

Making Trash Art in Boston

If the words “trash art” were to enter in conversation, would you know what it means? You may think trash art is simply art made from old disposed food like apple cores, banana peels, perhaps coffee grinds, etc. But it isn't that simple.

And you may even also associate it with the independent record label named “Trash Art!” based out of Providence, Rhode Island that started in 1997 and focuses on music created by some metal and punk rock groups and put on vinyl and compact discs.¹

But trash art is actually a visual art medium that typically deals with recycling used and/or found materials such as plastic bags, tires, motorcycle parts, bottle caps, computer parts, swimming fins, and even an old fur or mock fur coat.



Bob Smith

Recently, Wilderness House Literary Review's arts editor Pam Rosenblatt interviewed three people from the Boston area who are involved with the making of trash art:

Jennifer Lawrence is the co-founder and producer of Trash Bash, an annual exhibition that began in 2013. She is actually not a visual artist but a singer in the singing group called “Tongue in Cheek”. She works as the Sustainability Planner for the City of Cambridge.

Cambridge's Melissa Glick is a professional artist who works out of the Artisan's Asylum and has been creating Hacker Creations, 3D collage, sculpture, and assemblage for around four years.

And Bob Smith, who runs the business “Bob Smith Minimum Wage Art” since 1978, makes sculptures and mixed media pieces out of found objects often on the side of the roads. For the last ten years, he has lived in Arlington, Massachusetts.

In an emailed Wilderness House Literary Review interview, Glick explained why she makes recycled art. “Well, I have been making assemblage, or 3D collage for four years now,” she said. “My father worked at the military defense company Raytheon from the early '60s until the end

¹ Wikipedia, “Trash Art!” definition, 05.16.2016.

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of the '90s. Technology took huge leaps in development over that period. He liked to bring home old equipment, vacuum tubes, thick lines of colorful wire etc. I know he saw value in his collection he kept in his 'dungeon'. But when he passed away and we had to sell the house, I couldn't see throwing it all away. I moved it into my first studio and began to make stuff."

Glick's artwork has been called "structural poetry", as each piece consists of abstract geometric compositions.

She studied Art History in college and received her Master's in Art Education. "Before being a full time artist I ran community educational programs at cultural institutions, including tour guide at the Walter Gropius House. So I love geometric patterning of the Bauhaus [1919 – 1933], and the assemblage of Joseph Cornell [1903 – 1972]. Louise Nevelson's [1899 – 1988] ability to combine wooden shapes inspires me!"

One of Glick's early pieces is titled "Victorian Girls" which "... is small, five inches by four inches. It is a collection of new and old parts," she recalled. "There are two beautiful girls' faces, one pokes out through a round hole in a green motherboard. It has a combination of old brass gears and new copper parts, silver colored aluminum and it has a working clock on it."

She is now working on a "Victorian Women" series. Some of [these creations] resemble a fashionable way photographs were framed during the Victorian period, with an oval frame made from old computer parts, said Glick.

She is also a featured artist in Cambridge's Community Supported Art program, (<http://csartcambridge.com/>) a program that encourages art collection thru the purchase of shares.

Creating her trash art artworks is more than pure dedication and talent. "My work involves 25% serendipity and 25% spontaneity, 25% being able to see patterns and the way the shapes interact with color, patterns, scale, etc. and 25% hard labor," she said. "Right now I am working small and have found five inches by seven inches or eight inches by ten inches is practical for selling work. I have made a few large scale works (described below.) Completing a work could take a day or two, if there is crazy inspiration and everything falls together – but that only happens after a lot of organization, preparation...which is ongoing. Right now I am working on a few at a time up to ten in a series."



Melissa Glick



Melissa Glick

Glick has made larger works, too. "My first large scale piece was called 'River of Connectivity'. It was five feet long four feet high made on wood repurposed from the Veladrome – nothing goes to waste. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9aFqvc9XUA>).

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I collaborated with Tyler Hutchinson who is an engineer. Together we arranged twelve computer fans, like they were flowing down stream. I painted the background bright blue, turquoise and green and filled the river with a mosaic made from hard drives, stators (snowflakes), scanner mirrors, etc. He used an Arduino to program the fans to turn on and off in succession, like water flowing down the river. It is installed at the Kennedy Health Center in Milford, Massachusetts, thanks to the Arts Connection program," she said.

Her current work is also large scale and titled "Big Blue". It is on exhibit in the front window at Uni-T in the Natick Mall, Natick, Massachusetts. "'Big Blue' is also around five feet tall and four feet wide. I worked with some member at the Artisan's Asylum to design a series of squares on Solid Works (3d design software) that were then cut out on a CNC router. I inserted large metal heat sinks and other large parts into the holes," Glick said. "The cutouts allowed me to tilt the copper and aluminum parts, creating a pattern, visual illusion resembling the windows on a tall skyscraper. This was all arranged over a blue illustration of a building which I manipulated in Photoshop and had enlarged. The imagery is 'mod podged' down on the wood and the parts are secured using a clear acrylic caulk, some wires and screws. I don't know exactly how much it weighs, but it is heavy!"

Glick creates trash art because "...I was raised by a father who saved everything. The original recycler. I know it has something to do with being raised during the Depression, but it was also because he was a camper and didn't want to pollute the planet by being wasteful. It could have to do with being poor, wanting to get something for free... All I know is there is no such thing as junk. It's just something you haven't needed to use yet. We are creative, resourceful, imaginative, and see things in a unique way," she said.

Glick is trying to get the message across to her audience: "Something MUST change in the way technology is manufactured, with planned obsolescence, built NOT to last, designed to go out of date. This would be a big shift from the current short sighted, greedy economical model to one that is sustainable, earth and people friendly."

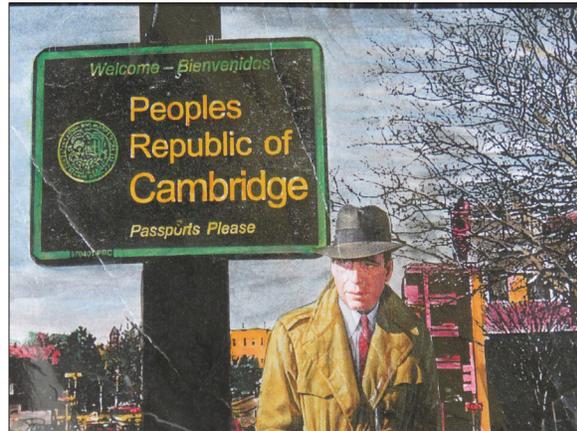


Image by Bob Smith

Artist Bob Smith agrees with Glick about planned obsolescence, though "the idea of being political about it was never in my motivation. It just comes with it...I never thought, 'Hey, where would it have gone anyway?' It doesn't disappear. It's matter. There's no way to make it disappear. But there is one thing though. Ever since I was young, I hated the whole concept of planned obsolescence. I just have a natural bend toward this. That always bothered me," he said. "Why are things made

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to break? From toys to everything. It was a big thing in our culture in the '50s and the '60s: "Oh, we can make things really quick. Make tons of these and then they fall apart and they break. So what? You buy a new one. What a waste. What a way to live.

But it's very profitable. And that was what [planned obsolescence] was all about. No one thought of light trash! But I didn't think of [the politics of planned obsolescence in my artwork] to begin with.... But now I do!"

In a person-to-person Wilderness House Literary Review interview at a local Porter Square restaurant, Smith mentioned how he didn't start his artistic career with a background in art or art history. He is a carpenter and a freelance repair man/problem solver who attended high school and was on the football team. He hung around a group of older high school boys who were artists. But he never really tried to make artwork himself. That is, he never took art seriously until he lived in New Mexico. There he met a man named Will Powers who pointed him in the right direction.

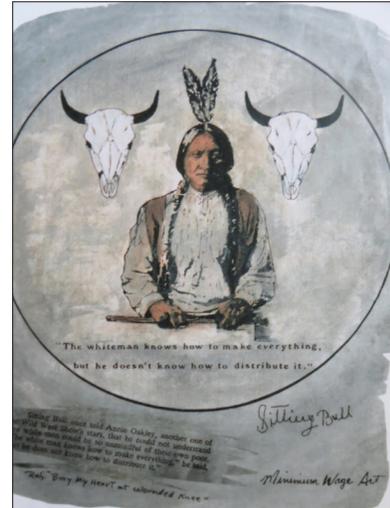
"People kept saying that I should meet [Will Powers] because we had some political ideas that we shared. The first piece of art that I made was actually before I met him. I guess that's why people said I should meet him because they looked at me like I was an artist," Smith said.

His first motivating art experience happened when Smith had become friends with some Taos Indians who lived in Taos Pueblo, New Mexico. He had become acquainted with them through Old Ray Knox, an older man who was best friends with some of the Taos Indians. Smith started spending time with these people. One day they all were looking at an old map of Indian Territory of the United States that covered only a section of Oklahoma. Smith was very impressed with it. He said, "The whole territory was your territory. What a weird thing." Then he added, "Boy, that would make an incredible t-shirt that image on a shirt!" His friends agreed. Smith asked, "Is it all right for me to do that?" Then one of the men replied, "It is for you to acknowledge," Smith said.

So Smith made that Indian Territory t-shirt with the image of the old map of Indian territory but he extended the design to include all of North America. To Smith, his graphic map "was the spiritual history" of the entire continent. Smith printed the words "INDIAN TERRITORY" underneath the design of the North American continent and brought it with him to show his Taos friends when he returned the following year. That t-shirt was a success, and what is equally satisfying to Smith is that "I recycled the historic idea," he explained.

After he showed the t-shirt to his Taos friends, he was introduced to Will Powers, who made artwork from found materials.

"Will Powers impressed upon me the wealth abounding in 'found objects'. It was his influence that opened that door, when before I was very



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much into the idea of graphic arts. I failed to mention the world wide 'Mail Art' movement, I became involved with. Very much akin to 'trash art' ... people mailing home-made post cards and found object paper collages. I was very much into that idea and still do some work like that now," Smith said.

"[Powers and I] would go to ghost towns and find things. I found an old belt buckle. He said, 'You can use that as a frame. Put an old image in there, or draw something.' So I did, and it got a write-up in a newspaper [after being] in a show named "Small Images" at the Stables Art Gallery in Taos. So right away, the first little thing I made was noticed. [Powers] and I became good friends. I ended up becoming a roommate of his, and funny things would happen."

For example, on one Monday, Powers said to Smith, "'Hey, on your travels, keep your eyes open. I need the inner workings of a wind-up toy.' And I said, 'Sure, Will, yes.' And I biked around – and being self-employed even there as a carpenter, I didn't have a car so I was bicycling – I got close to the landscape of the road, the side of the road. And, honest to God, that day, I was coming home and my eyes are drawn to [the side of the road]. And there is the inner workings of a wind-up toy! I couldn't believe it. I picked it up, put it in my backpack. When I got back to the place, I walked through the door. Will's sitting at the table working on a piece of art. I said, 'Hey, Will, catch!' And I threw the wind-up toy's inner parts across the room. He caught it and put it down on the piece of art. It's like a synchronicity in art. Things tend to happen almost like they're planned."

Smith said one thing that he enjoys about trash art is how the artworks seem to take on the form of living beings. "You look at them as beings, actual beings. You feel like it made itself," he explained. "We remove ourselves from the art real quick. In fact, that's the thing I like about it. The process of making it is really fun and challenging. You may really argue if you're collaborating with people. But once it's done, it's a thing on its own."

He finds it wonderful if you take the next step of placing your completed trash artwork on exhibition some place. "That's great. A lot of time you're done with it, and you wait for a show. There aren't many of those, really. There's the Trash Bash in Somerville, which I heard about and got involved with," he informed.

Smith has exhibited his trash art sculpture "Harley the Homeless Unicorn Bison" to the Trash Bash every year since 2013. If there is space and inspiration, he takes a few other artworks along with "Harley".

"Harley the Homeless Unicorn Bison" came into being after one of Smith's neighbors named Frank, a Harley Davidson fan, gave Smith a Harley Davidson gas tank and challenged him, "What can you do with this?" Frank left Smith alone to do his creating. And create he did.

Some of Smith's friends dropped by and thought that the gas tank resembled an insect. But Smith was not so sure. He decided to place the gas tank on a post. He went on to sweep and clean up the yard when he looked up at the gas tank on the post and said, "Oh my God, it's a buffalo

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skull!" Smith was ecstatic.

"I love the West and I love history and I love buffalo," he said. In fact, Smith saw many buffalo when he was out West. "The first time I went out West it was magnificent to stop and see them." He was assisting a friend in his move to California and asked his friend if they could pull over on the side of the road so that he could photograph the buffalo.

"I took some pictures that day that I still use in art. I took a color picture and made it into a negative so it looks like a ghost Buffalo. I've used that [photo] periodically in art as an image. It is a very strong image: a buffalo is looking straight at you and you really get to respect the idea that it was sacred to these people. It was everything to them," said Smith.

"We're recycling a lot of the spirituality out of the Native Americans. Some of them resent it," he said. His trash art has a tendency to reflect Native American art. In fact, he has received compliments on "Harley the Homeless Unicorn Bison" from people whom he did not know before. One such occurrence happened when he was on route home with this piece of trash art.

"One time I pulled into a gas station in Teele Square, Somerville, near Clarendon Hill, on my way home. I'm filling the car up and these two girls are just staring at the buffalo. I walked over and said, 'You like that, huh?' I had this idea that [the buffalo sculpture] makes people think of Indians. I said that to them, 'Does it make you think of Indians?' And they said,

'We are Indians!' It was an emotional moment. They said, 'We love this.' One of them was from New Orleans and the other was Navajo," recalled Smith.

The whole concept of "Harley the Homeless Unicorn Bison" was developed from the image of the buffalo on a buffalo nickel that Smith owned. The sculpture was built by Smith and two friends in the cold of one January winter. It has only been in one art gallery, though it was there off and on for a couple of different exhibitions. And that gallery was the Zeitgeist in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

"Harley the Homeless Unicorn Bison" is made up of various recycled materials like an old wooden table for its legs, PVC piping for its backbone, an outdated table, a bull's horn, and a worn fur coat that was found in Harvard Square is placed over its back. Somehow these objects formed themselves into the shape of the buffalo.

He also gave "Harley the Homeless Unicorn Bison" a pair of snow skis. "Another thing about the creatures I make I put them on skis. There are so many snow skis being thrown away. This is a good base. So I make the legs and then I have the skis."

As for the size of "Harley the Homeless Unicorn Bison", he said, "It's like a teen-age buffalo. It's like five feet high at the hump and it's thirty inches wide where the hump comes down around the head. It's like a big Harley Davidson gas tank, and it's about four feet long," Smith described.

Smith has also created other fascinating works of trash art. One of them is titled "Wounded in the War". This sculpture was materialized after finding several sand cast molds from the Charlestown Navy Yard in

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the basement of a woman who simply agreed to let him take them out of her basement. Smith thinks that many people once collected this type of sand cast molds. Along with the help of some friends, Smith designed this creature who "fights apathy in all dimensions of time and space. Apathy and boredom. It actually looks like a strange bear from another dimension. There's like this big head and it has arms and he has a cape with an American Flag. He's holding a bow and arrow, and all of this found stuff. And a beat up trumpet. It's eight to nine feet tall. A very colorful character. 'Wounded in the War'," he said.

Taking over one month to create, "Wounded in the War" has hockey pads for legs and very large swimming flippers for feet. He is made to journey in liquid or air. "And as I say, he was made as a Sci-fi creature who can be in three dimensions of time and space. It was a fun to make!" he said.

Smith enjoys good humor in his artwork and in other artists' art creations. For example, his favorite "trash" artist is actually the now deceased actor Buster Keaton (1895 - 1966) who "was one of my greatest inspirations. When I saw him, [his work] just blew my mind. He made contraptions and things. I'd say he's right up there with inspiration. He just did what he wanted.

When he became owned by the studio, that was the end of his great creativity. When he made those early films, he was brilliant. And you can be see the change in what happened to him," said Smith.

Another favorite renown person whom Smith admires is Sitting Bull (1831 - 1890). He finds Sitting Bull fascinating with his politics and many well-known quotes. "Sitting Bull had some pretty amazing quotes. He has to be one of the greatest political North Americans who ever lived. He's not appreciated with his politics yet, especially his agricultural view of things where

Sitting Bull implied that the colonists put poisons in the ground to make things grow. They're killing the earth. They drain it of its worth and then they expect it to give year after year. He said stuff like that," he said. "Who was he? He didn't go to college. He could see!"

In an email to Rosenblatt, Smith quoted Sitting Bull regarding this eco-friendly matter:

Hear me friends, we have now to deal with another people, small and feeble when our forefathers first met with them, but now great and overbearing. Strangely enough, they have a mind to till the soil, and the love of possessions is a disease in them. They have made many rules that the rich may break, but the poor may not! They have a religion in which the poor worship, but the rich will not! They even take tithes of the poor and weak to support the rich and those who rule. They claim this mother of ours, the earth, for their own use, and fence their neighbors away from her, deface her with their buildings and their refuse. They compel her to produce out of season, and when sterile she is made to take medicine in order to produce again. All this is sacrilege.

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And he added, "So yes, I find great wisdom and truth in how that man saw our society and culture in its early stages of waste."

Smith quoted Sitting Bull again: "He said this amazing thing to Annie Oakley after the Little Bighorn fiasco and [his going to live in Canada] and finally coming here and giving up and living on a reservation. He was able to go on the Wild West show. He became best friends with Annie Oakley. They were in Chicago, the big city, with all these children running up to him begging. [Sitting Bull] said to Annie Oakley, 'The white man knows how to make everything, but he does not know how to distribute it.'³ When I heard that quote, I had to make a piece of art out of it. I read the quote of Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, the quote spoken to Annie Oakley."

From this quote to Annie Oakley, Smith made a totally recycled piece of art. "I took a picture of a buffalo skull and made a copy of it; a picture of Sitting Bull; and made a copy of it. Then I painted it. Then I took the words from Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee and then I painted it. It's all recycled stuff. And I watercolored it. The actual image is seventeen inches by thirty inches. It's a big piece. Yes, it's mixed media."

Besides the recycled sculptures and mixed media art, Smith like to create mail art. He made the Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee artwork into a postcard and did so with other artworks like his photograph of this sign put up in Cambridge that reads "The Republic of Cambridge". He thought it was humorous so he mailed the picture to a friend in California who mailed it back with Humphrey Bogart in it in black and white. Smith painted and created a postcard from it. Why does Smith do this type of artwork? "I like mail art. I still do it."

In an emailed Wilderness House Literary Review interview, Jennifer Lawrence said, "Melissa and Bob are both amazing artists. They bring such different perspectives to the realm. Smitty (Bob Smith) is an urban scavenger and uses those pieces of other people's 'trash' to create beautiful pieces of art that all carry a note of social commentary. The "Trash Bash Drag Net" in the 2015 show was elaborate and beautiful – not to mention enormous! Melissa has a much more subtle art. She brings in pieces of technological 'trash' and melds these computer chips and electronic doodads into beautiful pieces that you can put in your home."

Trash Bash was conceived because "I really wanted artists to show off just how much we in the United States waste, and the beauty that can come from that. I come from an environmental sustainability background, and this was very important to me," she said.

Not an artist, Lawrence obtained her Masters of Art in Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning from Tufts University. She sees trash art

² Sitting Bull at 1875 Powder River Conference (in yellow) source: Charles A. Eastman "Indian Heroes and Great Chieftains 1918 pps. 119-121 (re-printed Dover Publications 1997)

³ Sitting Bull quote, "Dance of the Ghosts", Chapter 18, Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee by Dee Brown, 1885.

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as a means to help end pollution. "Absolutely! Why waste when we can create beauty," Lawrence wrote.

This year Trash Bash 2016 is scheduled to happen at Aeronaut Brewing Company, 14 Tyler Street, Somerville, Massachusetts for the month of November. Trash Bash 2016 competition will occur on Sunday, November 20th.

The proceeds from Trash Bash 2016 are to be given to "Somerville Local First, an organization that works to build and sustain the local, living economy," said Lawrence.