

ARIANNA RICHARDSON

**SURFACE
ALL THE WAY
THROUGH**



Plastic Blob Installation,
Detail



Plastic Blob Installation: Assorted Signs, Detail

I want to understand the many environmental, economic, and social implications of the klepto-capitalist, hyper-consumptive society that we are embedded in.¹ My practice revolves around the intersections between environmentalism, materiality, domestic labour, agency, consumerism, excessive decoration, and spectacle. My work most often exists as sculptures that mimic or modify everyday objects such as pillows, garbage cans, text-based signs, and absurdist trophies. I use hobby-craft techniques like knitting, embroidery, and sewing, introducing intensively laborious, hand-crafted production to vernacular objects that are typically mass-produced with great speed and efficiency.

Aesthetically, my work pushes the boundaries of kitsch and maximalism.

Everything I make is composed entirely of plastic: a material that I am endlessly attracted to for its shape-shifting mimicry and limitless supply of exciting surface qualities. As a toxic, uncontainable, and grossly over-produced material, it is also repulsive and surrounds me with dread and despair. It is the tension between these two opposites that drives my creative process as I work to both deflect and deal with my own conflicting attitudes in a time of vast uncertainty, inexpressible emotions, and constant horror. Most of the plastic I use is the result of my own consumption habits: discarded packaging carefully cleaned and

¹ The term “klepto-capitalist” is one that I use to denote the economic and social system that we are entrenched in whereby corporations and shareholders hoard wealth and power while eliminating any possible recourse or alternative mode of being for the average global citizen. Klepto-capitalism is perpetuated and amplified by market forces that coerce us into spending money and creating waste; a cycle from which it seems we cannot escape and that works to steal our agency in the name of making big profits for a tiny percentage of people.

re-purposed or broken household gadgets that get disassembled and put to use in unexpected ways. The other place I gather materials from is the thrift store: an unending source of vibrant matter, abandoned craft supplies, and decorations.

In the time I spend crafting with plastic waste (or waste-adjacent) material, I work through my own climate-crisis anxiety, frustration, and despair—each assemblage creating an imaginary, handmade world in which humorous and absurd individual actions can make a difference against the gigantic environmental catastrophe we currently find ourselves in. I mimic the visual language of mass-production completely by hand, turning myself into a mock-machine of capitalism that actively works to de-construct and re-present the excess material of consumer culture.

My most recent collection of work, *Surface all the way through*, is an exploration of superficiality, distraction, reflection, emotional blockages, accumulation, and waste. It is composed of four main parts: a series of handmade soft-sculpture wall-hangings, two oversized floor sculptures that double as gallery seating, an on-going series of pillow sets, and a collection of dangling “fascinators.” I have been creating an expanding collection of these dangling fascinators that are constructed from a variety of plastic bits that have accumulated in my studio over the years. Each is entirely unique: they almost create themselves as certain pieces of plastic suddenly become activated by others, choosing their material companions through the assistance of my intuitive interventions and playful material exploration. These objects are active wherever they hang: swaying, spinning, reflecting, and casting shadows as people and air move around them. As these objects are created through more experimental methods, they provide a good balance to the more tightly-controlled textile based objects in this body of work, existing as abstracted

and absurd assemblages where the decorative and formal elements of recognizable trash can be appreciated more fully, made visible by the reflective surfaces and multiple textures they contain.

This particular body of work, and my entire practice generally, is dazzlingly maximalist in the way that only plastic-based materials can achieve. I employ this aesthetic to invite viewers into difficult conversations, presenting a humorous and ambiguous space where we can re-imagine our relationship to this material that is simultaneously horrifying and extraordinary, ubiquitous and elusive, valueless and costly.

The wall-hangings in this collection are emblazoned with ambivalent slogans that oscillate between self-help affirmations, vacuous advertisement slogans, and the absurdist confessions of a plastic-obsessed consumer. Each object is saturated with decoration; layered with an impossible amount of surface texture, colour, and pattern. They are often pillow-like in form, simultaneously evoking comfort and repulsion with the play between their softness and familiarity and the discomfort of an excessively-decorated surface and plastic-waste-stuffed interior. The aesthetic qualities of each piece are dictated by the various trims and fabrics that I have collected from the thrift store: serendipitous combinations of vibrant matter make themselves apparent through the chaos of overflowing totes full of someone else’s discarded craft supplies.

The material history contained in discarded things is something that I am constantly in wonderment of. To what extent can we perceive the time and energy spent extracting, refining, creating, packaging, shipping, selling, using, and discarding an object? Plastic-based materials have an epic life-span: the materials necessary for its production existing as ancient



Wasted Pillow Install: Time I Spent

life in distant epochs all the way through to the seemingly endless time it can exist beyond our human use for it. Is this what makes plastic so enigmatic, this continuity through time and space, this impossible line connecting us both far backward into the Mesozoic Era and far beyond into the future? In pondering my tiny role in the lifespan of the objects I work with, I aim to connect with the potential richness of this material.

The two largest pieces in *Surface all the way through* are gigantic sculptures that double as gallery seating. One of them is made from five years worth of plastic trash generated by my own consumption habits that have been carefully cleaned and crushed. It is all contained within a machine-knit patchwork cover that presents an exciting array of pattern, colour, and texture. The material inside is a self-portrait, documenting and presenting

five years of my life as measured by all of my purchases and failed experiments with plastic trash. There is a small window built into the cover giving the audience a tightly controlled view into the interior of both the sculpture and my personal material history. The time spent cleaning and crushing each individual piece of plastic is not immediately perceivable but is present nonetheless; an absurd Sisyphian task of caring for and dealing with constantly accumulating waste material; a dedication to refuse the prescribed trajectory of plastic packaging from factory to landfill.

The second giant soft-sculpture is a burgundy velvet frilly heart and is made from my old king-sized coil mattress, discarded foam, thrift store material, and plastic trash collected from my job as lead preparator at an art gallery. As you recline on either of these sculptures, you can both feel and hear the wheezing crunch

of plastic being squished and contracted under your weight. When you get up, the form expands back out with a slow but audible intake of air as the plastic contained within is always looking to regain its previous shape.

An important component of *Surface all the way though* is an ongoing series of pillow sets that feature the slogans “Time I Spent” and “Time I Wasted.” To date I have made four iterations and will continue to make them for an as yet undetermined length of time. I have crafted each set of pillows in tandem, working to make them as identical as possible. I became obsessed with these slogans because they perfectly encapsulate the arbitrary distinctions made to delineate and enforce power structures in our society of precarity and disposability: depending on the context, my labour can often be categorized as valueless while at other times, the exact same or similar labours reward me with monetary gain (time spent mothering, performing maintenance, art-making, etc.) This absurdity is forever commemorated in these overly decorative pillows that poke fun at and destabilize the structures of capitalism that work to keep me in a perpetual and destructive pursuit of more more more.



Time I Spent Trophy

For All The Feelings Ever Felt





Can't Care Won't Care

TBA | SURFACE ALL THE WAY THROUGH

ARIANNA RICHARDSON is a sculptor, sewist, performance artist, and mother from Lethbridge, Alberta in Treaty 7 territory. She is a lifelong crafter and thrift-store enthusiast, constantly collecting plastic-based trash and discarded craft materials. Richardson sometimes performs under the pseudonym, The Hobbyist, taking her hobby-craft pursuits outdoors to activate public spaces and talk to people about trash. When she isn't making art, Arianna works as lead preparator at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery and as a sessional instructor teaching Spatial Practice at the University of Lethbridge. Richardson holds an MFA from NSCAD University in Halifax. Her first artist book, *Garbage Party: A Collection of Thoughts About Trash*, was self-published in March 2021.

DOI: 10.5206/tba.v5i1.16477