

# THE SATURDAY PAPER

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## PORTRAIT

Sarah Goffman on finding art among other people's rubbish. By *Sarah Price*.

## Recycling artist Sarah Goffman

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She walks the streets in search of garbage. Takes bottles from parks and picnics, and plastics lodged in gutters and drains. She collects shopping bags washed through waterways, old tobacco pouches and plates. The streets are her storage containers, nature her muse. Sarah Goffman is a garbage collector, trash converter and artist. She sees beauty where most don't.

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Sitting in her small backyard in Sydney's southern suburbs, Goffman is surrounded by some of her "collection". Behind her, on the shed's roof, glass bottles are lined in the scalloped grooves of the tin. To her right is a ceramic sculpture of a boy, sitting beside a well. Holding a storage container with pale fingers, he wears a fountain of plastic flowers where his head would once have been. Suspended from the lip of the shed's roof is a female figurine, dangling among a dying bamboo plant. There's an old hoop attached to some trellis, floral tiles, numbered tiles, an array of pot plants.

Goffman wears a black artist's apron and a slash of bright lipstick. She smiles broadly and talks with her hands, constantly. "I would love to change people's minds about how they see rubbish. Everything can be used as something else. I have the fortune to see and recognise these beautiful things."

She calls herself a forager, a garbage hunter. If she needs something for her art, she walks around until she finds it. Providence delivers, she says. If you don't find what you're looking for, you'll find something else. Once, while in Tasmania on a residency, she couldn't find any garbage, so she collected stones.

Tipping her face towards the bright sky, she closes her eyes. Autumn sunshine patterns her skin. "The answer is often right in front of you. Sometimes it's just being still. Enjoy the light on the passionfruit vine. There's brilliance in that. A square inch of land can teach you something. Nature is so enormous. We are just tiny minions. I was always the one going, 'Look at that moon.' I wanted to be in that moon. I wanted to stay there, and lick it and suck it and eat it." She opens her eyes and bursts into deep, gravelly laughter. "Art is life. I see art as utilitarian. I need art to look at it. If things are too blank... I don't know how people live. As an artist I want to share it. I want to take it and give it to you. Other artists have given to me the beauty of a shopping trolley or a scuff mark on a bench – or something – so that I can get through the tedium of life."

In her current exhibition at Wollongong Art Gallery, Goffman is sharing her collection of rubbish made beautiful. She has transformed discarded plastics into intricate replicas of traditional Chinese and Japanese ceramics. They look deceptively fragile. The designs are a "forgery", she says. "The eye is fooled, and that is an interesting thing in itself. A lot of people think it is ceramic. I love that trickery. I think that's what art is about: a riddle, a giggle. When I was growing up I used to make fake passports and money. I still make forgery of money and things of prestige, symbols of excess." Her hands slowly slice and swoop through the air, like they are telling the story. "The tension between beauty and ugliness is profoundly interesting. Ugliness can be beautiful if it's just framed right. I guess a gallery is a great place to frame anything. It's a rarefied place."

Originally, Goffman started working in the theatre, making props. "But I thought, 'Fuck the theatre, it's for the rich.' Even with a great play, you're mouthing to an upper-middle-class audience. I remember transitioning to art, thinking, 'I'm still making props, but I'm making them for anyone.'" With art, she says, the audience are the actors, real life the stage. "Real life is endearing. The reality of garbage is real. I'm always looking for plastics and little tokens of people's littering. It is poetry."

We walk a dirt pathway to visit her low-roofed studio in the back of the garden. Lining the yellow walls inside, shelves are filled with boxes and papers: Tupperware containers with melted-out bottoms, discarded shampoo bottles, Officeworks water drums, paints and brushes and books, Goffman's luxury bong collection, elegantly decorated in golds and greens. "The

everyday can be beautiful,” she says. “Even when I’ve cleaned the containers and scoured, even before I’ve decorated, they are beautiful. There’s this wonderment, this magic, that I can’t get enough of. I have arrangements that I sit and play with, or they play with me. I feel like a conduit sometimes. They tell me where they go.”

Standing beside her work table, Goffman picks up an empty water bottle. “It’s like a voodoo. There’s this container that’s had the lips of somebody on it, their hands on it. I’m erasing that by washing it and getting the labels off, but it’s got its history. People can readily associate with it. It’s not far removed from your average life, but it’s taking that and making it into something glorious – that’s the alchemy.”

It’s the convenience of plastics, the drawbacks of our consumer lifestyle, that tension of Western throwaway society, that drives her, Goffman says. A lot of what she does is political, her way of working as an activist. “If I didn’t see this horror I wouldn’t be so driven to reflect it back, and have it be seen. The regime is totally awry. What are we going to do, build a giant memorial for the Great Barrier Reef?” As well as speaking to common people, she wants her art to speak to politicians, to those who make legislation. “The voice of the people is art. Let it be known that when I die, Canberra can have my work. I would love to give it to them. I am at their service.” Her way of changing things, she says, is to eradicate garbage pollution – “the vandals of this environment” – to take it and convert it into something that is beautiful and rarefied.

“I can’t wait to finish what I’m doing, so that I can move on to drawings of household rubbish when it’s council clean-up time. Sometimes those arrangements are fucking art. I’m like, ‘Whoa.’ I really see it. It’s a sculpture. I wish I could take it all. The truck drives up and they put everything in and crunch it down. It’s criminal – the waste in this world.”

This article was first published in the print edition of The Saturday Paper on May 27, 2017 as "Rapt in plastic".