Detrimental Detritus

In a recent documentary called 'How The Earth Was Made,' we are taken on a history of our planet using the rather grounded science of geology. Slicing through million-year-old layers of rock, the program reveals how all of history could be traced: when life started, when ice ages occurred, and even when great catastrophes happened, like the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs. It also proves just how briefly humans have been around. But towards the series end, the presenter takes some samples from the recent sedimentary layers in a river that will eventually build up to form new rocks. He rolls the mud of today in his hands and extracts some tiny coloured grains, our greatest contribution to the four billion year old geological history of the future: plastic.

It is a little disturbing that the most pervasive geological legacy from the period of modern humanity is litter. The prevalence of waste in this century, or perhaps our inability to manage it, can most clearly be seen in the Pacific Trash Vortex. It sounds like a neo-punk band but it's actually a gargantuan collection of refuse that has found its way into the ocean, circulating through currents to the pool in the centre of the north Pacific Ocean, forming one of the world's largest artificial floating waste dumps. It would be entirely out of sight and literally out of mind, were it not for the work of oceanographers, and even eccentric millionaires like David de Rothschild, who sailed a boat made from plastic bottles through the vortex to raise global awareness. Of interest is what makes up the majority of waste in this drifting atoll of trash (and the similar floating waste islands in the Indian and Atlantic Oceans). Nearly all of these vortices consist entirely of clumps of plastic: shopping bags, lolly wrappers, drink bottles, and even those bits that you rip off the top of your cigarette packs, all out there floating like a toxic blob, far away from its creators.

The focus of Carly Fischer's work is not so much in terms of the scale of waste but the action of waste as a byproduct of corporate product consumption — familiar and conspicuous litter, the branded detritus of the west that has inexorably spread into the developing world and now become truly global. Fischer calls our awareness to both the source materials and the originating brands of her simulacra waste sculptures. She is pointing not only to the consumer who has abandoned the remnants of their own consumption, becoming someone else's problem, but to the companies that emblazon their logos across the problem itself.

Perhaps there is a marketing edge to trash? Does a company brand benefit from having the roads and waterways smothered in their crumpled logos, or is it simply detrimental detritus, working against their best efforts at maintaining a veneer of corporate responsibility? A study of everyday litter was conducted by Manchester Metropolitan University Business School in 2006, and resulted in an award-winning paper titled 'How (and Where) the Mighty Have Fallen: Branded Litter.' The researchers discovered in their sampling that the market leaders in consumables, unsurprisingly, made up the most commonly seen litter, among them: Coke, Marlboro, Stella and McDonald's. It's little accident then that Fischer's own observations should lead to similar brands emerging as subjects for her artwork. Yet she has taken this to a global level, combining international brands with more national and regional products and insignias, creating a branded amalgam that connects back to consumers around the world.

The actions of Fischer's work also speak to a quality of representational aesthetics that are embedded in realist sculpture yet blatantly defy the established norms that idealise beauty and conveniently ignore all that is unpleasant. In some ways, her works prevent us from seeing what lies beneath, any form of naturalism is overwhelmed and literally consumed by consumerism itself. One could look at Fischer's work as environmental, but this would not take into account its material form or its realist presentation. Fischer has established her practice over many years in the mediums of paper and foam core with her perfect waste replicas. Her global travels, from Australia to Japan to Germany and more recently America, have not only revealed the same by-products of contemporary life, but also driven a growing awareness of the interconnectedness of all things, even the rubbish.

Fischer's use of the Ben Lee song, where the exhibition draws its title, playing inside the gallery space moves the work out of the purely visual and into a more multisensory experience. This creates a link between product consumption and art as consumption, where the onus falls back on the user. The

presentation of her works alludes to their tactile qualities, subverting the visitor's experience, coaxing us to pick up what was disposed, to examine apparent detritus littering the gallery floor. Fischer's recent inclusion of music in her installations creates an atmosphere of consumerist pleasure, the light tune playing on our sensibilities, should we see this work for what it is: painstakingly handmade and intimate, or should we question our relations to the artwork itself. These fake by-products re-enter the consumerist space of shopping centres, where music lulls us into passive receptivity, tempting us to buy things we could never possibly need.

'We're All in This Together' clearly signifies an audio-visual connection to the parasitic nature of corporate branding that drifts globally through both formal and inadvertent channels. The seemingly accidental by-products of globalisation even played out recently, and somewhat sinisterly, in global political uprisings around the world — from the Arab Spring to the snuffed-out Jasmine Spring, and to the slightly messy worldwide Occupy Movement demonstrations, which raised the ire of city councils being forced to clean up extra trash. The people are revolting after all. Yet these same global brands, whose end products clog our oceans and landfills, were quick to swoop on the marketing potential of having thousands of participants waving placards in public spaces, while being watched by millions online. Fischer explains the link here to global corporates once again turning the detrimental into the profitable. So the May 1st Riots in Berlin became a buy-in for Levi's 'Reinvent Yourself: Go Forth' campaign, while Coke, Pepsi and Mars cynically capitalised on the Arab Spring protests with their associated 'Renewal' campaigns. What interests Fischer here is the perversity in destruction, disaster and even anarchy. Her work importantly highlights that those without a true interest in equity take the opportunities to step in and make profit from the rest — the people who can least afford it.

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