Artifacts of Industry

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ARTIFACTS OF INDUSTRY

by

JAMES DAVID ROBERTSON

Under the Direction of Ruth Stanford, MFA

ABSTRACT

Artifacts of Industry positions industrial plastic waste as an Anthropocene artifact that records humanity’s impact on the environment. My multimedia sculptures begin with casts of factory scraps—evidence of processes that occurred in other places and time periods. Working with the forms of these industrial remnants, I contemplate their pasts and their histories, and I imagine the experiences that imbue and shape each object. In transforming these artifacts, I aid their transition, rebirthing them into a new phase of existence.

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JAMES DAVID ROBERTSON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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ARTIFACTS OF INDUSTRY

by

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DEDICATION

Thanks to my incredible family and friends for all the support in helping me realize my dreams over the years. You kept me going. Love to you all!
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1 INTRODUCTION

My mixed media sculptures are made from cast-off industrial material created during the most recent one hundred years of the Anthropocene era. Working with these materials, I guide their transition into objects with unique personalities. I contemplate their pasts and their histories; I become aesthetically attracted and attached to them. I imagine the experiences that imbue and shape each object. In transforming these artifacts, I aid in their transitions, rebirthing them into a new phase of existence or "becoming."

I recognize plastic waste as evidence of our impact on the environment. If we fail to consider our ecological impact and to make a concerted effort to stop using fossil fuels, we risk rising sea levels, global warming, and humanity’s destruction. Human presence and human history are recorded through the petroleum-based plastic objects we create, cherish, destroy, and throw away. Artifacts of Industry presents aesthetically transformed plastic waste as an archeological artifact in order to raise awareness of disposable plastics and careless manufacturing practices. (Fig.1.1)

Figure 1.1, Industrial Artifact. Thermoplastic waste. Dimensions 60" x 30" x 12" thick
2 OBJECTS

I worked as an industrial designer for twenty-four years. My daily job involved designing, processing, and manufacturing displays for the two major soda companies. Everything we created also made tons of plastic waste; by-products were an inevitable outcome, nothing more than a cost of doing business. The plastic waste could have been recycled but was usually dumped in landfills.

Years after I retired, I rediscovered these ghosts of my past career and saw them in a new light. I came to see the discarded factory waste not as a by-product but as an artifact that had intrinsic value, embedded meaning, and a foreboding message for humanity. These unwanted scraps preserved a moment in time when people prioritized quarterly profits and companies were complacent about their ecological impact. As objects, these are sentinels: they warn us about the consequences of our inactions and our abrogation of responsibilities.

As part of my graduate work, I began studying object-oriented ontology. This branch of philosophy originated in ancient Greece with Heraclitus of Ephesus, who wrote that nothing in this world is constant except change and becoming.¹ He went on to say that all matter is alive and in the process of becoming a complex, interwoven web of materials. These ideas resonated with me; I began looking at the factory cast-offs as something more than a by-product of industry. I began to see them as objects that theorist and philosopher Jane Bennett calls “vibrant matter.”² I saw how I could affect their “change and becoming” by pushing them forward from

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the past into the present and future through a process of recontextualization and aesthetic transformation by the artist.³

These ideas are at the core of my piece *Artifact Tokens*, the first piece I created using remnant ABS (acrylonitrile butadiene styrene) thermoplastics sourced from a dumpster outside a plastics manufacturing site. I was immediately drawn to the amorphous, lava-like forms produced by the plastic molding process.

Once I took these artifact materials back to the studio, I saw their potential as art objects, both in terms of aesthetics and their inherent meaning as evidence of wasteful manufacturing practices. As I manipulated the surfaces with texture and color, the objects transcended their lowly origins as factory waste and took on a new identity as something alluring to viewers. (Fig. 2.1) The work I do with the materials imbues them with individuality and meaning, bringing them into their next phase of being as art objects rather than cast-off material.

![Image of Artifact Tokens]

*Figure 2.1, David Robertson. Artifact Tokens. Mixed Media. cast foam and acrylic canvas, 2020. Dimensions 20” x 186” x 40” tall*

Transforming the industrial artifact in this way, making it alluring by altering the objects’ physical appearance and properties, brings about the phenomenon of absorption, as described by art critic and historian Michael Fried. Fried asserts that absorption allows viewers to engage with

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the artwork and fully take in the subject matter. The experience of making *Artifact Tokens* inspired my current body of work. *Artifacts of Industry* uses the artifact and its transformation to help us consider our impact on the environment and reflect on the process of making art.

Ontology and aesthetics have been organically linked together throughout the evolution of art history. These two philosophical approaches influence my work in two ways. First, when I am selecting industrial waste objects as the “seeds” for my pieces, object-oriented ontology helps me meditate on each form’s aura, agency, and history. Second, when I am in the process of transforming the objects, aesthetic philosophies guide my choices regarding materials, colors, textures, and transparency. Sculptor Mel Kendrick uses a similar approach in his work; he calls it

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“seeing things in things,” (Fig. 2.1) a useful turn of phrase that efficiently combines object-oriented ontology, aura, and vibrant matter.

Figure 2.2, Mel Kendrick casting Twin Logs explores what he calls “seeing things in things”
3 RECONTEXTUALIZATION

“Can artworks retain their autonomy of expression, where humans are no longer present?”

As artists, we think of art in terms of its aesthetic properties, but aura cannot be conceived of solely in these formal terms. When I’m looking at factory remnants, I perceive each piece’s form, gestures, and presence, but these formal elements combine to communicate a picture of something more: the object’s soul. This “object soul-ness” is my conception of aura. In my work, I recontextualize these objects through aesthetic transformation: taking industrial waste and turning it into art objects. This process honors objects’ origins and positions these artworks as sentinels so that future generations can remember and contemplate our industrial past.

The industrial waste objects’ abstract forms are my muses; I select them for their interesting shapes and auras. To begin the recontextualization process, I make molds of each piece. The mold-making process involves multiple steps that can take several days. First, I mix the silicone rubber together and paint it onto the object, making sure I apply it evenly and into every crevice. Once this first layer is dry, I apply up to four additional coats of silicone in order to achieve the proper thickness that will allow the mold to retain its shape during the casting process. I let the mold dry overnight and slice it open the next day.

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5 Ibid., 139.
When I slice the mold open, I remove the original artifact. I typically do not use an outside “mother” mold because I want each sculpture cast from the flexible silicone mold to be unique. Process photos of mold-making can be seen in Fig. 3.1. All the way through the process, I am thinking about the many options I have in creating a final piece, and I allow the form that emerges from the mold to guide my aesthetic choices. On any piece, I might use opaque or translucent resins, pearlescent powders, pigments, urethane foam, papier mâché, cast sugar, gelatin, mud or clay, textiles, concrete, fiberglass, wood dough, and/or plaster—I select my materials in accordance with the object’s origins, its final destination, and the agency it will hold as an industrial artifact reborn as a work of art.
As I work with a piece and contemplate its final destination, I think about timelessness and how my work will be interpreted by viewers in 10, 20, or 50 years. One reason a work of art remains timeless is because there is something unusually unique within the artwork. Art historian Michael Fried calls this an “ideal particular” or unity within the work. The artist’s job is to make the work an artwork. Fried describes the “ideal particular” as something unique or different from other ordinary or mundane objects. He asserts that an object’s identity and agency are integral to the object itself and are not changeable according to how viewers perceive the object. The identities of the objects I work with come directly from the objects’ materials and not from what Fried terms the “beholder,” or the person viewing the artwork. In his 1967 essay, Fried describes how objects can “negate their own ontological status as an object and therefore operate as art; it is, above all, a special idealized unity that acts as a direct and determined vehicle for the artist’s expression.”

By transforming industrial waste materials into artworks, I negate the original objects’ ontological status, as Fried describes, by radically changing their contexts: from the factory floor or dumpster to the art gallery pedestal. My negation isn’t total, however; as I work with these objects, I consider their auras as well as where they came from and how they were made. As I bring these artifacts forward from the past, I imagine what they can become as aesthetic objects. My work becomes a transitional experience through their rebirth into, hopefully, formal gallery environments. I ponder how the work will be received years from now. Will their ecological backstories matter to the viewer, or will they just become art objects that arose from consumer commodities destined for future landfills? Despite my efforts to elevate these materials by

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6 Ibid., 140
recontextualizing them into art objects, will future audiences lose this context and see these pieces as disposable? Or will they continue to have value as artworks that absorb the spectator?
When I was eight, my family lived in Iceland for six summer months. As I explored my new surroundings, I felt a deep connection with nature. The Icelandic landscape is wondrous and dynamic: fire and ice, lava, volcanoes and glaciers, geysers, and mountains. (Fig. 4.1) These early experiences in nature led me to explore philosophies related to humans and the natural world. Ecologists assert that humans are “embedded” in nature. Nature is the surrounding medium that sustains our existence. Timothy Morton expresses this idea in his concept of “mesh,” which he defines as the ecological principle of “the thinking of interconnectedness.” “Mesh” is Morton’s metaphor for “the interconnectedness of all living and nonliving things,” consisting of “infinite connections and infinitesimal differences.”

Figure 4.1, Lava Fields at Gjástykki at Krafla in North Iceland

Figure 4.2, Choma Lava at Gjástykki at Krafla in North Iceland. Photo by Regina Hronn

Reading these theories clarified my own thinking about our impact on the planet. We are all interconnected by the ecological mesh. As some objects and life forms die, others are born or reborn. I see this cyclical connection in the materials I use and how I transform them. What was once an inanimate object left for scrap is now animated through my aesthetic remixing and rebirthing. By experimenting with a wide variety of materials in my work, I explore ideas of ecological materialism and consider the negative effects of materialism on desired pro-environmental outcomes. (Fig.4.2)

Everything humans do impacts our environment and all the beings within the mesh. Mesh enters my work in several ways. First, on a literal level, I embed pallet wrap mesh during the casting process as a substrate to stabilize the final pieces. I also layer and weave mesh-like
materials into pieces in order to create different textures, transparencies, and gestures. Mesh is also integral to my work in a conceptual way: as I install my work in a gallery, I think about how the pieces connect with each other and how viewers will negotiate the gallery space. While this is common practice in curating exhibitions, I infuse the construction of my exhibits with the intention of not only evoking audience participation but ensuring that their perception of the art is an added, active layer of the display. My works and the viewers’ engagement form a new mesh, one that is intentionally orchestrated according to its environment and each new audience.

In my *Passing Clouds* installation, I experimented with color, transparency, and mesh. The collected artifacts inspired the forms for this piece. Colored light fades in transitions similar to the camouflaging techniques octopi use to hide from prey on the seafloor. I am re-contextualizing this natural phenomenon into a sculptural and ephemeral experiment. (Fig. 4.3)
Figure 4.3, David Robertson. Passing Clouds. Mixed Media. 2020, Dimensions 60”x 60”x 40” tall

My work is a reaction to the dire climate crisis and its origins in decades of humanity’s willful ignorance and eco-political inaction. I use relevant ideas from theorist Timothy Morton to
help me grapple with these important concepts. His research contextualizes the call to action by problematizing environmental theory from the standpoint of ecological connections. He engages in a sustained project of ecological critique, primarily defined in two of his texts, *Ecology Without Nature* (2009) and *The Ecological Thought* (2010). In *Ecology Without Nature*, he proposes that we must not divorce/separate humans from the natural world. Entertaining this division would suggest that nature exists as something distinctly separate from humanity; nature sustains civilization but does not exist outside the confines of a constructed society.\(^8\)

This ideology—of man as distinct from, rather than part of, nature—is rooted in the Judeo-Christian belief of man’s dominion over the natural world. If we have dominion, aren’t we therefore allowed to treat nature however we wish? To use, exploit, ignore, and abuse it? The shift away from an agrarian society toward industrialization, especially from World War II forward, accelerated our despoilment of the natural world. Mass manufacturing of consumer goods made everything cheap, easy, and disposable. Corporations encouraged the newly created first-world citizens to use something up, throw it away, and buy another.\(^9\) A two-page article in the August 1955 issue of *Life* magazine is a historical marker; it celebrated a new lifestyle called “Throwaway Living” and hailed the advent of single-use products, including disposable dog bowls, a use-once-and-toss aluminum frying pan, and even an asbestos-based throwaway barbecue grill. (Fig. 4.4)

\(^8\) Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 27.

Even as the “Throwaway Lifestyle” took hold, a few people realized where unchecked consumerism of disposable goods would lead. In the 1960s, some scientists were already discovering the negative effects of unregulated industry on the environment. President Richard Nixon founded the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970 to combat air and water pollution, so it’s clear that environmental issues weren’t only of concern to a fringe of American society. But because of capitalism’s tendency toward shortsighted greed, the warning signals were put off for future generations to solve. As time has passed, we have become more aware of the consequences of our addiction to convenience. The legacy of this disposable consumerist ideology has led to overflowing landfills, seas choked with plastic waste, and environmental degradation of air, land, and water. The idea that we could throw things away is an illusion; we
hope that discarded materials can be recycled or landfilled safely, but the irrefutable evidence of these falsehoods is everywhere.\textsuperscript{10}

Robert Sullivan, an urban ecologist and \textit{New York Times} reporter, wrote an article about the Meadowlands, entitled “How the World’s Largest Garbage Dump Evolved Into a Green Oasis.” In the article, Sullivan describes the impossibility of throwing things away.\textsuperscript{11} Just as Jane Bennett asserts everything is “vital matter,” Sullivan asserts that something will always rise from the pile of trash. In other words, matter will continue to exist even after it has been discarded as an unwanted commodity: “inanimate things can animate, act, and produce dramatic and subtle effects.”\textsuperscript{12} This trashing/animating process is perfectly illustrated by plastiglomerate forms that are found in many of the world’s oceans and washed up on beaches today. (Fig. 4.5)

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} “Throwaway Living,” \textit{Life} 39, no. 5 (August 1, 1955), 43. \url{https://books.google.com/books?id=xlYEEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA43&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=2}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Jane Bennett, \textit{Vibrant Matter}, 6.
\end{itemize}
Plastiglomerates begin life as discarded pieces of plastic that find their way into waterways and eventually make their way to oceans. Some of these plastics break down into tiny particles that become fused onto coral and into rock crevices. Ocean currents also bring together bits of flotsam that collect and coalesce into larger plastic blob-like forms, as seen in the image above. In *The Ecological Thought*, Morton uses the term “hyperobjects” to describe massively distributed objects that transcend time and space, such as radioactive plutonium, global warming, and oceanic garbage islands. According to Morton, hyperobjects alert humans to environmental

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dilemmas. These residual artifacts of our consumption undergo a process of metamorphosis; their agency can never completely disappear from their/our sphere of existence, connecting them to hyperobjects forever.\textsuperscript{14} I find this concept useful, and I frame how I think about my work in terms of the hyperobject. In my work, the sculptures and their relationship to each other within an installation enmesh to form hyperobject sentinels that provoke contemplation about humanity’s impact on nature. Rather than an all-encompassing, physical hyperobject, my work is a didactic hyperobject, inspiring response, teaching a lesson, calling to action.

These plastiglomerate forms fascinate me, not only because of their power to remind us of our past transgressions against nature but also because of their aesthetic appeal. In the right context, they could easily pass as intentionally made works of art. Rather than being seen solely as industrial and consumer waste, they become products of art. My intervention echoes this change from industrial material to an art object, imbuing the finished piece with the aura earlier discussed in this thesis. This altering of agency into an aesthetic object brings up questions of future legacy. The plastiglomerate form seen above has clear ties to the past, but what is its future? What is its function moving forward? The object's future legacy is a concept I explore in my work, as I bring new life to discarded industrial waste.

It is not unusual for environmental artists to use reclaimed or found waste materials. Many of these artists remix or arrange found objects into final works. My process goes one step further than some, however, as I make molds of the industrial waste I find and then create new sculptures from casts of the molds. Their forms appeal to me, not only aesthetically, but also because of the dynamic way in which they were made. These piles of waste are the result of

\textsuperscript{14} Timothy Morton, \textit{Hyperobjects}, 128-30.
industrial vulcanism: intense hydraulic machine pressure, extreme heat, and lava-like extrusion. Transforming these objects into artistic works moves them forward in their temporal and spatial occupations, removing them from the scrap heap and propelling them into the future. Will my work be the new disposable, or will it have a future legacy becoming a new sentinel for future consideration?
5 THESIS SHOW

In my thesis exhibition, I wanted the works in the gallery space to function as a total immersive experience. I achieved this effect in three ways primarily: strategic lighting choices, unconventional display methods, and laying out the space so that viewers could circulate freely amongst the pieces. Working with a three-dimensional mock-up of the gallery helped me understand how to use lighting to enhance the viewer’s experiences of theatricality and absorption.15

Using blacklights in specific places in the show brought the works to life by activating the fluorescent inks and dyes I apply during the sculpting process. Many of my pieces visually suggest bioluminescent ocean organisms reminiscent of my scuba diving excursions and smoldering lava-like forms inspired by my years spent in Iceland. The luminescent colorants I use in my work contain phosphors that absorb the ultraviolet radiation coming from a blacklight source, creating a glowing effect. Through lighting effects in the gallery, I arranged the work not only to highlight the formal aesthetics of the artwork but also to draw the viewer into engaging with the pieces. I found through experimentation that using too much blacklight flattened the surfaces of certain pieces, so I tried to strike a balance between full-spectrum light and the introduced blacklight LED floods. (Fig. 5.1)

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I did not use pedestals in the show, but rather suspended pieces from the ceiling and attached them to display arms that viewers could not see. Custom-made steel display arms attached the art objects to the gallery wall. I painted these arms the same color as the wall, so they blended into the wall under the special lighting. The suspended pieces relied on thin, braided monofilament that visually disappeared. These techniques make the works appear to levitate and prevent the pedestal from becoming a part of the artwork.

*Figure 5.1, front view of the gallery*
I placed every piece in the show with space in and around it so that viewers could walk behind, next to, or beneath. Allowing viewers to examine each work’s details increases the absorption they feel as they engage with the work. Absorption leads to immersion. Navigating around each piece, taking in its surfaces, colors, and forms, viewers are transported out of the real world into my environment of vibrant matter. (Figs. 5.2-5.14)
Figure 5.3 front left view of the gallery
Figure 5.4, David Robertson. Vanpyrotheuthis. Mixed Media, cast resins and mesh, 2022. Dimensions 60” x 16” x 36” tall
Figure 5.5, David Robertson. Red Muse. Mixed Media; cast resins and 3/D fibers, 2022. Dimensions 16” x 16” x 20” tall
Figure 5.6, David Robertson. Green Sentinel. Mixed Media; cast resins and mesh, 2022. Dimensions 18” x 16” x 20” tall
Figure 5.7, David Robertson. Fire Falls. Mixed Media; cast resins and mesh, 2022. Dimensions 18” x 16” x 20” tall
Figure 5.8, David Robertson. Winged Victory. Mixed Media; cast foam, alcohol dyes and wire, 2022. Dimensions 20” x 23” x 68” tall
Figure 5.9, David Robertson. Orange Connections. Mixed Media; cast resins and mesh, 2022. Dimensions 12” x 16” x 26” tall
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Figure 5.14, David Robertson. Remix. Mixed Media; cast resins and mesh, 2022. Dimensions 12” x 16” x 20” tall
6 CONCLUSION

In creating the work for my thesis exhibit, I tested my ideas about how to push forward objects that were born in an earlier, more wasteful era. I plan to continue exploring the aesthetic and ontological implications of translating these industrial artifacts into more sculptures, digital art, and public art projects. This exhibit has so much potential for growth: in the number of pieces, the way they’re presented, and the avenues through which they’re shared. I hope that I can continue expanding the boundaries of these objects for artistic and educational purposes.

Working on the gallery show, specifically, uncovered the potential for new ways to light my pieces as well as unique layers that might augment their presentation. I will continue to explore new visual layers and incorporate more specialized lighting into the work, such as layering video projection on large and small scales.

Digesting all the research and focusing on my practice during this thesis year unveiled conclusions and provoked unanswered questions. Upon learning about the origins of my work, some viewers incorrectly associated it with the work many environmental artists create out of found materials and trash. While ecological concerns are central to my work, I explore these ideas on a metaphysical level. I need to continue thinking about how I position my work in conversation with the work of other environmental artists.

Through producing Artifacts of Industry, I gained a fresh perspective on the educational potential for immersive environments that aesthetically address environmental issues. Creating this body of work represents a beginning, not an end.
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