

Rox De Luca Gleaning for plastic, on the beach

Each day Rox De Luca goes gleaning along her local beach, Bondi, Sydney. She is looking for flashes of colour or of whiteness against the sand, the signs that the beach—like every beach on the planet, sadly—is adjusting fragment by fragment to the deluge of plastic waste that our species generates daily. She collects the weather-worn and -shaped fragments, rebirthing them slowly from the sand, and she takes them home to clean and to categorize by size, colour and shape. Then the painstaking transformations take place.

Using heavy stainless steel wire or sturdy fishing line, and piercing each plastic piece with a drill bit, she threads them into long sinuous garlands, or she collates them into smaller, more intimate bundles. Sometimes plastics accessed 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—are reordered into shapes like the skeletons of long-dead sea creatures, an allusion as well to the lethal work done by plastics when ingested by the marine animal and bird life of the earth's oceanic ecosystems. Even the thread-like remnants left by the drilling process—yet more plastic waste to be gleaned—find their way into De Luca's garlands, clumps and clusters.

I use the verb “to glean” here to characterize 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 resemanticization of those plastic shards and discards into new forms, and thus new modes of critical deduction and inference. With those resonances De Luca's works also reference an artistic tradition that includes Eva Hesse and her visceral latex, fibreglass and plastic constructions, Sheila Hicks's monumental wool-textual sculptures, and Tony Cragg's early colourful plastic outputs, while suggesting contemporary affinities with Cecile Williams in Western Australia and Caroline Phillips from Victoria, both of whom are compelled to rework our quotidian waste products.

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 insistent reminder of our destructive, wasteful propensities. Vast gyres or garbage dumps of plastic and other debris have formed in the world's major oceans. Some 90 percent of the debris to be found on Australia's beaches is plastic: bottles, bottle tops, straws. 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 wants her audience to intuit something of these displacements, and the vastness of their scale, when viewing the reformulated results of her gleaning for plastic, on the beach.

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