

# Urban Nature in Art

Lesley Lambert

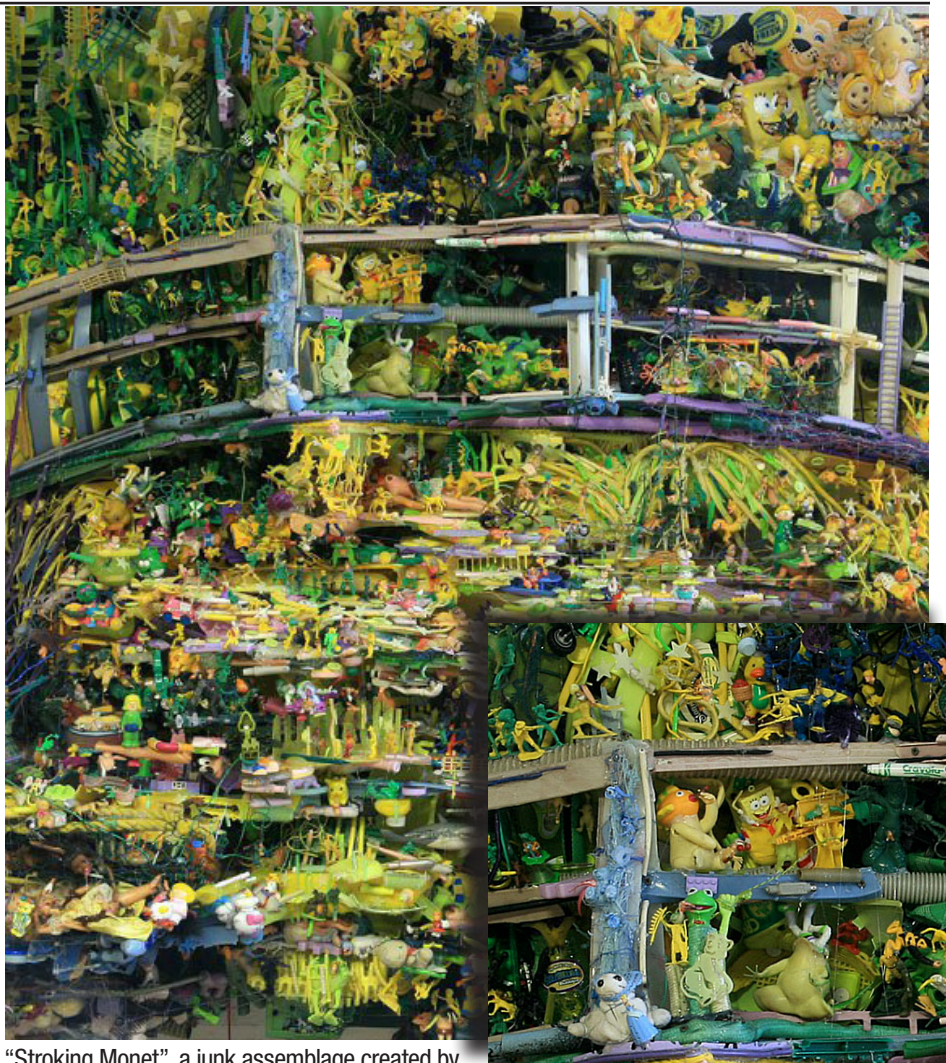
With frozen TV dinners, plastic water bottles, disposable diapers and individually wrapped, well... everything, we live in a throwaway world. So many products are made to use just once and then be thrown away. But where is away? Have you ever driven down the highway or walked along a beach without spotting one piece of trash?

According to Captain Charles Moore, author of the new book, *Plastic Ocean*, each year, roughly 250 to 300 million tons of plastic are produced around the world. To put this in perspective, the weight of plastic produced every two years outweighs the total weight of all 7 billion people on Earth. The unfortunate truth of these staggering numbers is that less than five percent of the plastics produced are actually recycled, while the rest of it sits in our landfills, blows across landscapes, and washes into the ocean, where it circulates around for years to come. The plastic we produce today will be around much longer than your children and even your children's children. So what do we do with all this leftover plastic?

What better way to use this everlasting trash than to turn it into art? This is just what some of the environmental programs and innovative artists around Rhode Island have been doing!

Some artists see the natural world as their canvas, creating a statement about societal issues using natural elements such as driftwood, stones and plants. Others make statements about the natural world using man-made elements such as plastics, metals and found debris.

One local artist, Tom Deninger, gets his inspiration from found objects. Literally, the trash and debris found in dumpsters and drifting along the side of the road are used to create huge assemblages that—from a distance—look like a picturesque Monet landscape, but up close, are more like a trip into a child's mind. Tom has always been a painter, and his environmentalism started at a young age when his neighborhood swimming hole closed down due to contamination. After graduating from Salve Regina University, Tom traveled around Europe soaking up all the art, surfing, and women he could before returning home to purchase a studio in Fall River. In his big new studio he began to branch away from the traditional painted portraits. He began experimenting with putting objects into his paints, then creating mosaics using



"Stroking Monet", a junk assemblage created by Tom Deninger. The smaller image above provides a detailed look at what this assemblage is made of. See more of his work at [www.tomdeningerart.com](http://www.tomdeningerart.com) Photo : Tom Deninger.

various impressionist techniques. Tom began expressing his environmentalist ideals almost by accident. Tom's work speaks to the fact that petroleum controls our lives—but like a Kurt Vonnegut story, exposes this depressing reality in a fun and whimsical way. In a time where children's movies are created based on the profits merchandizing can bring, toys lose popularity faster than politicians, and are discarded to the landfills along with last year's CDs, broken lava lamps and old pizza boxes. From landscape assemblages to self-portraits, to fish sculptures, Tom has prevented countless toys, bottle caps, broken utensils and who knows what else from waiting out their days in the Central Landfill in Johnston, R.I.. His work not only speaks to the theme of the piece—be it the serenity of a lakeside, or exhilaration of a famous model—but when viewed up close, his work evokes a sense of nostalgia to viewers old and young; bringing up memories of childhood toys and simpler times gone by.

Another local artist uses the natural world as her canvas and natural elements as her medium. Ana Flores, a Cuban native, came to America with her family as political refugees when she was just six years old. The cold white winter lands of America gave her childlike mind a blank canvas to recreate the lush green jungle she left behind.

Ana now lives in Southern Rhode Island at her Earth Inform Studio where she works as an artist, activist and educator. She works with community organizations to explore and evoke creative ways to learn about, conserve and protect their natural ecosystems.

Flores' sculptural work—in a time when many are rootless and disconnected from the natural world—reminds us of how profoundly place and geography informs us of who we are. Her sculptures and environmental designs always begin with long walks and explorations into each unique landscape. Artifacts she collects from nature suggest their own stories and what slowly emerges are cultural and mythical narratives that she gives form to in a combination of materials including wood, stone, metal and cement. Most projects also demand an investigation into the history defining a particular place; and her own written response becomes—for her—like a deep form of drawing.

Her fascination with geography and place comes out of her own experience of dislocation because of her family's exile from Cuba. Forty years after Ana left Cuba, she returned to visit her family still living there. The pilgrimage had a profound and defining impact on her sense of identity and vision as an artist. Inspired from her trip, she created the Cuban Journal. The resulting sculptural installation was multi-layered with political, cultural and personal imagery. The show traveled to museums and galleries throughout the U.S. for three years. All of the work in the series was made out of found and recycled materials as a tribute to the creativity and resourcefulness that she witnessed on the island. This January she returns to Cuba after a decade away, and in November of 2012 the Newport Museum will premier a her new series on Cuba entitled, *The Island Draws Me*.

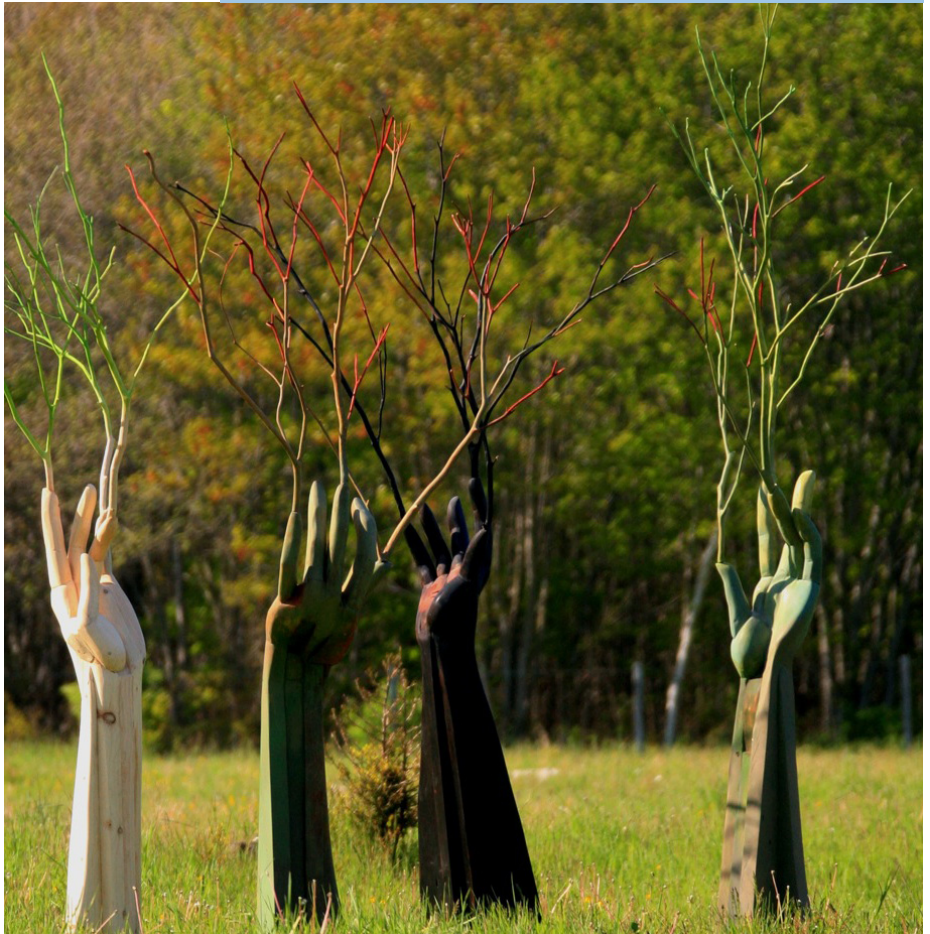
Ana's work with cultural narratives is central to her ecological practice, Earth Inform Studio. For over 15 years she has worked with communities and clients to explore and evoke creative ways to learn from, conserve and protect their natural ecosystems. Ana has done this by designing sculptures and poetry boxes that are peppered throughout natural landscapes across New England. The pieces serve to illuminate the natural and human history of a landscape. Her most recent project is as Scholar/ Artist in Residence for the Hale House in Matunuck, managed by

the Pettaquamscutt Historical Society. The house was the summer residence of the family of Edward Everett Hale; among them were notable writers, social reformers and artists. Their Matunuck summers inspired many works of literature and painting from 1873-1909. In June of 2012, new programs designed by Flores will honor the family's engagement with the arts, the landscape and their progressive thinking. The new programs entitled "InHale" will offer intensive workshops and exhibitions in the arts and ecology. The historic and beautiful natural setting of the House will provide a dynamic, intimate learning environment for artists, scientists, educators and students to convene and explore new tools for interpreting the land—as it did for the Hales and their creative colleagues a century ago. The first exhibit from June to September will be "*Seeing the Sea/ Selected Recipients of the Visual Artists Sea Grant*."

## Go Deeper!

For more information on *InHale* and the workshops to be offered in June and October of 2012 please contact Ana at: [ana@earthinform.com](mailto:ana@earthinform.com) or [pettaquamscutt@yahoo.com](mailto:pettaquamscutt@yahoo.com).

Check out artwork by Tom Deininger at [www.tom-deiningerart.com](http://www.tom-deiningerart.com). To commission a piece, contact Tom at [thomasdeininger@aol.com](mailto:thomasdeininger@aol.com).



These hand trees are made of wood and are approximately 11'x 5'x 6'. Together they make Sacred Grove. This series is presently being fabricated in Bronze on commission. Photo: Ana Flores. [www.earthinform.com](http://www.earthinform.com).

Organizations such as the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council and the Urban Pond Procession use trash, recycled materials and other found objects to convey messages to the public.

Artist Holly Ewald founded the Urban Pond Procession in 2008. Holly's process began with visits to Mashapaug Pond in Providence, R.I. to talk with residents and photograph the ponds. After speaking with the residents, she began researching the history of the Gorham Silver Manufacturing Company, whose 70+ years of operations on the northern shore of the pond left behind hazardous toxins that still plague the area. After attending public meetings about the environmental issues effecting Mashapaug Pond, Holly realized she needed to do something interactive on the streets to reach the groups who were reluctant to come to meetings. She decided a festive procession would be a good way to get information to more people. With the help of volunteer artists, scientists, educators and concerned citizens, she organized the Urban Pond Procession (UPP). For four years now, this revolving group of volunteers has hosted workshops for groups of all ages to learn and engage in understanding the health of the urban ponds in Providence. Each year the

series of workshops and culminating procession focuses on a different issue faced by the local urban ponds. During these workshops, attendees not only learn about the science, history and potential solutions for environmental issues facing the ponds but they also make creative props for the annual celebratory procession that raises further awareness to the public and advocates for the restoration of the ponds.

Her work has spread to other aspects of the community and environment. Last year she began a program with the after school Green Club at the Community Preparatory School in Providence to educate the students about the resourcefulness of Native American practices. The students began learning about stormwater, groundwater and the pollution problems around their school. The students created an interactive fence out of found and recycled materials that will be displayed at the JT Owens Park boat landing in Providence.

An information box accompanies the fence with text explaining the environmental and public health reasons why the public should avoid direct contact with the water at these ponds. Visitors are able to write their wishes for the ponds on luggage tags and tie them to the fence to spur more public conversation.



This interactive fence allows visitors to put up their own thoughts, experiences and suggestions using luggage tags found inside the creative unbewearable box. Photo: Holly Ewald, Urban Pond Procession. [www.urbanpondprocession.org](http://www.urbanpondprocession.org).

The Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council (WRWC) is another shining example of incorporating trash into environmental education. The Rising Sun fish ladder was installed on the Woonasquatucket in 2009 and with the help of a few artists, this ladder is truly a work of art. Artist Will Machin used tiles found in the river to create mosaics depicting the history of the falls. The viewing area for the ladder is fenced in with the sides of grocery carts—also found in the river. The goal of restoring fish passage over the first five dams on the river is almost complete. With four dams already passable, the WRWC has secured funding and is working on an RFP for engineering, design and construction of a natural fish-way across Manton Dam.

WRWC has not only worked with artists to develop their social displays, they have also been hiring River Rangers to help protect the river and spread the word about the value of the most urbanized river in Rhode Island through art projects and public education. River Rangers is a high impact job-training program for young adults in the area. This competitive internship has become a highly coveted summer job for inner-city students who otherwise would have little opportunity to learn about being environmental stewards. River Rangers not only patrol the bike path, perform clean ups, remove graffiti and work on landscaping around the parks, but they help to educate the public of all ages on the importance of keeping our natural environments clean and healthy. WRWC is helping to create environmental stewards with a sense of creativity and a passion for protecting our natural environments.

Like the saying goes, “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure.” You can’t go wrong with reusing discarded materials to express your creativity and reduce the amount of waste we send to the landfill. Just think how much smaller our landfills would be if every McDonald’s happy meal toy, old shoe and broken dish were reused to create an artistic expression instead of being thrown away!

~Lesley Lambert is the digital communications manager for NBEP.



River Rangers show off their recycled fish sculpture. With help from local artist, Chris Cane, the River Rangers used soda cans and recycled metal to create this fish sculpture, which will be displayed at Atlantic Mills in Riverside Park. Learn more at [www.wrwc.org/gwyRangers](http://www.wrwc.org/gwyRangers). Photo: WRWC.



The Rising Sun Mills fish ladder tells the story of the Woonasquatucket River. There once were fish and the river ran free. Then industries came and blocked the river with dams and polluted it with industrial waste, leaving it dirty and without biodiversity. A new age of water protection and engineered fish passage will improve habitat for wildlife and bring fish back to the river. Photo: WRWC.