

Plastic Entanglements

Ecology, Aesthetics, Materials

Palmer Museum of Art, Penn State



Available for travel beginning January 2018.

Featuring work by

Mark Dion, Steve McPherson, Marina Zurkow, Pam Longobardi, Katrin Hornek, Kelly Wood, Dianna Cohen, Chris Jordan, Brian Jungen, Jessica Stockholder, Evelyn Rydz, Aurora Robson, Deb Todd Wheeler, Vik Muniz, Zanele Muholi, Bakary Emmanuel Daou, Tejal Shah, Morehshin Allahyari, Gisela Colón, Kelly Jazvac, Matthew Northridge, Pinar Yoldas, and Margaret and Christine Wertheim

Palmer Museum of Art
Joyce Robinson, Curator

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Exhibition Tour

Plastic Entanglements: Ecology, Aesthetics, Materials features contemporary artwork investigating the complex cultural and material nexus that is “Plastic.” Organized around the curatorial concept of entanglement – which describes the literal entanglements of animals and plastic detritus as well as the plasticity of global networks – the exhibition assembles artistic investigations of humanity’s reliance on a material that is at once ubiquitous and, for that reason, virtually invisible.

Featuring an international array of emerging and mid-career artists, *Plastic Entanglements: Ecology, Aesthetics, Materials* argues that plastic globally entangles categories of the aesthetic, the ethical, the material, the technological, and the critical.

Plastic Entanglements is curated by Palmer curator Joyce Robinson; Heather Davis, Postdoctoral Fellow, Institute of the Arts and Humanities, Penn State; and Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor, Associate Professor of English and Women’s Studies, Penn State.

Exhibition Overview

The story of plastic is as complex and entangled as the polymer chains that comprise its unique material properties. This exhibition brings together the work of some twenty-five contemporary artists to explore the entanglements of our ongoing, vexed love affair with this paradoxical material that is both *miraculous*, in its introduction of once-unimagined conveniences of modern manufacture into our lives; and also *malignant*, in its introduction of a new agent of ecological and environmental degradation.

Plastic Entanglements explores the unique materiality of plastic, both as an artistic material and as a symbol of the innovative spirit of Western modernity. Plastic claims an exemplary status as one of the most successful human inventions in the history of material sciences, informed by, and confirming, modernist virtues of convenience, hygiene, mobility, malleability, and availability.

Petrochemical products do, of course, have a darker side. The unintended environmental consequences of the widespread use of plastic are seen most dramatically in the “Great Pacific Garbage Patch,” a floating mass of garbage said to be about twice the size of Texas, and growing. Plastic trash, the detritus of our convenience culture, chokes coastal and inland wetlands and waterways, obstructs the stomachs of creatures on both land and sea, and tumbles across deserts, plains, and urban canyons.

As a material associated ideologically with notions of modernity and progress, plastic is also a complicated expression of temporality. Plastic’s temporal entanglements create the exhibition narrative: beginning with the archives plastic creates (as collections of detritus that numerous artists mine); to its paradoxes of scale and seductive materiality in the entangled present; to its “speculative futures,” both biological and technological.

Exhibition Organization

The Archive

Resiliently non-biodegradable, plastic comprises both a literal and cultural archive of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and is one of the markers of the proposed geologic epoch of the Anthropocene. Principles of salvage, collection, assemblage, and identification characterize the pieces in this section of the exhibition, which includes work by Mark Dion, Pamela Longobardi, Steve McPherson, Katrin Hornek, Kelly Wood, and Marina Zurkow. A living archive of salvaged plastic and consumer detritus emerges when our desires “of the moment” are memorialized in a disposable plastic product or “technofossil.”

The Entangled Present

The Entangled Present describes the ways in which plastic binds people, plants, and animals together across diverse geographical locations, and through global systems. The artworks in this section focus attention on the complex effects of the reach of plastic on ecological—that is, interactive human and natural—networks as well as on current artistic practice. They reveal the ways in which we are bound up in plastic realities, often regardless of our individual choices or ideals. Featured in this section are works by Chris Jordan, Brian Jungen, Deb Todd Wheeler, Evelyn Rydz, Dianna Cohen, Zanele Muholi, Bakary Emmanuel Daou, Vik Muniz, Jessica Stockholder, and Aurora Robson, which bring home the effects of plastic’s ubiquitous presence in startlingly intimate and spectacularly declamatory ways.

Speculative Futures

Speculative Futures closes the exhibition by opening up our imaginations to the range of possible futures in plastic, asking what worlds exist beyond human-centered histories in biology, geology, and technology. Speculative biologies are spawning aesthetic possibilities that may herald the theory and practice of a posthuman aesthetic, as the work of Tejal Shah, Pinar Yoldas, and Margaret and Christine Wertheim (Institute for Figuring) attests. Other artists, among them Gisela Colón and Moreshin Allahyari, engage with new forms of plastic and plastic production, such as blow-molded acrylic, 3D modeling, and bioplastics.

The exhibition ends with these questions: how does the fact of these evolutionary inventions of material and ecosystem change our futures? What forms of life, what forms of art, what kinds of unintentional consequences, beneficial and not, might plastic be heralding in?

Participation Fee: \$30,000, plus shipping and insurance

Booking Period: 12–15 weeks

Available: February–May 2018 September–December 2018 Tentatively booked

June–August 2018 February–May 2019

Space required: 3,000 to 4,000 square feet

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