

Cynthia Liu

Under the Sea, Under the Plastic

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Material: Found objects (plastic bottles and cups, cans, plastic bags, straws), Wire. Digital projector, Wood, Cardboard, Acrylic paint.

Dimensions: Garbage pile: ; Projector Box:

ISSUE: PLASTIC ACCUMULATIONS IN THE OCEAN

Plastics are accumulating in the oceans, and they tend to breakdown into smaller pieces and are swallowed by marine animals, causing serious life threats to a lot of species. Plastic is created and used by human, it is scary just to think about how many plastic each person would use per day. But what is scarier is the fact that people do not realize their action is causing such a huge impact in the diversity—we might not see it happening, but it is a serious and it would eventually affect us human.

Here in Urbana-Champaign, I was shocked by the amount of plastic and garbage wastes produced everyday, even the restaurants choose to use styrofoam for takeaway box, utensils, and cups. Not considering the fact the styrofoam is even harder to biodegrade than the normal plastic. These garbage would mostly end up in the ocean. Seeing people use the plastic (styrofoam) and dump it into the garbage bin afterward, not aware of their action. Therefore, I wanted to make an artwork that brings up the issue of plastic accumulation, make people aware of this issue and change their habit of using non-reusable cups.

Picture taken on a nice warm Sunday afternoon (2/19/17 4:50PM) : Overloaded trash on the Quad



INSPIRATIONS

Designer: Steve Cutts | Artist: Tim Noble & Sue Webster

Steve Cutts is an illustrator who incorporates satire into his drawing, to critique social or political norms. Making fun of a convention, something people do everyday, or something that seems normal to everyone but there's actually a problem existed, it's just that it's being done everyday so people become blinded to see the problem. He uses satire to awake people on the problem that exist in the society that people are not aware of. I love his idea of applying sarcasm in something that was "thought to be normal" but actually was not at all. It's an effective way to highlight a problem, because the illustration itself is hilarious, at the same time it might be portraying something people do everyday, so there would a sense of shame by looking at the illustration, the feeling of waking-up, which provides a more powerful motivation to change their problematic action.

Tim Noble and Sue Webster are a married couple, they collected trash, and assembled them into certain forms, so that when light was casted on the pile of trash, the shadow appeared behind was something recognizable. I like the surprising feeling as the shadow appears. If just looking at the pile of trash itself it made no sense, only when the light is casted, the meaning of the trash suddenly made sense to the viewer.

Designer+Artist

The reaction from audience is a big component in both artworks, designer Steve Cutts uses satire to make fun of a convention, to create a sudden realization that something people do or believe actually lies a problem; artists Time and Sue make good use of shadow as the medium of their artwork, to create the surprising feeling when the light is being casted on a pile of objects. Hence, I wanted to combine two ideas into my artwork: create something that is sarcastic on something people do everyday, and they would be surprised when seeing the final product, hence, realize the severe impact their everyday action could bring to the environment. Therefore, I chose to use garbage to assemble a shadow that shows two hands holding a knife, about to stab a whale. Also, I used the lyric from *Under The Sea*, as the caption of my artwork. Since Little Mermaid is a disney movie and it is supposed to be happy, but not when it is being applied into the global environmental issue.

From the viewer's perspective

The first thing the viewer see would be the box and a pile of trash in front of it, perhaps not even aware that the trash is part of the artwork. They would noticed the illustration of a whale looking upward drawn on the box, with the caption "*You dream about going up there / But that is a BIG MISTAKE.*" and hopefully know that it is taken from the song *Under the Sea*. Then as they approach the box, they would see the text "The choice is up to you." with a styrofoam cup and a reusable cup at the side. Hopefully they would pick one of the cup up. If they pick up the reusable cup, they'd see a smiley face saying "Thank you :)"; however, if they pick up the styrofoam cup, the light from the projector (which locates inside the box) will be activated, and as the shadow of the stabbing-hand-killing-whale will appear behind the trash. The viewer would

made the connection with the illustration on the box, and the caption about going up above the sea, that the whale appear in the shadow (about to be killed) is the one that dreamed about going up there. The before and after storyline is:

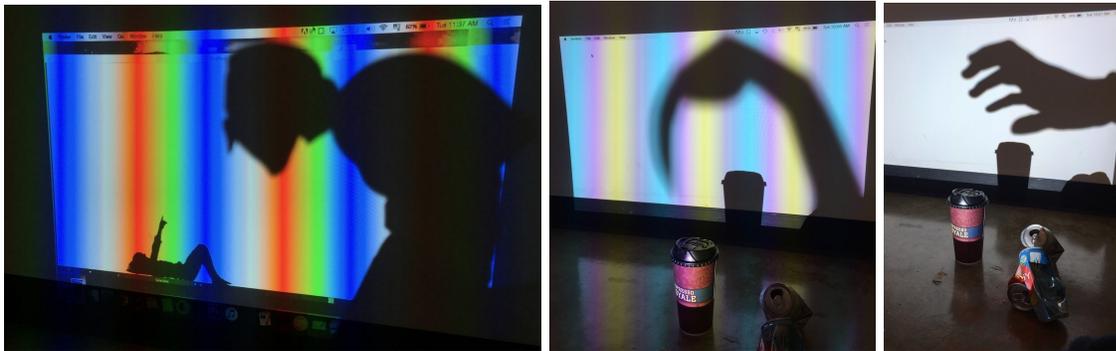
The whale is like Little Mermaid, dreaming of going up above the sea, and one day he did, but he was struggling through the pile of trash floating on ocean surface, and when it finally had his head out of the surface, there was a knife pointing directly at him and he was about to die at any second. Link back to the lyric caption on the box: But that is a big mistake.

The knife holding hands could be seen as a metaphor, or real hands that the plastic transformed into, because the plastics are as threatening and dangerous as the knife holding hands. The shadow should create a shocking reaction to the viewer, a sense of threat and urge in change of action, that **IT IS HAPPENING RIGHT NOW the whale is about to die and human have to make a change in their action NOW**. The final thought that the viewer should take away is to understand the problem of plastic accumulations in the ocean is threatening the marine animal. They should also be aware of their choice of using a plastic cup or a reusable cup in restaurant could make such a big difference.

THE MAKING PROCESS

What kind of shadow?

- *The shadow should be effective and powerful but not cliché or boring.*
- *The shadow has to be doable, the shape has to look like the shape it's supposed to be in order to be effective and convincing.*
- After a few experiments I discovered that shadow has the property of threatening and shocking when casted on the wall. So I decided to make something that feels like it's ABOUT to happen right now and there is no time left. The hand stabbing idea seems suitable.
- Then I think about what thing would the hand stab? Earth? A human? A ship on the ocean? Then I think it would make the most sense and also logical if I make the shadow a plastic accumulation in the ocean, and just make a marine animal swim up the sea surface and see a hand with knife coming toward him.
- A whale is easier to make than a ship, in terms of doability.



Collecting garbage

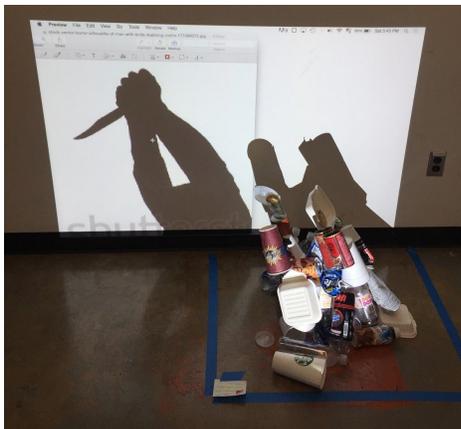
- Asked friends to give me their recycled bottles
- Went out early in the morning to collect garbage for two times.
- Basically just kept the process of collecting garbage throughout the making process.
- The number of items I collected: approximately 135 items
 - It was shocking that how much waste is being produced in such a short amount of time!

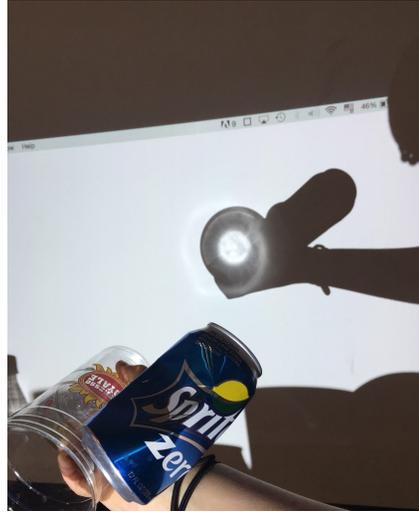
The picture shows only 1/3 of the total trash collected



Making the shadow

- At first it was really hard because I was the kind of person who have the working habit of thinking and planning everything well before executing. So at first I was going very slowly and thinking which piece should go where. But then I realized it can't work like that. This project is something I have to "just do it try it experiment with it" in order to know the answer.
- The specificity of the angle of assemblment. I successfully built the hands, but it fell down the next day I went in. So I had to repair it, and I tried to just glue the pieces back together, but it didn't work, because the garbage could only make that certain shape of shadow when it was being placed at a certain angle. It was really hard for me to figure out the angle, so I just disassembled all the pieces, and build it all over again.
- The adhesive problem. I realized that hot glue gun can attach the pieces well at first, but because of gravity pulling, the cans would gradually detached from hot glue, and that was the reason for the hands falling apart. I think of ways to build a stronger support for the parts that are fragile, with one thing kept in mind: cannot look too human-made, still **maintaining its "trash" feeling**. In the end I used straw and wire. The wire worked especially well, because the next day when I went in, even though the cans was detached from hot glue again, the wire holds them together very tightly.
- Whale not look like a whale. It took me a long time to assemble the shadow of the whale, I asked my friends to tell me which part look weird. In the end, I think that to make it even more recognizable to the audience, is to just draw it on the box, so that there would be a reference to the shadow. It is also how I came up with the idea for making the box. To make the box a part of this artwork, making use of the exhibition furniture.
- **Choice of garbage:** I discovered there are certain properties in certain trash that could create cool shadow. For example, transparent plastic bottles, the shadow is semi-transparent, which is perfect to form the shadow for ocean water. It feels silky and watery. Also, there is kind of like a shiny sun-ring thing between the whale and the hand, which is casted by *Royale Espresso* cup. It does not only create just the shiny circle, but also two "halo-like" rings on the outer, which could be used for making the effect of the threat stronger, emphasizing that it needs ATTENTION and everyone should look here.





Making the Box

- With the idea of whale in mind, I think it'd be great if I could **integrate interaction with the viewer** into the piece, it is also the most direct way to address the concern that plastic accumulation is caused by human action, that "we are the killers".
- I wanted to keep the box simple, so that it doesn't attract too much attention away from the garbage. The top is painted in black, representing the world where garbage is created, also known as the world human lives. Below the surface is the ocean, and a whale at the bottom.
- So the top black part is human action (your choice of choosing a reusable cup or a plastic cup), the bottom part is the sea world, which is the part that is directly being impacted by the decision viewer make above the sea.