

Abstract.

In this article I will discuss the elements of my practice and how it has evolved, plus the influences I have sourced from other artists and art practitioners I have researched who draw on similar ideals of time and place. References will be made to French Jesuit and scholar Michel De Certeau, analysing his writings in his book titled 'The Practice of Everyday Life'¹, in particular the chapter entitled "Walking in the City" [Certeau 1984]. I will also engage with other artists and philosophers who share my concerns for the environment and the kind or type of art work they create or involve themselves in. Chris Jordon (Jordon 2012), American Artist and Photographer and his team of environmental carers and their plight to bring to notice the mountains of plastic residue that is continually increasing, forming islands of plastic floating in our oceans, and the detrimental effect it is having on all sea going birds and sea creatures. American sea captain Charles Moore's² surprise encounter in 1997 of what has come to be known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. This problem will be discussed in depth in the body of this essay.

When I moved to the coastline a number of years ago, I did not realise the impact it would have on myself as an artist, and the impact it was to have on my art practices. I had lived in the country for most of my adult life, painting landscapes and people in the environment. Walking in the country, muddy boots were now left behind to enjoy the milder climate of the coastal area we chose.

Walking had begun for me purely as an exercise program. As time went on I began to explore the coastline further, noting the changes in the tides, the purple sand crabs scurrying along whenever they heard my footsteps in the pristine sand. Marvelling at the unique sand patterns left in the wet sand by the crashing waves as they sucked back to the ocean, endlessly. This action was to become a valuable starting point.

In 1997 American sea captain Charles Moore, discovered while sailing the seldom traversed North Pacific Subtropical Gyre, known as an oceanic desert, the largest garbage dump on the planet, soon to be known as The Great Pacific Garbage Patch-a spiral nebula where plastic far outweighs zoo plankton, the oceans food base³. Moore undertook a large scale study of

¹ Certeau., M. d. (1984). The Practice Of Everyday Life. [Walking in the City]. California, University of California Press,Ltd.

² Moore, C. (2012). Plastic Oceans. N.Y., Avery Penguin.

³ Ibid.

this problem, largely ignored by the masses and continuing to increase in size over the years. The devastating tsunamis in Japan, destroying two hundred thousand homes with all their contents were washed into the pacific, traveling the ocean currents, impacting and adding to this massive garbage dump. We have become a throwaway consumer society since the birth of plastic. Plastic bottles, cups, wrappings and other single use only items are continuing to clog our lakes, waterways, all ending up in the oceans with dire consequences. Plastic rubbish and other debris not only ruin the aesthetic quality of oceans, coast, and lakes, but can alter the chemical makeup of a body of water.

Accompanied by a marine biologist Moore set about trawling in this area taking samples in large glass jars, an oozy brew of plastic scraps and plankton tissue. The finding then was that plastic residue far outweighed zoo plankton by a ratio of six to one. Another study of a 62,500-square mile of the ocean it was calculated that 83.3 tons of tiny little plastic bits in this section of ocean-North Pacific Subtropical Gyre. This study did not take in to account the macro and mega plastics, nets, crates, floats, shoes, plastic bottles and the larger items collected and logged. Plastic residue in all its forms continues to find their way into our oceans causing untold damage and resulting in death to all ocean life. Plastic products are proving harmful to all marine life in the gyre. Loggerhead sea turtles often mistake plastic bags for jelly fish, their favourite food. Mammals and birds have become strangled by the clear plastic rings used to hold six packs of beer and soda drinks together. It is only a matter of time until the effects of plastic begin to impact on the human species, in some way or another it may have already done so.

The beach walks I have enjoyed over time have given me a deeper understanding and awareness of our fragile environment, more than I could ever have imagined. On these walks I would pick up the occasional plastic bottle and numerous coloured bottle tops and place them in the bins provided along the foreshore. It soon became necessary for me to carry a bag to put my collection in, the further I walked the more discarded plastic rubbish I would see. Plastic in all its forms floating in the shallows, odd thongs of all sizes, some chewed around the edges by the crabs, children's sand toys half buried in the sand, bait bags discarded by fisherman enjoying their leisure time oblivious to the hazards they were innocently creating. Walking and collecting plastic left by an unthinking consumerists society became the grounds for a new environmental art practice. And it was thus that my work began to be informed by the dichotomy of discarded man made plastic and nature's organic and pristine patterns.

Discussing Certeau's writings 'Walking in the City', People engaging with man and machine made pattern, concrete freeways humming with traffic, flashing lights and numerous semiotics to direct and guide the walker here and there through crowded streets, people

scurrying past heads down going about their business oblivious to their environment. We can be guided around a place by maps and signs or we can walk freely exploring our chosen environment. Quite a contrasting experience as I walk along the sand tracks dodging the waves as they rush up the beach. Noting the organic marks embedded in the sand as the wave recedes. The continual splash of the waves, the shrill call of seagulls is the only intrusion as I walk along an almost secluded and beautiful natural coastal environment. During these walks I document the plastic items I find and photograph dead sea birds and fish when I come across them. Lately there have been a number of shearwaters on the shore, possibly drowned from lack of food. On further investigation their stomachs have been empty. Additionally, I note the state of natural tidal erosion and shifting sands. I photograph these many changes.

Over time I have collected a large amount of all types of plastic bags and other coloured plastic in sheet form, possibly used for shade purposes in the summer, left of just forgotten. As my collection grew I had to do something with it. I decided to attempt to fuse together some of the sheet plastic using old Elna ironing press I had been keeping for unknown reasons. Donning my mask to prevent breathing the toxic fumes that arise when plastic is heated; I commenced fusing together this mess of collected plastic, entwined with seaweed sand, and the odd piece of polyester rope. Randomly I select the odd scraps of coloured sheet plastic, and combine it with everyday supermarket bags as well as plastic containing text and other print related material all adding detail to my soup of plastic. My new explorations had started to take on an identity of their own.

Intentionality was non-existent when I commenced this project. As I randomly adding each piece of collected plastic the work gradually morphed in to something of its own making. I began to think how unattractive this collection of melted rubbish was, until recently when viewed on wall, reports of beauty have come back to me. I agree totally with Meike Bal⁴ narrative writings. She suggests in cultural and visual analysis that the control over what happens between the work and its future viewers is out of the artist's hands. Art connoisseurs have been known to read weird and wonderful concepts in to an art piece.

Growing into a large colourful spiral, and reasonably attractive from a distance, my fused plastic wall piece is taking shape. Shrinking in and bulging out in other areas, creating a visual tension. I started to engage with the idea that maybe I could make something attractive and colourful from a distance and the truth would reveal itself as the viewer came in for a closer look. The spiral or mandala effect that evolved in the making is reminiscent of

⁴ Bal, M. (2002). Intention. Travelling concepts in the humanities: a rough guide. Toronto, University of Toronto Press. **Green College lectures**.

the ocean currents as they carry their flotsam to be deposited elsewhere in the ocean. The movement of ocean currents collect an array of discarded plastics which finds its way into feeding grounds of our marine animals with devastating effects. I will enlarge on this matter further into this essay.

In previous art works I have engaged with the beauty of the landscape and the elements of nature. A visual feast of nature as quoted by British artist Bridget Riley (Art), *'The eye can travel over the surface in a way parallel to the way it moves over nature. It should feel caressed and soothed, experience frictions and ruptures glide and drift .One moment, there will be nothing to look at and the next second nature the canvas seems to refill, to be crowded with visual events.'* I feel strongly that this important observation of seeing applies to all. Riley's vibrant optical pattern paintings during the 1960s, where she explored the optical phenomena, juxtaposing colour and tints and, shades of black white and grey which appear to move and pulsate on the canvas, became immensely popular at that time.

Recently I have been asked 'What is beauty?' Discussions in Stephen R. Kellerts⁵ book 'birth right' the words of English biologist Edward O. Wilson are worth thinking about. Wilson, who relates nature's beauty to human fitness and survival suggests; *'Beauty is our word for the perfection of those qualities of environment that have contributed the most to human survival'*. My feeling is that if aesthetic attraction to nature is non-existent in society, then all respect for the planet is seemingly lost. The experience of beauty is inextricably connected with pleasure.

English writer John Armstrong suggests in his book *'The Secret Power of Beauty'* that *'the feelings of pleasure are themselves bound up with our general state of mind'*.⁶ When contemplating the patterns of nature I experience a visual pleasure, and this, for me encapsulates beauty. The word beauty has been analysed in many quotes by German Philosopher Immanuel Kant⁷. *'Look closely the beautiful may be small'*. If our own experience is not pleasurable we are not entitled to say that we find the scene or object beautiful.

⁵ Kellert., S. R. (2012). birthright. People and Nature in the Modern World. London, Yale University Press. p3.

⁶ Armstrong., J. (2004). The Secret Power of Beauty. . London., Alan Lane.Penguin Group. p54.

⁷ Kant, I. from <http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/11038.1>.

Researching the word conservation I came across acclaimed American artist and Cultural activist Photographer/Filmmaker, Chris Jordon. His work explores contemporary mass culture from a variety of photographic and conceptual perspectives. Jordon walks the fine lines between art and activism, beauty and horror, abstraction and representation, the visible and the invisible. His work asks us to consider our own multi-layered roles in becoming more conscious of our complex and embattled world.⁸

Jordon's work explores the phenomenon of American consumerism, using every day commonalities such as the plastic and paper cup. These large photographic works at first glance look like a twisted mass of pipes or tubes snaking across the canvas. On closer viewing you recognise the humble plastic cup stacked inside each other, bending and weaving throughout the image. This image contains one million plastic cups representing the amount used every six hours on airline flights in America. The number is substantially higher in the use of the paper cup. Mass consumption is also highlighted in his work titled "Seurat 2011' 88"x132" in three panels. This image is made up of four hundred thousand coloured plastic screw on bottle caps arranged in a tonal pointillist way, and is equivalent to the average number of plastic bottles consumed in the United States every minute. Mimicking the work of Georges Seurat⁹, French Neo-impressionist and one of the icons of 19th century painting, the image is titled 'A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande', 1884-1886. Jordon had previously completed the same image in 2007. At that time he used one hundred and six thousand aluminium cans the number used in the States every thirty seconds. Each can was arranged vertically with the correct colour tone facing for each surface of the work. These clever works look at patterns, order and colour, and also sends out a bold message, leaving the viewer to contemplate the consequences.

The power of art to reconnect us with what we feel, describes his latest body of work: The Midway Series¹⁰. It was art that led Jordon into the environmental movement, an early portrait of a garbage pile in an industrial neighbourhood sparked conversations about the politics and ethics of material consumption amongst his friends.¹¹ Midway Atoll is a small uninhabited group islands in the middle of the Pacific, formally used as a U.S. Naval Base, known for the Battle of Midway during the Second World War in the 1940,s. Midway is home to almost three million avian residents, mainly sea bird species including a large

⁸ Moore, C. (2012). Plastic Oceans. N.Y., Avery Penguin.

⁹ Courthion, P. (1988). Georges Seurat.1859-1891. N.York., H.N.Abrams.

¹⁰ Jordon, C. (2012). "vimeo.midway film " midway. Retrieved 3/5/2013, 2013, from <http://vimeo.com/midway/midwayfilm>.

¹¹ Borrelle, J. (october 2012). "Human Nature." Habitat. **40**(4): 12.13.

Albatross colony. These large sea going birds, have been known to live for sixty years, nest and rear their chicks on this deserted island. These islands are one of the world's greatest known breeding colonies. The surrounding reefs, lagoons and waters are home to dolphins, seals, squid octopus and turtles. Unfortunately it has now become commonly known as The Great Garbage Patch, one of the five concentrated oceanic gyres in the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. An ocean gyre is a circular ocean current formed by the Earth's wind pattern and forces created by the rotation of the planet. All kind of discarded debris eventually makes its way in to the centre of the gyre, trapped floating rubbish continually increasing in volume to become a floating island. Midway Atoll is in the centre of this garbage collection and where Jordon's latest film is being made

The Island is littered with plastic in all forms, bottles, large balls, coloured shards of plastic, broken down bits of former things. Many plastics do not wear down: they simply break into smaller and smaller pieces. Micro plastics make up the majority of the garbage patch, not always seen by the naked eye.

Jordon's film takes you through the life of an albatross, mating, nesting and feeding the fledgling. Food is regurgitated in to the chick, a cocktail of ocean fish and plastic in all forms. The chick continues to grow until it eventually succumbs to the toxic food supply. The image of this brown fluffy fledgling writhing in its last moments is heart breaking. It has been estimated that one third of chicks die due to ingestion of plastic fed to them by their unwitting parents. Plastic is found in the digestive tracts of nearly all albatross that nest on this Pacific Island. A still from Jordon's film shows the sun bleached skeletal remains of an albatross in its nest. The complete stomach contents are a colourful mix of bottle tops and other plastic debris. This is a film not to be missed.

At each stage of its breakdown plastic uncannily mimics the organisms' anchovies, copepods, and finally phytoplankton that other organisms feed on. Ingested, it travels up the food chain, concentrating in larger animals all the way up to us. As far back as 1969 the examination of albatross carcasses beached in the Hawaiian chain of islands found an average of eight indigestible items, each stomach contained thirty per cent of plastic fragments. Three decades later on Midway Island, examination of a dead albatross chick stomach it was found to have swallowed more than five hundred pieces of plastic debris, including bic lighters, shot gun shell cups and plastic tubes, the type used as spaces in Japanese oyster farming.¹²

Closer to the Australian coastline lies Lord Howe Island, a tropical haven with white sandy beaches and a nesting place for many sea birds. Tasmanian researcher Jennifer Lavers (Lavers. 2012) is studying the impact plastic is having on the Flesh –Footed

¹² Scigliano., C. E. a. E. (2009). Flotsametrics and the Floating World. N.York., Harper Collins. P211.212

Shearwater, an ocean going bird also known as a mutton bird, whose nests are tunnels in the ground. Loss of habitat due to urbanisation and plastic contamination is causing their numbers to decrease. The physical presence of plastic in the gut prevents the birds from receiving a full load of food at each feed resulting in lower nutrient intake, reduced fitness or death.

I continue to make art work from recycled materials, the latest being a series of prints. I have used discarded hay bale netting found on the side of the road. Mono print is my chosen media, inking up a flat surface then applying the netting to collect ink transferring net onto paper, repeating this procedure until I am happy with the results. I have made ten of these prints in various tones of blue grey. When displayed on a wall I hope that the image and the swaying movement of the net would become obvious to the viewer. More and more plastic continues to flood societies' around the world. Books have been written about ocean pollution, alarming statistics collected and recorded, and percentages of plastics found in the stomachs of our ocean going creatures are all recorded. Decades later this problem continues to increase at an alarming rate.

The ocean has always been an extremely cheap and easy way to dispose of waste. Until the late seventies ships could legally dump their ballast and rubbish in to the oceans, it was a case of out of sight out of mind in this vast space. It can be done quietly and the waste is practically untraceable. Many people in the past thought that the oceans were so enormous that factory and all types of rubbish would have little impact on the quality of the oceans, making dumping legal, but they were horribly mistaken. Millions of pounds of all types of rubbish have been legally, and illegally, discarded into the oceans. Plastics, garbage, rubbish, sewage, and different types of industrial and radioactive waste plague the oceans, leaving even the most remote areas of the oceans polluted and contaminated. Every day this once pristine environment becomes more and more degraded, resulting in the death of marine flora, fauna, and ocean aesthetics. If this abuse towards the ocean is not controlled, the chemical makeup of the ocean will be transformed, killing the base of the food chain, and ultimately all marine life. It will affect human life in some way as we rely on the ocean as a food source. It is not too late to control our use of plastic, more education and responsible recycling of all plastic items. I hope my current work delivers this all important message. Changes must be made to our everyday decision making in order to ensure this planet survives for future generations. It is imperative that we respect and preserve the quality and beauty of our marine environment.

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