

Beautiful Plastic: The Art of Reuse

For over a century, plastic has overtaken the world in all forms. Plastic encompasses the world around us, impacting the global availability of foods, medicine, and providing protection from the elements, however I have never heard plastics described as pretty. Why is this? Plastic can have pretty designs on it, it can have a nice color to it, so why don't people look at discarded plastic and think, "This is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen!"? At least, people don't think that until they see the works of artists like Mbongeni Buthelezi, Sue Lipscombe, and Veronika Richterová. Throughout the world, plastic is being given new life. What was once something to be thrown away is now being turned into pieces of wonderful art, bringing awareness to the misplacement of plastic.

Artists across the globe are using repurposed plastic to create inspirational works of art. A South African plastic artist, Mbongeni Buthelezi, describes his art as "I collect rubbish and create something beautiful from it. I collect something that has no value and give it a new life. That's what we can do with ourselves and our lives." These works of plastic art are created by heating up plastic and placing it onto a canvas, creating an oil painting look. These "paintings" help to mediate and communicate hope for the South African people. His message is simple yet transcends cultures, you can create a better life out of something basic just as you can create wonderful art out of discarded plastic. His artwork has been shown all around the globe, helping inspire people and create a narrative that there is more to South Africa, and more to discarded plastic, than what might be initially seen.

Each artist chooses a unique medium in order to send a different message. While Buthelezi's art looks nothing like the original plastic collected, other artists choose to keep the original shape of the plastic. One sculpture utilizing this strategy is the "Bristol Whales," created

by Sue Lipscombe. It is composed of 70,000 repurposed plastic bottles elegantly aligned to form rolling waves over the city of Bristol, England (“Whale”). The bottles were collected from the Bath Half-Marathon and the Bristol 10k Race. The two whales are composed of Somerset willow, gracefully combining both natural and man-made materials.

While the other artist may use local plastic supplies others tend to experiment more. Veronika Richterová, an artist from the Czech Republic, has collected more than 3,500 plastic bottles from 96 countries. She is constantly experimenting with different techniques to create her art. She has cut, melted, heated, and assembled many different works of art, creating anything from light fixtures to creatures (including animals and plants). She always makes sure that she uses a particular type of plastic in her sculptures, PET plastic. This type does not decompose naturally, so Richterová sought to give them a new purpose. Currently over 3,000 pieces of her work is being displayed in 76 countries. From her work, she has created wonderful sea creatures, flowers, and other aspects of natural life made of something wholly man-made.

The artists who use plastic as a medium all have one goal, to make something beautiful out of something that most people believe is worthless. They see something more than just waste in their work, they see a message, a new way to look at our world. Our world is filled with useful, reliable, and consistent plastic that many people view as one dimensional. Something to be used and then discarded. Artists like Buthelezi, Lipscombe, and Richterová breathe new life into something that most consider to be worthless. Plastic gives them the perfect base to start with, and from there, their imagination is allowed to fly.

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