



2021

Animating Plastics: Shinto and Environmentalism in Sayaka Ganz's *Reclaimed Creations*

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Notes:

Erin Inouye won the first place in the Humanities: Critical Research category. She is a double major in English and Art History, enrolled in both the College of Arts & Sciences and the College of Fine Arts. Additionally, she is an intern in the Learning Lab at the University of Kentucky Libraries Special Collections Research Center.

Dr. Miriam Kienle was the faculty mentor.

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Recommended Citation

Inouye, Erin, "Animating Plastics: Shinto and Environmentalism in Sayaka Ganz's *Reclaimed Creations*" (2021). *Oswald Research and Creativity Competition*. 39.
<https://uknowledge.uky.edu/oswald/39>

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Animating Plastics: Shinto and Environmentalism in Sayaka Ganz's *Reclaimed Creations*

A pair of horses galloping through a wall. A cluster of dolphins and a whale suspended midair. A bright bird bursting forth. These colorful creatures in motion are just a few of what sculpture artist Sayaka Ganz has to offer in her *Reclaimed Creations* collection. Ganz's sculptures imitate the brushstrokes of traditional Japanese calligraphy-style paintings with her own twist. On closer inspection, an observer will find that these creations are not mere strokes of paint, but a multitude of plastic objects. Everything from spatulas to clothing hangers make up the figures in Ganz's collection, a colorful plastic menagerie. In this paper, I argue that Sayaka Ganz's *Reclaimed Creations* reflect the Shinto environmentalist paradigm by promoting anti-wastefulness through beauty.

Born in Yokohama, Japan, Ganz is strongly connected to and influenced by her Japanese roots, however she grew up between Japan, Brazil, and Hong Kong, and completed her arts education at Indiana University Bloomington. But no matter how far from Japan Ganz finds herself, her Shinto beliefs surrounding object value, beauty, and harmony are always closely tied to her artwork. In the artist's statement on her website, Ganz says that she "grew up with Shinto animist belief that all things in the world have spirits. Thus, when I see discarded items on the street, I feel a deep sadness for them and I am moved to make these abandoned objects happy."¹ Ganz's emotional connection to this animist spirituality is deeply ingrained in her work, and what she attributes as the origin of her desire to create works of art out of used objects that would otherwise be thrown away.

Ganz began her sculpture career working with scrap metal and it was with these metal forms that she developed her signature style of animal sculptures that resemble things both mechanical and natural simultaneously. While all the objects in her *Reclaimed Creations* series are plastic rather than metal, all of Ganz's sculptural works begin with wire armatures as the base

¹ Sayaka Ganz, "SAYAKA GANZ," <https://sayakaganz.com/>.

skeletons upon which the forms are built. In a video on her website, Ganz stated that she transitioned from metal to plastic while in graduate school when she felt her work was becoming repetitive. After finding a plastic chain at a thrift store that was similar in design to the metal chains she had experience working with, Ganz said she had a moment of realization that she should continue her work in plastic. She collects plastic objects, mostly household items like kitchen utensils and coat hangers, from second-hand and thrift stores, keeping a large stock of items at her home organized by color.²

Color is a large part of Ganz's work in *Reclaimed Creations*, as each piece is brightly colored in its own way. Ganz self describes her style of sculpture as "3D impressionism"³, reflected by the way she uses the plastic forms to create elegant flowing lines through her work like brush strokes. Perhaps one of the best examples of this is in her work entitled "Emergence II"⁴ which depicts the head, torso, and front legs of two horses, one is black and the other in white, seemingly galloping through the gallery wall in front of which they have been placed. The back halves of the horses seem to dissipate into thin air with dynamic yet gentle flowing implied lines. On closer inspection, the main components of "Emergence II" are plastic kitchen utensils and other similar simple household items. A slotted spoon becomes an ear, and a bent spatula part of the mane. Ganz uses the monochromatic color palette as a means of creating a smooth cohesion between the objects. On its own, a black spoon is just that, but in the larger context, surrounded by other plastic black objects it forms a defining part of an animal. This idea of tossed away objects becoming something greater, or coming together to form something beautiful is integral to the message of Ganz's work.

² Ganz, "SAYAKA."

³ Ganz, "SAYAKA."

⁴ See Images: Figure 1.

In her article “Sacred Forests, Sacred Nation,” Aike P. Rots introduces the concept of the “Shinto Environmentalist Paradigm,”⁵ or the idea that “Shinto is a primordial tradition of nature worship (sometimes referred to as ‘animistic’), said to contain ancient ecological knowledge on how to live in harmonious coexistence with nature.”⁶In other words, the Shinto Environmentalist Paradigm encompasses a view in which Japanese Shinto/Animistic beliefs are spiritually connected to and hold the answers to contemporary environmental issues. Rots’s article explores how over time, Shintoism has transformed from its Japanese origin which was centered on worshipping the emperor and loyalty to Japan. The transformation of Shintoism led to the development of such ideas as the Shinto Environmentalist Paradigm which actually hinges on Western perceptions of Shinto as a mystic exotic nature based religion. In fact, Shinto is more of a set of daily practices and personal societal beliefs held by many Japanese people individually rather than a large organized religion.

While Shinto is often tied to Buddhism in terms of its religious nature, it stands that Shinto has transformed into something larger than just a religion. Shinto is something to be practiced rather than worshipped. It is a practical set of spiritual beliefs. Many Japanese people have integrated Shinto practices and beliefs into their everyday lives but do not claim to have any religious affiliations. As evidenced by Ganz’s own artist statement, her personal animist beliefs, instilled in her as a child, are set apart from any kind of religious beliefs, but they are what drive the meaning behind her work. The environmental message that comes with working with reclaimed and found objects, especially in Ganz’s context, seemingly came second to her personal animist message: giving objects a second-chance after being discarded satisfies their

⁵ Aike P. Rots, "Sacred Forests, Sacred Nation: The Shinto Environmentalist Paradigm and the Rediscovery of "Chinju No Mori"." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 42, no. 2 (2015): 205-33. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43686903>.

⁶ Rots, “Sacred.”

souls. This is tied closely to Rots' Shinto Environmentalist Paradigm, as the belief seems to propose another reason to be anti-wasteful that is more spiritual than scientific. Ganz's animist message draws on spiritual ideas to project a practical solution to overconsumption and plastic waste production.

Simultaneously, this message implies that creating art with pre-existing objects could be a solution to some issues of plastic waste and the general waste created by the artistic community. Ganz herself claims that using recycled plastic objects to create art that amplifies the objects' value and especially their beauty could be more effective than more negative leaning eco-art that focuses on the dire state of the environment. "I want to convey the message about the environment in a fun and inspiring way because when I'm given a negative incentive, when I'm told if you don't do this something terrible is going to happen... if instead, if it's turned into a game for instance, that I can really enjoy or if there's a reason for me to want to do this instead of having to do it."⁷ Ganz is not quite telling viewers that production of plastic items should cease, but she is more saying that since the items have been and are being made and wasted, something better can be made of them. Landfills and the natural environment does not have to be the final resting place for these objects.

The environmental awareness side of Ganz's work is, in my opinion, most evident in her depictions of sea creatures. "Nanami" is a 16 foot long whale made from blue, green, purple, black, and white plastic objects. Whether it is swooping through an empty gallery⁸ or above a garden,⁹ "Nanami" is an enormous scale reminder of one of the great creatures of our planet affected by pollution and overconsumption. However, "Nanami" is beautiful and seems untroubled by the waste that it is made from. Herein lies the factor which sets Ganz's work apart

⁷ Ganz, "SAYAKA."

⁸ See Images: Figure 2.

⁹ See Images: Figure 3.

from other eco-oriented artists. Ganz chooses not to engage with the negativity or the fire and brimstone style of activism which stresses the catastrophic effects of human pollution and waste. *Plastic Capitalism: Contemporary Art and the Drive to Waste* by Amanda Boetzkes examines how the artistic community interacts with plastic as a medium and a message, but curiously Ganz's work does not really fit in with that of the other artists discussed in the book. Ganz's *Reclaimed Creations* are not "grotesque" or "campy" amalgams of plastic waste like *Heap* by Jim Shaw (discussed in Boetzkes' book)¹⁰. The *Creations* are not doomsday reminders of the atrocity of plastic waste humanity has created. Works like "Nanami" Ganz are offering her viewers an alternative. She is saying look at these objects that we so often disregard as trash and throw away. See how they can be beautiful and see how we can use them in ways that prevent them from harming the world around us. In this way, Ganz falls into Victor Margolin and Hildegard Kurt's "aesthetics of sustainability"¹¹ as she is of the mind that seems to believe that "Art as a mode means that sustainability is seen, felt, thought, and conceived differently - and communicated differently."¹² Ganz could very well make a sculpture of a whale made of plastic that seems to be confined, tangled up in, and strangled by such plastics as a very direct way of emphasizing the negative effects of plastic. But she chooses instead to take these materials that are byproducts of a world of overconsumption and create something beautiful. Ganz relies on that beauty to further provoke the thoughts of those who view her work.

When interviewed by Azaria Podplesky for *The Spokesman Review*, Ganz talked about what exactly she hopes for her audiences to take away from her *Reclaimed Creations*. "I believe

¹⁰ Amanda Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism: Contemporary Art and the Drive to Waste*. Massachusetts, USA: MIT Press. 2019.

¹¹ Victor Margolin, "Reflections on Art and Sustainability." In *Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art*. The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art and Independent Curators International, 2005.

¹² Margolin, "Reflections."

the best way for artists to help reduce waste is to show how beautiful these materials can be, and what can be done with these mundane objects and materials, ... When we think of these things as beautiful, we value them. If we value our resources, we will waste less."¹³ This idea of giving mundane items new life by looking at them from a new perspective is written all over Ganz's work, but especially in the "Luminariales."¹⁴ These moving "chandeliers" are made from cheap plastic dinnerware, the sort one might find at a discount store or a children's birthday party. The materials came into Ganz's hands via donation when she and a friend were working on a public art project and asked the community to donate plastic items they no longer wanted to use. Ganz was inspired to stack the objects and said they began to look "almost like a string of beads."¹⁵ When installed into a space with their added motors for movement and lights to brighten the colors, Ganz's "Luminariales" look more like blown glass than plastic margarita glasses and plates. This perspective, that of finding new lives for old objects, is the very heart of Ganz's work. There is again that belief that all objects, no matter what they are made of or how valuable they are deemed by society, have souls that deserve to be fulfilled.

In her book *To Life!: Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet*, Linda Weintraub gives eco-art four defining characteristics, although she states that "no single work epitomizes all four attributes."¹⁶ Ganz's work interacts with all four attributes, though it does so unconventionally. To start with the first trait, topics, Weintraub says that "Topic identifies the dominant idea and determines the work's material and expressive components."¹⁷ Ganz's topic is clear. She is

¹³ Azaria Podplesky, 2018. "MAC Exhibit Highlights Sculptures of Eco-Artist Sayaka Ganz." Spokesman-Review, The (Spokane, WA), June 6.

¹⁴ See Images: Figure 4.

¹⁵ Ganz, "SAYAKA."

¹⁶ Linda Weintraub, *To Life!: Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet*. California, USA: University of California Press. 2012.

https://books.google.com/books?id=6lQIDQAAQBAJ&dq=sustainable+art&lr=&source=gbs_navlinks_s.

¹⁷ Weintraub, *To Life!*.

engaging with objects that are normally cast off and thrown away as trash or worthless, which leads to her materials. Weintraub's "Topic" is the idea that a work's concept and materials are intrinsically linked, which is precisely the case with Ganz's *Reclaimed Creations*. Weintraub goes on to define the second trait, interconnection, as "the inescapable law of links and relationships that govern all materials, all processes, and all events on Earth."¹⁸ Ganz is aware of the interconnections between her work and the world, her materials and the world. Her work is in a sense bound by its connectedness to the environment. With plastic as the major ingredient to her works, Ganz acknowledges the unfortunate truth that plastic is a lasting object that does not fade away easily. The third aspect of eco-art according to Weintraub has a different relationship to Ganz's work. "Dynamism emphasizes actions over objects, and changes over ingredients."¹⁹ While certainly, it may appear that Ganz does the opposite of this, focusing on making her work about the objects, she does play into the idea of action and changes. The objects that make her works are not emphasized physically to the viewer. They are made cohesive and transformed into something larger. The action and changes that Ganz asks us to consider is how we think about these items, their value, and their beauty. So rather than state an outright manifesto for her collection, Ganz asks subtle questions that grow apparent the longer one lingers with her work. The final trait of eco-art is ecocentrism, or, "the principle that humans are not more important than other entities on Earth."²⁰ This concept is layered throughout Ganz's work. She asks viewers to think about inanimate objects like people, with a soul and a desire for purpose. But the creatures her work depicts also humble audiences, reminding them to think of the other living beings on this planet, and that human actions (such as waste production) affect them too.

¹⁸ Weintraub, *To Life!*.

¹⁹ Weintraub, *To Life!*.

²⁰ Weintraub, *To Life!*.

With plastic as her medium, Ganz finds herself part of the larger conversation about the material and its effects on the environment. As Boetzkes says, “Plastic accumulates because its disposability is a function of its market value. To throw plastic away is to exercise and reify its exchange value.”²¹ While Ganz has not openly stated that her *Reclaimed Creations* are a critique of capitalism or mass production, it is certainly a topic that relates to her choice of materials. Using plastic as the “face” of her work speaks to the view that plastic is not simply disposable, cheap material that overproduction and mass consumption has made it. Ganz is redefining value for these objects not in spite of but because of their material. In a video on her website Ganz says, “I’ve acquired a very strong yearning for a place to belong to, and I think that’s something I want to give to these plastic objects. A place to belong to again and to have a second chance at becoming something alive and beautiful.”²² It is the more spiritual, philosophical side of interpretation which Ganz asks viewers to think about and focus on. These objects are by-products of a wasteful society, but that does not mean that they must be waste themselves.

²¹ Boetzkes, “Plastic.”

²² Ganz, “SAYAKA.”

Images



Figure 1: Sayaka Ganz, *Emergence II*, 2013, Reclaimed plastic objects, painted aluminum and steel armature, hardware, wire, cable ties, Traveling Museum Exhibition.



Figure 2: Sayaka Ganz, *Nanami*, 2017, Reclaimed plastic objects, painted aluminum armature, hardware, wire, cable ties, Traveling Museum Exhibition.



Figure 3: Sayaka Ganz, *Nanami*, 2017, Reclaimed plastic objects, painted aluminum armature, hardware, wire, cable ties, Traveling Museum Exhibition.



Figure 4: Sayaka Ganz and Jim Merz, *Luminariales: Garnet*, 2011, Kinetic mixed media repurposed plastic dinnerware, LED lighting, motors with computer controllers, Traveling Museum Exhibition.

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