

Sarah Goffman: Waste not...



Sarah Goffman, *I am a 3-D Printer*, 2017, PET plastic, other plastics, permanent marker, wooden base, installation view. Photograph by Bernie Saunders.



HR HYATT-JOHNSTON

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Sydney-based artist Sarah Goffman and writer HR Johnston both hate to see anything go to waste. They met to discuss how Goffman turns trash into treasure.

Artist Sarah Goffman hates waste. "I can't believe what is thrown out, ending up in landfill, desecrating this earth," she says. I recall Sarah admiring a teacup I used when I worked at Artspace and saying that if it ever broke she would love it. It was classic Shelley, which I had found in an opportunity shop. Of course if I had broken it, I would have given the teacup to her. But I am careful with that cup and hope it will be a long time before I can give it to Sarah.

I first met Sarah Goffman in the mid 1990s. She was working at FirstDraft, which is one of the oldest artist run initiatives (ARIs) in Australia. Sarah was part of a new group that had taken over in 1996 and I was part of the previous managing team. Perhaps FirstDraft's longevity is due to its strategy of having volunteer directors that change every two years. Over the past few decades many innovative artists have been involved. Watching them come and go is like watching a National Geographic program, it is interesting to see what happens with those involved. They were all budding artists. Some make it. Some don't, and some move on to do other stuff. At that moment they were passionate and committed to what they were doing. Sarah remains a passionate practicing artist.



Sarah Goffman. Photograph by Hamish Ta-mé.

Sarah and I have similar family stories. Our parents were European war babies growing up between the First and Second World Wars. Sarah's parents met on a ship while migrating to Australia in the late 1950s. The family were transient for much of her childhood. As Sarah recollects "We lived out of suitcases, travelling and moving round a lot. If you did not have a lot of cash you invented other solutions."

It's amazing what you can find. As they say, one person's trash... Some call it dumpster-diving. I prefer the term "gleaning." Sarah says, "I was taught not to waste food or materials as my father had grown up without a lot of money and lived frugally. Gleaning or recycling wasn't something special, it was essential." I like the term that Sarah

uses to describe herself. "I am a trash converter and forensic garbologist," she says.

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The art of gleaning is very practical if you are short of cash. It requires a certain amount of dexterity, ingenuity and adaptability. There is no such thing as a free lunch. Gleaners work hard at picking up what others deem to be waste. You need to be always on the lookout and not too proud.

Sarah has been sourcing materials from the streets since 1992. I asked her how she finds stuff. "When I take my two dogs for walks I use it as an opportunity to find and collect the detritus that others throw out," she says. "I do what I can to stop rubbish entering waterways and restore or convert it into something else." Sometimes she makes unexpected discoveries, other times she stumbles across exactly what she was looking for. "It's like I am meant to find it." Often, what she calls "a process of gleaning and cleaning up" results in amazing artworks.

In 2008 I saw a collection of objects at the Tin Sheds Gallery in a group show called *Paradise Found*. I was so excited by these ceramic works that looked like something from the Ming Dynasty, I wanted them. I really wasn't interested in anything else. They looked valuable. Then it slowly dawned on me after I got closer that they weren't real ceramics. I recognised those shapes. I had drunk liquids from those bottles. I was looking at rubbish, complete rubbish turned into something remarkable by Sarah Goffman. I had to laugh. She had transformed unloved plastic bottles and other detritus into what at first glance looked like classic masterpieces. Instead they were contemporary masterpieces.



Sarah Goffman. Photograph by Hamish Ta-mé.

"When I made my first blue and white pieces I wanted a lot of them. I wanted my own collection of beautiful objects," Sarah recalls. "So I made hundreds of them. I had my very own collection of beautiful, original ready-mades from my gleaned objects."

Recently I saw Sarah's solo show, *I am a 3D Printer*, at the Wollongong Art Gallery. She responded to their Mann-Tatlow Asian Art Collection, and using her gleaner's artistic-twist made discarded waste look like an expensive collection of classical artefacts that would normally be monitored via security cameras and guards. The exhibition was planned with that intention. "I installed them as rarefied exquisite objects in glass vitrines alongside furniture from their collection and items from my own," Sarah explains. "So it looked like a real collection amassed over several years."

With an incredible attention to detail, Sarah adorns and transforms waste into precious and wonderful objects. I wish I had thought of it first. We both believe that to reuse is better than to recycle. And recycling is better than throwing out. Sarah shares. I keep. But we both can't stand waste.

Sarah Goffman: *I am a 3D Printer*

Wollongong Art Gallery

11 March - 18 June