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Excavating America's Future With 'Escape From the Landfill'

Huntington Beach Art Center finds beauty in humanity's discards

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published: August 02, 2012

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It's Dallal's world: Joyce Dallal's 'Receptacle'

Details:

"Escape from the Landfill" at the Huntington Beach Art Center, www.huntingtonbeachartcenter.org. Open Tues.-Thurs., noon-8 p.m.; Fri., noon-6 p.m.; Sat., noon-5 p.m. Through Sept. 1. Free.

With the sheer number of social issues I try to keep up with, I'm dismal about giving environmental issues their due. It seems so much bigger than I am—we're talking the whole world here—and hell, even just thinking about it depresses the hell out of me. And you, loyal readers, know I don't need any help being a depressive cynic.

I read the press materials before going into "Escape From the Landfill" at the Huntington Beach Art Center, and I feared the worst, but to my joy (yes, actual joy), I had nothing to fear. Curator Darlene D. DeAngelo and her trio of visionary artists have put together an exhibition that demands you think differently of the stuff you toss away, but it does so with a sense of humor and intelligence, soliciting a variety of subtle intents and take home, all without an iota of lecture.

Olga Lah collected hundreds upon hundreds of screw-top lids for her installation, *Propagate*, attaching them to the gallery walls in a barrage of yellows, whites, blues and greens. The lids look to be about the same size throughout, creating a numbing uniformity that launches its journey at the gallery's entrance, drifts out of reach to coat the upper walls, then pours down the back of the exhibition, threatening to take over the floor as though it were the Great Pacific Garbage Patch.

Free association? Checkers. Clouds. Lava. Rows of laundry detergent in a supermarket. Water. A war-room light board noting potential threats and targets. Mold. Effluent. Viruses. A map. A startling map that chronicles the likelihood that there are millions, billions, trillions of these rigid circular

chunks discarded all over the world or buried beneath our feet.

Can you say *revelation*?

It was Christmas trees and Transformers, of all things, as I walked around admiring Cynthia Minet's

unsustainable creatures: ox #1 and *unsustainable creatures: ox #2*, two life-sized beasts of burden made from recycled and repurposed plastic trash and LED lights. Eyes glowing, the oxen strain in agony and fury as they yank a plough through piles of garbage zip-tied together, and it's easy to see ourselves in their place, straining to wind our way through dumps of the waste each one of us leaves behind. The bottles of water I buy are plastic, as are the milk cartons, the cracked bumper on my car, my glasses' frame, the soles of my shoes, the keys on my typewriter, the stapler and calculator on the desk next to me, my printer, my refrigerator, my trash bags, trash can, the pen I used to write the original draft of this review. How in hell is the stuff I have going to get recycled, let alone everybody else's? It won't be, suggests the artist's third piece, the soulful *unsustainable creatures: camel*. Instead, we'll just be down on our knees, inviting the garbage to climb aboard.

Artist Joyce Dallal's short film *Mine* (done in collaboration with John Flynn) is six minutes of people, young and old, sharing stories about toys that have a special place in their hearts. They stare straight at the camera, as the narration plays over handheld tracking shots of piles of toys and old television commercials for long-forgotten toys. There's a phone number in the film you can call (310-558-4310), inviting you to participate if you have a story to share.

That blurring of the boundaries between passive observer and participant is further showcased in another corner of the room: A pile of "gently used" toys sits, one available for the taking if you bring one and donate it to take. But even these charitable toys have a story. Corralled next to the pile of "good" toys are "bad" items that are damaged, have small pieces or lead paint. This Devil's Island of Misfit Toys is segregated from the general population by a fence, so they can't mix.

Next to that is the penultimate piece of the show: Dallal's 10-foot-tall baby made of wire-mesh trashcans that's holding hundreds of pounds of broken toys. On a purely visual level, it's a staggering bit of brilliance. As a symbol, it's every crushed dream a child experiences and holds onto. As metaphor, it's a giant prison for the broken and "unrecyclable."

Despite being a voracious consumer of art, this small, intimate show felt just right, leaving me wanting more. Tightly focused as it is, this fine exhibit is small enough you'll be in and out within an hour, but it's dense enough in ideas and images that it'll go home with you.

This review appeared in print as "Junkyard Dreams: Huntington Beach Art Center exhibit finds beauty in humanity's discards."

