with those life forms that directly or indirectly feed on them.” Essentially, our plastic refuse is a type of “civilized plankton”, a synthetic element that now interacts with the environment in new and potentially destructive ways.

The concepts and ideas regarding *Everything Must Go Somewhere* have clearly been influenced by scientific research, but my aesthetic decisions are also continually influenced by a number of visual artists. Claudia Borgna, Tara Donovan, and Beili Liu are all installation artists from whose work I draw aesthetic inspiration. Each of these artists have worked with disposable materials such as plastic bags, straws, Styrofoam cups, and string in order to create pieces that transcend the mundane nature of the original objects. Their installations achieve a tremendous sense of atmosphere. I am striving to achieve the same sense of atmosphere I feel from their work, and I am also interested in exploring the arrangement of a multitude of simple objects. An untitled work by Tara Donovan made from Styrofoam cups mimics cellular structures due to her use of repetition. I use milk jugs to create the majority of my work, but the simple shapes that I arrange have also been described by others as spores, cells, kelp, salps, and other organic forms.

Despite numerous aesthetic similarities between the pieces I make and the work of these artists, I find myself questioning the differences in the conceptual backgrounds of the works. The artists do not make a point of noting how they get their materials and where their materials come from. Reuse or recycling doesn’t seem to be a key conceptual component to the work. Claudia Borgna, however, has discussed the ways in which human consumption factors into the work she creates.



Edward Burtynsky



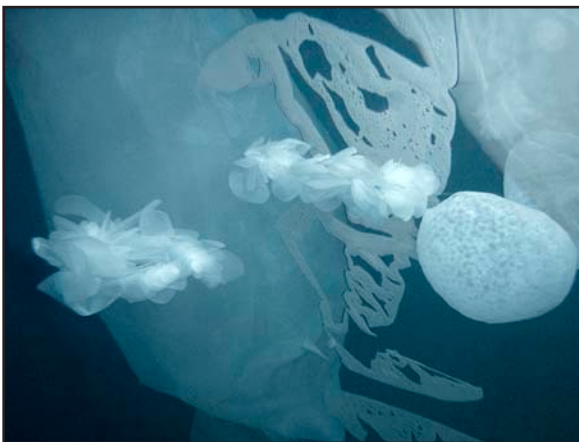
Edward Burtynsky

Borgna writes, “In the past years I have been looking at how rubbish and man made objects are very much transforming and creating new landscapes and becoming more and more integrated into nature... the plastic bags are a human creation and therefore natural appendix of man. One could argue that whatever is man made is natural and that ultimately nature is an unstable and unreliable human construction ruled by social and cultural needs.” Borgna is touching on the environmental debate about whether humans are a part of nature or separate from nature. If humans are a part of nature, then one can argue that everything humans do is natural. This argument can be used to defend pollution as a natural occurrence, voiding human responsibility. While Borgna appears to be aware of this environmental debate, she is using art to explore and question the relationship between man made objects and nature rather than advocating for a solution.

The boundary between advocacy and fine art is a debate that I have continuously encountered. Aesthetically, I am interested in making beautiful work. Ideally I would like to create moving and inspiring images. I am passionate about the ocean and I would like others to sense that as they view my work, but I do not want to create a campaign that would be too dull and simple to affect others. I want my work to hint at the larger environmental issues pervading the world’s water resources; the issues that require significant thought and new processes of behavior. Rather than focusing on a campaign that might be too simplistic or simply disregarded, I would like to walk the line between science and art and examine the boundaries between strictly visual work and strictly educational work. Ed Burtynsky, a photographer who documents landscapes altered by man explains:

“We are changing the nature of this planet. We are changing the air, we are changing the water, we are changing the land... There are times where I have thought about my work and putting it into a more politicized environment. If I said, ‘this is a terrible thing that we are doing to the planet’ then people will either agree or disagree. By not saying what you should see, that may allow them to look at something that they have never looked at and to see their world a little differently. I think many people today sit in that uncomfortable spot where we don’t necessarily want to give up what we have, but we realize that what we are doing is creating problems that run deep. It’s not a simple right or wrong. It needs a whole new way of thinking.”

In a similar way I would like my work to be about provoking thought rather than handing out simple solutions to a complex problem. My challenge, however, will be in deciding how much information to offer my audience and how much to hold back in order to allow for a more personal interpretation. This issue truly affects everyone because water affects everyone, but it is ultimately up to each individual as to whether or not they will change their lifestyle. I hope that my work will enter the dialog about marine pollution in a new way,



causing people to think about the issue from a different perspective. The more people contemplate environmental problems in a wide variety of ways, the more influences there will be prompting change.

The final installation consists of a loop of projected photographs set among the plastic sculptures. This was done with the hope that the space will create a new environment for the audience to step into. In this new environment they may be able to see the cycles of human resource use in a new light. The projected images and sculptures are initially just beautiful objects, which are difficult to identify. I hope that the viewer's perception will change as they become aware that the work is influenced by marine pollution and made entirely out of refuse. The artist statement that I have prepared for the work should also help inform the audience about its scientific basis. I believe that a sudden moment of understanding for the viewer can be a very powerful quality of the piece.

I believe that *Everything Must Go Somewhere* will serve as a starting point for future work. I am interested in exploring a number of new directions by working in new locations with higher quality equipment. I have come to realize that higher quality video work could become a natural extension of the work I have completed thus far. My work this year has only sparked my interest in using recyclable materials and discarded objects to create art. I continue to be inspired by the possibility of making powerful work out of objects that were once regarded as waste. Finally, I would like to continue to create work that is simultaneously inspiring and troubling to the viewer. The water contained on our planet is our most precious resource, and it is a common bond on which we all depend. I hope that I can express how beautiful water is. As humans, we need to be reminded of how critical water is to life, and how tragic its destruction would be.

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