

The Art of Recycling

It is hard to say where my interest in “alternative art materials” came from: my father who was a conservationist and a recycler long before most of us started thinking about the consequences of our “throw away” lifestyle; a student in my kindergarten class who asked for the Jell-O boxes on the day we made Jell-O for snack, Renata made pocketbooks for her dolls out of the boxes we would have thrown away; Max and Ned Blackwelder, my landlords at my Hillsborough studio who never gave up on finding a use for anything or a way of repairing an item the rest of us would have deemed useless; being the child of parents who were young adults during the depression and the grandchild of those close enough to “The War” to know want and need; and most recently, a piece I made for the annual Botanical Gardens Show entitled “Compost Mentis, Non-compost Mentis” which has kept me thinking about the issue years after the end of the show!

I remember reading selections from pioneer diaries in one of my high school English classes and being impressed that nothing was thrown away. Our fore bearers reused everything. I read about people searching the ashes of burned buildings to find nails to be used in rebuilding. Quilts were made from old clothing that no longer fit any member of the family. A use was found for every part of a slaughtered animal.

When I was a little girl my mother, my siblings and I spent the long summer months away from the heat and humidity of Charleston at my grandparents’ house in Johnston, SC. My father came up on weekends. It must have been one of those summers that my mother made a dress for me with material from feed sacks. I have a vague memory of picking out which sacks we would use. It was one of my favorite dresses; even then I loved the concept of transforming one thing into a second generation of use. Later, I learned that grains and flour were packed in sacks made from material that could be reused by farmers’ wives for quilts and other sewing projects. I don’t know if it was a marketing strategy or became one.

Now so many of the products we consume are encased in alluring packaging. Mostly, we rip off and discard the wrapping and consume or use the product. Several years ago I was collecting material for an art project. (My husband suggested to me that I not tell people that I was going around picking up cigarette butts.) While engaged in that activity I also began to pick up discarded cigarette packaging; lots of times it is very appealing and stands out. And more importantly, I began to think about the aesthetics and psychology that goes into packaging a product and of the many things that we use once and discard. I like to work with these materials in my own art and delight in the clever and stunningly creative way that I see many of the artists in the first ever Scrapel Hill Art Show sponsored by Chapel Hill’s own University Mall. Congratulations to the organizers and participants!

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