

Rox De Luca: Gleaning for plastics, defying wastefulness

Most days Sydney-based artist Rox De Luca gleans along her local beach, Bondi, or a little further away at Rose Bay Beach. She is looking for flashes of colour and of whiteness against the sand, the signs that the beach—like every beach on the planet—is adjusting fragment by fragment to the deluge of plastic waste that our species generates daily. She collects the weather-worn fragments from the sand, and she takes them home to clean and to categorize by size, colour and shape. Then her defiant transformations occur.

Using steel wire or fishing line she threads the plastic remnants into long sinuous garlands, or she collates them into smaller, intimate bundles. Sometimes De Luca accesses her plastics from other sources—for example, the tamper-proof aviation seals that are discarded in their hundreds of thousands each day in airports across the world—and reorders them into shapes like the skeletons of deceased sea creatures, an allusion to the lethal work done by plastics when ingested by the marine animal and bird life of the earth's oceanic ecosystems. At times, De Luca homes in on a recognizable plastic form that seems to proliferate without pause, a key example being the red tops from the small fish-shaped plastic soy sauce bottles that are ubiquitous in Japanese restaurants. That De Luca can create massive spirals out of those small, but endlessly available, discards, says a lot about the poor design choices that food producers have made, and that we as customers accept without question.

I use the verb “to glean” to frame De Luca's aesthetic interest in the environmental spate of discarded plastic in two senses: to gather something laboriously and slowly; and to detect, discover, unearth, often little by little, ergo to deduce, to infer, also slowly. Usually applied to the actions of people collecting remnant grains or vegetables or fruits after harvesting, De Luca's gleaning involves her gathering of plastic detritus, and her remaking of those plastic shards and discards into new forms, and thus new modes of critical deduction and inference.

The constructions evolving from De Luca's gleaning are beautiful in their sinuousness and their subtle, at times translucent, colourations. Even the minimal, neat order of her small bundles invites admiration precisely because the environment appears to be assisting De Luca in configuring that order. At the same time De Luca's works are humbling in their defiant reminder of our destructive, wasteful propensities.

A January 2016 World Economic Forum report forecasts that in the middle of this century our oceans will hold less fish than plastics. And—as De Luca's gleaning intimates—plastics are vying with sand itself to form the core constituent of the planet's beaches. De Luca's practice addresses such forecasts by asking her audience to intuit something of these global displacements, and the vastness of their scale, when viewing the reformulated results of her gleaning for plastic, on the beach. It seems apposite, then, that this exhibition takes place in the middle of a global pandemic that has caused many of us to reflect on our relations with, and impacts on, the world that hosts us.

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Still gleaning for plastics, on the beach

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