

**Becoming Again:
Environmental Perspectives on the Exhibition
*Second Time Around: The Hubcap as Art***

at the
Museum of the Shenandoah Valley, Winchester, Virginia
September 7, 2014 – March 1, 2015

by
Woodward S. Bousquet, Professor of Environmental Studies and Biology
Shenandoah University, Winchester, Virginia

As its title *Second Time Around* reveals, this exhibition's focus is on creating new lives – in this case, new lives for used materials that otherwise deteriorate in junkyards, trash heaps and landfills. Contemporary artists took up the challenge issued by the Landfillart Project to turn discarded automobile hubcaps into art. Shaped by their hands, tools, skills and, most of all, their imaginations, the hubcaps became butterflies, self-portraits, turtles, faces, kinetic sculptures and canvasses for personal messages. These repurposed objects, like all art, provoke viewers' responses. They delight, inspire, dismay, teach, challenge, surprise and even repel us.

This exhibition is both a reflection of and a reaction to the evolving nature of humans' interactions with and views about what we call nature or the environment. The dazzling array of artistic expressions is rooted in the evolution of the global environmental movement, yet, at the same time, it directs our attention to contemporary and future challenges of assuring a healthy planet Earth.

Found Objects, Folk Recycling and Eco Art

For her sculpture *Becoming Again*, Linda Mix Yates uses bits of glass and porcelain to create a phoenix, the mythical bird in Greek legend that rises from the ashes of its dead predecessor. Celebrating renewal and rebirth by reusing discarded materials provides a particularly appropriate metaphor for this exhibition. In picking up the pieces of life, new life is created and hope is renewed.

The label for Yates's sculpture informs us that *Becoming Again* is a picassiette, that is, a mosaic that incorporates broken ceramics into its design. The term comes from *La Maison de Picassiette*, a house and gardens in Chartres, France decorated in mosaic between 1938 and 1964. Its owner, Raymond Isidor, created an encompassing landscape reminiscent of the iconic folk art environments that include Simon Rodia's *Watts Towers* in Los Angeles and Howard Finster's *Paradise Garden* in rural Georgia. All made extensive use of discarded objects such as soda bottles, tiles, glass marbles and construction waste.



Becoming Again, 2010
Linda Mix Yates

Similarly, retired Hazleton, Pennsylvania welder James Popso created tabletop-scale depictions of coal mining machinery, village characters and local homes from scrap wood, junk, unsold paint and other unwanted materials. The cultural roots of reusing found objects and junk run deep and wide. As Tom Patterson interprets the practice in his essay that accompanied the 1993 Diggs Gallery exhibition *Àshe: Improvisation & Recycling in African-American Visionary Art*,

Material resourcefulness and conservation are essential survival skills for those who have little, whether they be black, white, brown, yellow or red. In most traditional cultures, such skills are associated with common sense and wisdom. ... On a purely material level, the works exhibited here exemplify what anthropologist Julius S. Kassovic has termed "folk recycling," a virtually universal tradition among the economically disadvantaged, whereby 'junked and industrially-produced items are somehow re-worked to produce "new" items performing altered functions.'"

Here at the Museum of the Shenandoah Valley, Tim Gaudreau's *Self Portrait as Revealed by Trash* takes the discussion a step farther. He arranges photographs of a year's worth of his

own discarded materials on a hubcap “canvas” to demonstrate that our trash is one way in which we assert our presence on this planet. Gaudreau’s collage reflects the contemporary “ecological art” or “eco-art” movement. Eco-artists including Gaudreau and several others in *Second Time Around* inform people about environmental problems and attempt to inspire us to redesign humans’ relationships with our surroundings. Incorporating junked hubcaps in this exhibition strengthens these messages through the art medium chosen.



Self Portrait as Revealed by Trash, 2009,
Tim Gaudreau

Recycle, Reuse, Repurpose or ... ?

Artist Bruce Johnson provides us with play on words with his *What Goes Around, Comes Around*. In converting an old hubcap into a colorful and functioning bird feeder, he invites birds to “go around” his bird feeder when they “come around” to his yard in search of food. Johnson’s humorous take provokes us to consider the phrase’s conventional meaning. “What goes around, comes around” admonishes us to remember that actions have consequences. Misusing the Earth’s resources, such as discarding a chromium-plated steel hubcap, means that these metals and other nonrenewable resources won’t be available in the future.



What Goes Around, Comes Around, 2009, Bruce Johnson

Recycle, recover, reuse, return. Through these words on *Hidden Treasures*, David Medley urges us to see trash as treasure buried in our landfills. In his sculpture, as Medley states, “You control the flow. Turn the wheel to create rain.” (Get a museum volunteer to give *Hidden Treasures* a spin.) The artist’s imagination and metalworking skills make creators of us all.



Hidden Treasures, 2011,
David Medley

'Round and 'round we go ... with words and with ideas about using natural resources responsibly. This exhibition’s preparators were

appropriately careful in their choice of the word reuse. Hubcaps in this exhibition have indeed been reused, not recycled. The two terms can be confusing. Although recycling and reusing are both practical approaches for giving waste a “second time around,” their specific meanings differ.

Recycling is a mechanical process. It involves shredding, melting or otherwise reprocessing waste materials into raw materials so that they can be used to manufacture new products – either the original product or a different one. Converting used office paper into paper pulp that can be used to make wrapping paper, newspaper or new office paper would be recycling. So would melting a discarded filing cabinet and then using the molten steel to manufacture a new steel desk, hubcap or filing cabinet.

Reusing is often a creative process. It can be as simple as using the same flowerpot for growing geraniums each summer, or buying used clothing at a second-hand shop to wear yourself. Reuse can mean fixing a nonworking lamp, freezer or automobile. Reuse can also mean repurposing, a term recently popularized via do-it-yourself television programs. Repurposing is using an object for something other than its original intent, which usually involves altering that item in one or more ways. Examples include converting a wine bottle into a lamp, candleholder or coaster. Although the reused object may be cut, drilled or painted, it is not reprocessed into raw form.

The artists in *Second Time Around: The Hubcap as Art* are truly exemplars of reuse. But how did reusing, and the related term recycling, become so important in our daily lives?

Dumps and Landfills, RCRA and CERCLA

Until the 1970s, few U.S. laws governed where landfills could be built and how they are operated. In fact, landfills weren't usually called landfills a half-century ago. We called them dumps: out-of-the-way tracts of land where society's unwanted, unused waste from homes,

factories and farms could be, well, dumped. Often these dumps were situated in environmentally sensitive areas such as floodplains, steep hillsides, sinkholes and wetlands. Out of sight, out of mind? Not really. Rotting garbage smelled, attracting disease-carrying insects and rats. Usually left uncovered, dumps were routinely set afire to reduce their volume. Children eager to explore their surroundings sometimes looked to dumps as special, secret places to play. Dangers lurked on, or just beneath, the surface. But many of our dumps' problems remained hidden ... for a while.

Dumped material didn't stay put. As rainwater percolated through layers of our discarded materials, it picked up household cleaners, industrial chemicals, battery fluids, paint solvents and pesticide residues. From junked automobiles, rainwater slowly dissolved copper, chromium, iron and other metals. This dangerous brew soaked further through soil and bedrock. It eventually made its way into surface streams and groundwater, contaminating them and threatening the health of streams, lakes, rivers and water supplies. We learned that there was no true "away" we could throw things into.

It is this concern that prompted artist Helen Crispino's contribution to the *Second Time Around* exhibition. A hubcap's radial geometry provides the layout of the familiar yellow-and-black graphic for a radiation hazard. Look more closely. Animal footprints and leaf silhouettes remind us that humans are not the only ones *In Harm's Way* when hazardous substances are mishandled.



In Harm's Way, 2008, Helen Crispino

Post-World-War-II booms in manufacturing, industrial technology, population and highway construction made waste-related problems even worse. We produced more waste, our waste was more harmful, and we came into closer contact with it. Sometimes, neighborhoods were built beside or, as at the Love Canal in Niagara Falls, New York, atop dumps filled with poisonous industrial chemicals. In Bullitt County, Kentucky, near Louisville,

more than 17,000 drum-loads of heavy metals, solvents and other toxic chemicals were discarded, dumped and sometimes incinerated. The notorious 23-acre site became known as the Valley of the Drums. Life-threatening cases like these involving hazardous wastes – plus the noxious odors, polluted drinking water, billowing smoke and blowing piles of trash from “ordinary” dumps – eventually led the public to press the federal government to take action.

In response, Congress passed the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act in 1976. Abbreviated RCRA (pronounced rik'-ruh), the law was designed to establish waste management standards, encourage resource conservation and eliminate improper waste disposal. Amended in 1980 and 1984, RCRA's provisions include:

- developing criteria to make solid waste disposal sites environmentally safe,
- identifying, regulating and tracking hazardous wastes from their production to their final disposal sites,
- promoting waste reduction, recovery, recycling and detoxification,
- developing and implementing state-level regulations for solid waste management and disposal, as long as those state programs meet federal standards, and
- establishing deadlines for setting standards and implementing regulations.

While RCRA applies to currently operating facilities, what about abandoned dumps? In 1980, Congress passed CERCLA (sir'-kluh), the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation & Liability Act. Better known by its shorter name Superfund, CERCLA tackled the vexing challenge of inventorying, ranking and cleaning up uncontrolled, contaminated sites such as Valley of the Drums and Love Canal. The problem's scope turned out to be huge. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) eventually identified thousands of Superfund sites nationwide and initiated cleanup efforts on those deemed most hazardous to human health and environmental quality. Agency staff members estimate that more than 50,000 eligible sites exist. Other experts believe that this number is far too low.

Where are we now? Open dumps are prohibited under RCRA. In modern municipal landfills, only a small area is exposed at a time. Waste is covered frequently to reduce odor and litter, and to avoid attracting pests. Lined with a combination of compacted clay soil and a rubber-like membrane, landfills have systems to collect and treat leachate, that is, the material that rainwater carries downward through the landfill. Potentially hazardous household wastes in most communities are collected separately and transported to facilities designed for their treatment.

Recycling has become a household term and an everyday practice in most businesses, homes and communities. According to the EPA, the nation's recycling rate for trash reached 28% in 2001 and exceeded 34% by 2010. Some cities have passed the 50% mark. The City of Winchester, Virginia, reported that recycling saved nearly \$100,000 of taxpayers' money in 2008. However, although one-third of our trash in the United States is now recycled, demand for consumer goods has increased even faster: the volume of municipal solid waste in this country grew by more than 50% since 1980.

Today, both RCRA and CERCLA address the cleanup of contaminated dumps and the management of hazardous wastes produced by industry, the military, agriculture and other economic sectors. The good news is that total production of hazardous wastes has dropped dramatically from nearly 300 million tons nationwide in 1976 to around 40 million tons today. Researchers have developed less harmful substitutes, companies are using smaller quantities, industries recycle their wastes or sell to other industries that can use them, and storage and disposal are substantially regulated. Preventing pollution has become a large, and profitable, business of its own.

Progress in making contaminated areas safe has been slow and expensive. As of mid-August 2014, programs have met cleanup goals at only 383 locations on the EPA's National Priorities List (NPL) of the nation's most potentially serious hazardous waste sites. At an additional 1,161 NPL sites, remediation technologies are installed but contamination may still

exist. Yet to be fully investigated and, if necessary, treated are 1,318 more NPL sites – nearly half the total identified since CERCLA’s inception. Furthermore, the EPA expects to add more than 100 locations to the NPL each year. Congress allowed Superfund’s funding sources – taxes on the production and use of hazardous substances and on the corporations that make them – to expire in 1995. The result is that annual appropriations are now the primary source of cleanup money. A report from the US Government Accountability Office (GAO), not surprisingly, projects that cleanup costs will exceed available funds.

The National Priorities List of Superfund sites tells only part of the story. In 2004, the EPA estimated that over 350,000 contaminated sites in this country will require cleanup over the next 30 years, assuming current regulations and practices remain the same. The bill for this cleanup may amount to as much as \$250 billion.

Our reckless, shortsighted waste disposal practices of the 1940s and 1950s are hard to imagine today. Modern landfills are clearly superior to the uncontrolled dumps of the past. Many countries have made commendable progress in reducing toxic waste, cleaning up contaminated sites and increasing recycling and reuse. Nevertheless, incomplete success and discouraging EPA projections for containing and detoxifying the remaining hazardous waste dumps in the United States remind us that, indeed, *What Goes Around Comes Around*. Horror stories of decades of improper waste disposal in developing countries regularly show up in news reports. Together, these situations constitute an overwhelming argument for continued vigilance and international collaboration to address this global problem. Many of the solutions begin in the daily decisions that artists in this exhibition urge us to make in our homes, businesses and communities. Refuse. Reduce. Reuse. Recover. Recycle.

Beliefs Matter

But there must be the look ahead, there must be a realization of the fact that to waste, to destroy our natural resources, to skin and exhaust the land instead of

using it so as to increase its usefulness, will result in undermining the days of our children – the very prosperity which we ought by right to hand down to them amplified and developed.

-Theodore Roosevelt, Seventh Annual Message, 3 December 1907

Concern for the environment is not new. Some American politicians such as President Theodore Roosevelt, quoted above, recognized more than a century ago that our present and



Once Upon a Turtle's Back, 2009,
Jeb Prazak

future well-being depends on the health of the Earth and its natural systems. For many centuries, various cultures around the world have shown their respect for the living and nonliving world they inhabited. Jeb Prazak's sculpture, *Once Upon a Turtle's Back*, captures the ancient legend that a giant turtle bears the Earth on its back. In the Book of Genesis, God forms a human from soil and infuses "the breath of life" to create a living being. Whether these

images are taken literally or considered metaphorically, the messages are the same.

As Erika Wain titles her work, *No Bees No Humans*. Imagine a world without bees, hummingbirds, wasps or other pollinators. In the U.S. alone, the value of their pollination activities tops \$15 billion each year. Pollinating is but one example of the natural processes that environmental scientists and conservation biologists call ecosystem services. These are ecological functions that nature provides at little or no cost to us but that are essential to human survival. For instance, forests, grasslands and microscopic ocean-dwelling algae capture carbon dioxide and release life-giving oxygen. Wetlands help trap and neutralize pollutants that rain carries toward streams from lawns, parking lots, farms and highways.



No Bees No Humans, 2009, Erika Wain

Every habitat on Earth provides materials that we use, plants and animals that we eat, and landscapes that inspire us. The sparrow in Marla McLean's sculpture *Witness* perches on a vine as a butterfly loses its life. Too often we fail to recognize the value of nature's gifts.



Witness [detail], 2009, Marla McLean

While it is appropriate to acknowledge people's need for natural resources and the importance of managing them wisely to insure our well-being, environmental attitudes need to incorporate more than self-interested utilitarianism.

We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to treat it with love and respect."

– Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949)

Conservationist Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) penned these words as he considered the interdependence of all life. Published a year after his death, Leopold's essays were written in one of the "sand counties" of south-central Wisconsin.

Leopold is generally regarded as the founder of science-based wildlife management and of the U.S. wilderness system. A professor of natural resources at the University of Wisconsin, his writing brought together two strands of environmental philosophy: the utilitarian view that values nature for its usefulness to us, and the aesthetic view that embraces nature for its own sake. To these Leopold added a third perspective: the ecological view. An ecologist, Leopold recognized that life – including human life – forms an interdependent community. In turn, living communities depend on the earth's life support systems: air, water, land and energy. If, Leopold argued, people consider this community and its life support systems as mere commodities that we can buy, own and sell, we will abuse them – we see them only as vehicles for our livelihood, status and profit. On the other hand, if we recognize the environment as a

community, we will treat the natural world in an entirely different manner. Birds do not foul their own nests. Neither should humans.

The volume of hubcaps and other materials kept out of landfills because artists featured in *Second Time Around* found creative ways to reuse them is miniscule. That's not the point. Instead, this exhibition raises its artists' diverse, collective voices to challenge us all to see the beauty and importance of *Becoming Again*. As hubcaps gain new lives, we gain new perspectives on our relationships to the environment.

* * * * *

Woodward S. Bousquet is Professor of Environmental Studies and Biology at Shenandoah University, Winchester, Virginia. He also serves as director of Shenandoah University's Blue Ridge Institute for Environmental Studies (BRIES).

www.arts.su.edu/arts-sciences-home/environmental-studies/

www.su.edu/su-bries

REFERENCES

Beardsley, John. Gardens of Revelation: Environments by Visionary Artists. New York: Abbeville Press, 2003.

Bousquet, Woodward S. Jim Popso and His Coal Country Folk Art, Pennsylvania Folklife 44 (3): 126-138, Spring 1995. Available online at www.folkartisans.com/sup/popso1.html

City of Winchester, Virginia. Recycling. www.winchesterva.gov/go-green/recycling. Accessed 29 August 2014.

Kovarik, William. Environmental History Timeline. www.environmentalhistory.org. Accessed 25 March 2014.

Greenmuseum.org [website]. Accessed 19 August 2014.

Kassovic, Julius S. Junk and Its Transformations, A Report from the Center for Folk Art and Contemporary Crafts 3., 1992.

Landfillart. Landfillart.org An Artist Reclamation Project. Accessed 19 August 2014.

LoveToKnow Corp. Green Living, United States Recycling Statistics. greenliving.lovetoknow.com/United_States_Recycling_Statistics. Accessed 27 August 2014.

Miller, G. Tyler, and Scott Spoolman. Living in the Environment, Seventeenth Edition. Pacific Grove, California: Brooks/Cole Publishing Co., 2011.

Patterson, Tom. Àshe: Improvisation & Recycling in African-American Visionary Art. Winston-Salem, NC: Diggs Gallery, Winston-Salem State University, 1993.

SPACES (Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments), Aptos, California, spacesarchives.org. Accessed 27 August 2014.

US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). EPA Record of Decision. A. L. Taylor (Valley of Drums), Brooks, Kentucky. Washington DC, 1986. Available online at www.epa.gov/superfund/sites/rods/fulltext/r0486009.pdf

US EPA. 25 Years of RCRA: Building on Our past to Protect Our Future. Washington, DC, 2002. Available online at <http://www.epa.gov/osw/inforesources/pubs/k02027.pdf>

US EPA. Superfund's 30th Anniversary: 30 Years of Protecting Communities and the Environment. Washington, DC, updated 2011. Available online at <http://www.epa.gov/superfund/30years/index.htm>

US EPA. Wastes. Washington, DC www.epa.gov/epawaste/index.htm. Updated 14 July 2014.

US EPA. National Priorities List. Washington DC www.epa.gov/superfund/sites/npl/index.htm. Accessed 29 August 2014.

US Government Accountability Office (GAO). EPA's Estimated Costs to Remediate Existing Sites Exceed Current Funding Levels, and More Sites are Expected to be Added to the National Priorities List. Washington DC, 2010. Available online at <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-10-380>.