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## KEEPING WATCH exhibitions reveal the beauty in discarded plastics

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By Barbara Schreiber  
Correspondent

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Art made from discards is nothing new. It has been a mainstay for those who might not otherwise have access to materials – so-called folk or outsider artists – and it is also part of the contemporary art mainstream.

But art from discards – plastics in particular – has taken on a new urgency because there is so much of it. For many artists, plastic debris is not just a material; it also carries a message about how much we consume and throw away, to the peril of ourselves and our planet.

Right now in Charlotte, three exhibitions are showing us the con- relationship with dis part of [KEEPING W](#)

awareness, education and engagement. As the project continues, it will encompass history, science, writing and other disciplines, focusing on creeks in 2015 and air in 2016.

Driving this effort are UNC Charlotte's Urban Institute and College of Arts + Architecture and independent curator June Lambla of Lambla artWORKS.

Public engagement is at the core of KEEPING WATCH. This year, three visual arts projects under its banner accomplish

Slideshow

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Diedra Laird - dlaird@charlotteobserver.com

Joyce Dallal's "The Other Toy Story" sculpture, on

### MORE INFORMATION

#### YOU CAN KEEP WATCH

- **"Sustain Me Baby,"** Projective Eye Gallery, UNC Charlotte College of Arts + Architecture, runs through June 26. Clean Martini Screens is June 13, 6-9 p.m.. [centercity.unc.edu/projective-eye-art-gallery](http://centercity.unc.edu/projective-eye-art-gallery).
- **"Aurora Robson: Stayin' Alive,"** McColl Center for Visual Art, runs through July 26. [mccollcenter.org](http://mccollcenter.org)
- **More info:** [KeepingWatch.org](http://KeepingWatch.org).

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that in various ways.

“Sustain Me Baby,” at UNC Charlotte Center City’s Projective Eye Gallery, uses images of babies in humorous and horrifying ways to illustrate the consequences of our dependence on plastics.

Joyce Dallal’s “The Other Toy Story” is a 10-foot baby made out of wire mesh commonly used for trashcans. It is being filled with donated used toys, most of which will be recycled. Partly inspired by Dallal’s experience of trying to give away some of her son’s toys and finding that everyone she knew was already drowning in a sea of playthings, it makes a striking, uncomfortably funny visual.

While “The Other Toy Story” elicits a mix of nostalgia and discomfort, Chris Jordan’s “Midway” series operates on an entirely different, heartbreaking level. These photographs, taken in the Midway Islands, depict dead baby albatrosses and their stomach contents – bits of plastic debris their adoring, unknowing parents have mistakenly fed them, killing them while trying to nurture them.

## Tower of trash

“Is This Yours?” are outdoor exhibitions created by sculptor Kurt Warnke and photojournalist Nancy Pierce.

Pierce’s contribution is a series of removable, recyclable stickers that volunteers are placing around town. The stickers cleverly combine words and images (the message “Drop something?” superimposed on a photograph of plastic bottles littering a woodland), offering a fresh take on the “reduce, reuse, recycle” mantra.

Warnke created two 13-foot temporary sculptures, each incorporating three bales of high-density polyethylene that weigh about 900 pounds apiece. The sculpture at the Government Center, made from detergent bottles, is on display until early June; the one at Discovery Place, made from milk cartons, runs through late June.

These works provoke intense, often lively reactions. Some passers-by examine them for products they use; others don’t want to be confronted by monuments to the waste they generate.

“Some of our guests like ‘Is This Yours?’; others do not know what to make of it,” says Robert Corbin, vice president of learning experiences at Discovery Place. “Regardless, the installation forcefully reminds us that we must consider the cultural origins of technology and how technology represents both the hopes and consequently at times the failures of our society.”

The materials for these sculptures are on loan from the Mecklenburg County Recycling Center, which derives income from everything it recycles. The sculptures point out the importance of recycling, not only in reducing the waste stream, but also in providing revenue for the county. In these two sculptures alone, the materials are worth about \$6,000.

## From streams to sculpture

In Aurora Robson’s “Stayin’ Alive,” at McColl Center for Visual Art, plastic debris recovered from streams is transformed into alluring objects.

Dominating the exhibition is “Be Like Water,” a ceiling-suspended installation composed of tens of thousands of bottles and caps.

The exhibition also includes work Robson has created during her McColl residency with Central Piedmont Community College students, using trash retrieved from Irwin Creek in the Brightwalk neighborhood north of uptown.

“Aurora worked closely with students and community to explore how individuals can creatively restrict the flow of plastics into our waste stream,” says Lisa Hoffman, director of environmental art and community engagement at the McColl Center.

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“Working in Charlotte ... has given me a lot of hope,” Robson said. “It was a gift to work with people who share my belief that the intersection of art and the environment is worthy of serious exploration. Rarely have I had a chance to work with a community who is genuinely taking risks alongside me and investing in solving complex problems with such integrity, sensitivity and strength.”

Jacqueline McClure, a CPCC student and McColl Environmental Program intern, said:

“Working with Aurora Robson has given me the tools and insight to work in a more sustainable way. ... Working together to extract waste debris from the local environment created an instant bond amongst the people and a reconnection with nature, which is often under appreciated in urban living.”

Robson is drawn to her materials' seductive surfaces. In the resulting work, you don't see the awfulness of plastic pollution; instead, you see enchanting objects. It's a complex, mixed message – partly about transforming bad into good, but also about being drawn to things that have the capacity to harm us.

### Origins of collaboration

KEEPING WATCH came about almost by happenstance, when Lambla, UNCC Urban Institute's Mary Newsom, and UNCC College of Art + Architecture's Director of Galleries Crista Cammaroto realized they were each working on projects that involved shared visions and goals.

Lambla was seeking a venue for an exhibition dealing with water, air and trees, to bring attention to Catawba Riverkeepers, Clean Air Carolina and Charlotte Trees. Then she became aware that Cammaroto was planning “Sustain Me Baby.” In turn, Cammaroto told her about “City of Creeks,” an exhibition concept originated by Newsom, with whom Cammaroto was collaborating.

Other partners were eager to jump on board. They have been joined by a growing list of partners, which now includes Discovery Place, McColl Center for Visual Art, Mecklenburg Solid Waste, City of Charlotte, Catawba Riverkeeper Foundation, Clean Air Carolina, Charlotte Ballet, Sustain Charlotte and Charlotte Museum of History.

The three started talking in the summer of 2013 and had to move fast to get this year's iteration, KEEPING WATCH on PLASTICS, off the ground. Luckily, there were a few projects – “Sustain Me Baby” in particular – that could come under the KEEPING WATCH banner.

Newsom's research wound up on wall texts for “Sustain Me Baby.” Lambla got to work facilitating projects like Warnke's sculptures and Pierce's stickers.

Lambla says that they don't want to dwell on “doomsday messages. ... One impetus of the project is to tell what good progress is happening and to clue the public in to sustainable practices that are being promoted in a good way by nonprofit groups, by the city, by the county.”

Even during this seat-of-the-pants first year, there has been a rich array of related programming, including a webinar about plastics in the health care industry, a screening and discussion of the film “Bag It,” and EcoFAB Trash Couture's Recycled Runway fashion show. On June 13, Projective Eye Gallery will show the film “Growing Cities” and clips from Jean Paul Ganem, followed by a discussion on the need for urban recycling of food waste; guests can enjoy clean martinis from local distilleries.

### Coming up

This year, the KEEPING WATCH message has been delivered almost exclusively through art. In 2015 and 2016, the project will expand to include science, history and more public participation. KEEPING WATCH will provide artists with research, both scientific and historical, that they can incorporate into their work.

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The 2015 theme is KEEPING WATCH on CREEKS. Newsom initially wanted to publish profiles of Little Sugar Creek/Briar Creek, Irwin Creek/Stewart Creek, and McDowell Creek on the Urban Institute's [PlanCharlotte.org](http://PlanCharlotte.org). The goal was to delve into the history and the science of the creeks and explore them as "personalities of value."

But Newsom realized that expanding it to include an exhibition would reach a broader audience. This is when she sought Cammaroto's advice and they discovered they and Lambla had common aspirations.

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation has provided funding to support the involvement of neighborhoods, which includes gathering oral histories from people in creekside neighborhoods such as Greenville and Brightwalk.

Art made from discards is an established genre. And environmental education, whether in the form of a panel discussion or a clean-a-stream-in-matching-T-shirts activity, is ubiquitous. How is KEEPING WATCH different?

"With a collaborative project like this, you can come at it from not only the art, but through the science, through the history, through education," says Lambla. "The people already involved in those initiatives know the story. They're trying to get the word out, but usually, it's to a limited audience. But by going across disciplines, we're hoping to reach a broader public."

The principals of KEEPING WATCH are counting on its scale and scope to keep it from being an exercise in preaching to the choir.

"When you put a bunch of choirs together," says Cammaroto, "the total resonance is much bigger."

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