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Integrative Project 2018- “Repent. Repeat.”

Written Thesis

Introduction:

Plastics are often seen as “disposable”, but this human mind set leads to the polluting of our oceans and the filling of our landfills. Even when recycling our plastic waste, it takes large amounts of energy to, for example, turn a used plastic bottle into a new one. “Repent. Repeat.” is an installation I will be creating, consisting of a video that is projected onto a quilt made from plastic shopping bags. The plastic bags will be transformed into yarn and then crocheted into different pieces to make up the patches of the quilt, while the video displays the laborious and repetitive process that it took to make the quilt. Together, these elements will illustrate the absurdity of trying to solve the plastic problem by solely recycling/reusing the plastics and not eliminating “disposable” plastic use, while also illustrating my personal relationship with plastic.

Context:

Plastic grocery bags were introduced to American super markets in 1979, with little popularity. Consumers preferred the paper bags they were used to, but with the price of plastic bags being cheaper than paper, supermarkets began to push plastic bag use. In 1985, 75% of supermarkets were offering plastic bags, but only about 25% of customers choose plastic. A short ten years later, 80% of costumers were choosing plastic.

The market grew and grew, and so did our trash piles. A single trip to the grocery store can result in taking one to over twenty plastic bags home with you. Once they get to your home,

they are emptied, and their purpose is fore filled. With an average use time of only twelve minutes, the bags then get stuffed under the kitchen sink until they start to over flow, with their next stop being the trash, or possibly the recycling bin.

Many cities here in the United States are one the track to get rid of plastic grocery bags. Austin, Texas for example, has made plastic grocery bags illegal, making costumers bring their own reusable bags to grocery stores. Other cities have also introduced an extra charge for plastic bags, but these efforts are not widely spread.

Plastic bags are made from high density polyethylene (HDPE), which is only about 29% recyclable. Compared to other plastic types, this is actually high, yet with the incredible amount of HDPE that is single use, it is not enough. That is one of the biggest problems with recycling. We blindly assume that one hundred percent of what we recycle with be reused, and that recycling is hoped to be a completely clean process, yet it takes a lot of energy, and results in waste just like any other process. Yes, it is a cleaner process than harvesting and using more virgin material, but when it comes to single use materials that are wasted and overused, it is not an appropriate solution.

People have seemed to deem plastic as an invaluable and harmless material, based on how we over use it and the lack of care used to dispose of it. Many artists and activists are working to add value and bring awareness to the incredible amounts and effects of the plastic we use.

Artist Josh Blackwell was born in New Orleans, currently lives in Los Angeles, and has been in shows all over the United States and Europe. He works with everyday disposable items and manipulates them with heat and fibers to create sculptures and installations. He has multiple

series of works, including Plastic Baskets, that are all questioning and challenging the idea of the “disposable plastic bag”.

Plastic Basket is a series of plastic bags that Blackwell fused and layered on top of one another. He also goes back into some of the pieces and embroiders. Some pieces are embroidered with larger spaces in between stitches, leaving the plastic visible to the viewer. Others are completely filled and covered with stitch and fibers. Just the time known to take to embroidered, eludes to the value that Blackwell is trying to give these seemingly disposable and worthless items. Blackwell is saying that nothing should be deemed disposable, as everything has some value or the potential for value.



Josh Blackwell, “Plastic Baskets”.

Blackwell’s plastic baskets are small intimate pieces that question the value of the items we deem as waste, but at the opposite end of the spectrum is El Anatsui’s work. El Anatsui is an artist born in Ghana, and now works in Nigeria. He creates large tapestry pieces made up of collected wastes, usually aluminum cans. Anatsui’s pieces are a beautiful transformation of waste, but what comes to the forefront is their size. He has created pieces that fill walls, take over rooms, and even covered buildings, using massive amounts of trash to create them. What is most interesting about his practice is that he designs these pieces, but does not dictate how they are install, leaving that up to the location and what best suits the



El Anatsui, “New World Map” 2009

space, making each piece site specific. Anatsui's work shows to the huge amounts of waste that we create and how it is going to fill and take over our environment and our lives.

There are also some companies that are collecting waste and transforming it into something new. Thread International is a company that works with communities in Haiti and Honduras to create sustainable fabrics from plastic water bottles. The communities in Haiti and Honduras collect littered plastic bottles and turn them in to be processed. The bottles are flaked, heated, and then spun into yarn. It is either kept in yarn form or woven into fabrics and then sold. Thread has provided an income for 3,845 people in Haiti and Honduras and has removed 38.9 million plastic bottles from the streets and canals of Haiti and Honduras. Working with these communities not only provides them with an income, but also cleans and educates the community on recycling.

Thread's method of recycling stops the recreation and use of single use items, and transforms these materials into fibers, that can be made into clothing, house hold items, and more that will be used multiple times. It's a more sustainable recycling method, because it stops the absurd cycle of recycling single use items, losing some of the material to create more single use products.

Plastic use is growing, and recycling efforts are not enough to keep our planet safe and clean. The process of recycling is labor intensive, and finicky, where the elimination of mass single use plastic is simple and clear.

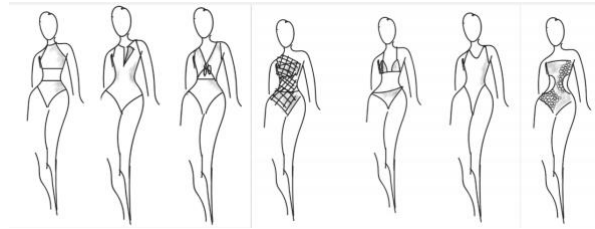
## Methodology:

Within the first week of having my studio set up, I pinned up three inspirational photos on my wall. One of a turtle and the other two of seals, all entangled and deformed by plastic and ocean pollution. These notably disturbing photographs were the fuel to my project. I wanted to bring more awareness to all the effects of our waste in our waterways.



"Peanut: The Story Behind a Poor Turtle Deformed by a Six-Pack Ring."

My project started in a different place from where it ended. The first few months I was totally enthralled by first ideation that I entitled "Plastic Beach". "Plastic Beach" was going to be a collection of swimwear made from different types of plastics that I had collected. The swimsuits were designed to imitate the distortion that the plastic causes on the sea creatures onto the human models.



Siciliano, Swimsuit design Sketches. 2017.

This project was a great way to mix my passion for sustainability and the environment with my passion for textiles. But as I continued to work on the project, I continued to add more and more elements to it, which ended up complicating the project so much that the message was lost.

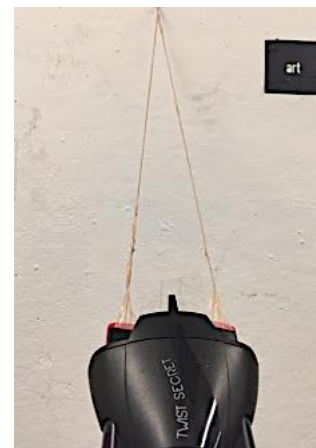
I stopped in my tracks, cleared my slate, and decided that I needed to cut back and focus on one aspect from the thousands I was trying to pack into my project. A good starting point for me was to narrow it down to talking about one plastic source, instead of trying to talk about all of the different types of plastic. I went back to the book and internet, to do more research on the

different types of plastics and the effects the different plastics have research on the environment. I did not only want to choose the plastic type that is the most dangerous or damaging to the environment based on its chemical makeup, but also put into consideration the plastics that are most commonly used, and also the product use time versus it's lifetime. I landed on plastic shopping bags.

Once I narrowed down what my plastic source would be, and I already had plenty collected from my previous iteration, I could start experimenting. I was not sure what the final form would be, but I knew I wanted to transform the plastic into a type of textile of sorts. I began experimenting, by flattening the plastic bags, placing them between two pieces of parchment paper, and running an iron on top of them. This fuses the plastic bags together, creating a softer and thicker material.

My next experiment was to create a thread out of the plastic bags. I first attempted to stretch the bags into a thread, which made the plastic too fragile and caused it to break. Next, I cut the plastic bags into strips, gathered three strips, and hand braided the strips together. Adding slight tension created a thin and strong thread. The biggest problem with this process was the time. Hand braiding took so much time, which did support the absurdity of the time it takes to recycle plastic bags, but I wanted to do more with the plastic after I created this “yarn”, so I did not want to spend too much time hand- braiding. This prompted me to be asked how I can make this process more automated.

I began to search the internet for different machines used for braiding and twisting. I found myself on an obscure website buying the BaByliss Twist Secret. This hair twister has two clasps that rotate, twisting the individual strands, and then the entire head spins



BaByliss Twist Secret.

to twist the strands together. Replace the pieces of hair with strands of plastic bags, and that is how I made my plastic thread.

I began to crochet this thread into nets, to resemble the fishing nets and plastic aquatic animals are caught in- limited on sea life. This prompted the next ideation to create a space filled with the netting made from the plastic bags that the audience would have to walk and navigate through. The goal being that they audience would feel engulfed and entrapped by the plastic netting, much like the sea life that live in it.



Siciliano, Crocheting Netting, 2018.

This project was still focusing on the sea life, but a large part of my project and research was the idea of labor and time. The absurdity of the amount of time and energy that goes into recycling items that we shouldn't use. This was thought to be lost in the making of such large quantities of the netting and was an aspect of the project that I wanted to focus more on.

I thought that maybe creating smaller more intricate pieces would better display that time and the labor intensity of the work better than larger pieces. Instead of crochet large sections of netting and began crocheting small lace samples. These samples were to live alongside process videos, showing the small repetitive movements and time it takes to transform a small number of plastic shopping bags.



Siciliano, Crocheted Lace Sample, 2018.

I worked on this iteration, and through critique and conversations with my peers, the question came up of where my voice was in the piece. I subconsciously tried to keep my face out of the project, viewing it as if there was a company making this lace and not me. I feared putting my voice in the project, because of the guilt I felt.

Guilt from the fact that I believe that we should not use plastic grocery bags, and from all the research I had done, I still did not bring reusable bags to the grocery stores. I tried not to support plastic use, but I would order take out that comes in the plastic containers, with the plastic utensils, all tied up in a plastic bag. I was a hypocrite.

The guilt came not only from my continued use of plastic, but it goes back to the guilt I feel for learning and talking about sustainability, and participating in all of these eco-projects, yet the only reason that I am able to get the education that I am and participate and create these projects is because of the oil industry. My father works with in the oil industry, and I have always felt this guilt that I am being disrespectful of him and all he has done for me by doing these projects, and also that it is the money and support my family receives from the oil industry that allows me to work on the projects.

I have felt this confliction, and the easiest way for me to work was to ignore it and refrain from putting my voice or physical self into my projects. But because sustainability and plastic pollution is a common theme amongst artists, the only way that my project will read as anything new, is by letting my voice be heard. This is when I went all in.

Instead of just showing my hands crocheting pieces of lace, the video was going to include all of me. Showing the nonstop work, I was doing, and how I got my entire body and



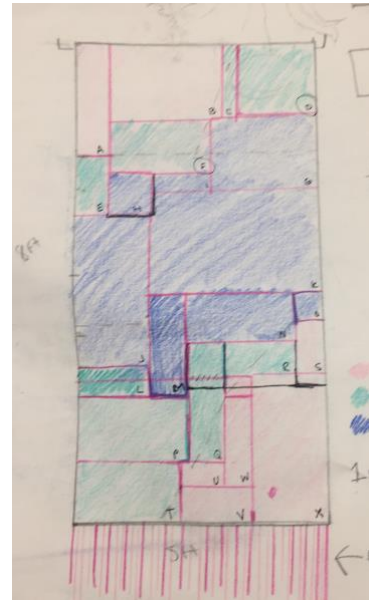
Siciliano, Still from Final Video, 2018.



being involved in transforming these plastic bags. The transforming of the shopping bags was my repentance for every using them.

I continued to crochet different pieces of lace patterns, but instead of showing them separately, I joined the patches together, like a quilt. This quilt was the physical representation of my guilt, and my attempt to fix what I have done. To be able intertwine the physical quilt and video together, I decided that projecting onto the quilt would be the most interesting. Through testing, the crocheted pieces were too busy to project on, so instead I took the scraps of plastic from making the yarn and fused them together to create a clearer surface to project the video onto.

The final piece was made up of over two hundred plastic bags and took hundreds of hours. The patches ranged from ironed pieces of scrap plastic to large crocheted netting pieces, all sewed together into an eight-foot-long by four-foot-wide quilt. The video that is projected onto the quilt shows me creating the yarn from the plastic and then crocheting with it in all sorts of locations, from on the bus to in the bathtub. The video truly displaying how obsessed I am to fix the damage that I have done.



Siciliano, Sketch for Final Quilt



Siciliano, "Repent. Repeat." close up. 2018.

Through a lot of iteration and self-reflection, my final project ended up being a culmination of everything I had learned. Combining my own personal relationship with plastic, with the problem that we as a society pose onto our environment because of our constant use of plastics.

### Creative Work

The final piece hung in the Stamps Gallery on South Division in Ann Arbor, Michigan from April 13 to April 28, 2018. The tubing I fashioned at the top of the plastic quilt was threaded with a metal rod. It was then hung off of hooks that are about three inches away from the wall- allowing the piece to move with the air flow in the gallery and also to promote the audience to touch and feel the different textures of the plastic. The video was projected onto the quilt, in the space made up of iron scraps of plastic. The video was set up on the loop, displaying the never-ending process of trying to repent for my personal and all plastic grocery bag use.



Siciliano, "Repent. Repeat." 2018.

## Conclusion

The video ends with me picking up yet another bag from the mass of bags around me, showing that the process is starting again. The end of the quilt is uneven and unfinished, as the patches are attached less securely. The project is never ending reflecting the flaws and the never-ending process of recycling and the never-ending effort to repent for all of my own plastic use. Promoting recycling is the first thing we do when talking about being more sustainable, and of course it is important, but it cannot be the solution and it is absurd process to rely on. Recycling can only take us so far, so switching to more sustainable and multiple use alternatives for single use plastics, like shopping bags, is a more reliable solution.

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