

IN THE STUDIO

AURORA ROBSON

WITH EDWARD M. GÓMEZ

AURORA ROBSON IS A SELF-MADE WOMAN. Born in Toronto in 1972, she had a challenging childhood. Her parents, she recalls, were creative and eccentric “in a hippie mode”; her mother painted, and her father was “a Shakespearean actor, a writer, a photographer and a poet.” He was also a drug smuggler who abruptly moved his family from one place to another. (He made sure to drive a Jaguar but often neglected his family’s basic needs.) In her teens, Aurora returned to Toronto alone, lived with a relative and briefly attended a technical high school. Invited by her brother, she next moved to Seattle; there, she began to make art in earnest, experimenting with found materials. In 1990, Robson moved to New York, where she learned to weld, made metal sculptures and, despite her lack of a high school diploma, passed Columbia University’s entrance exams and went on to earn a bachelor’s degree in art history and visual art, graduating with honors.

Deeply concerned about the natural environment, Robson sees herself as an eco-activist who uses her art to address urgent issues poetically, not polemically. She is best known for assembling cast-off plastic bottles, which she colorfully paints, into wildly inventive hanging sculptures—the smaller ones sometimes containing LED lights—and large works that fill entire rooms. Recent monumental projects include *What Goes Around, Comes Around* (2008), a 9,000-bottle creation that was installed last year in the atrium of a building on Bank of America Merrill Lynch’s corporate campus in New Jersey; and, at Rice University in Houston, *The Great Indoors* (2008), which was something like a portal or tunnel that visitors could walk through. Here, sculptural components were given such subtitles as *Alveoli*, *Polyp*, *Blood Blister* and *Liver Spot*, indicating that “indoors” referred to the human body.

This year, Robson received grants from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation and the New York Foundation for the Arts. Currently, she has work on view in “Trash Menagerie” at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Mass. (through June 1, 2010), and she will present “Land Mines,” a solo exhibition of new work, at Salve Regina University Gallery in Newport, R.I., opening Oct. 14 (through Nov. 8). Robson lives and works in Brooklyn.

EDWARD M. GÓMEZ As a youngster, were you the precocious one who was always making things?

AURORA ROBSON Yes. I used to cut all of the eyeballs out of my mother’s magazines and paste them on my wall.

EMG When did you seriously start making art?

AR I started working and supporting myself when I was 15; I never finished high school. I painted murals, though not as a serious artist, in restaurants—landscapes—and integrated found objects into the murals. In 1988, I moved to Seattle; my brother, who was already there, asked me to run a

Aurora Robson in her studio, Brooklyn, 2009.
Photo Edward M. Gómez.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

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gallery he was opening. Then I really began to immerse myself in making art and helping other artists. Later, I married one of them. I was painting but I also started making things with garbage, like old shoes, assembling them in unusual ways and playing around with weight, gravity and color. Used objects contain historical energy. You can’t always see that energy but you can feel it.

EMG Does that same attitude extend to big objects, too, like buildings or cars?

AR Yes. Maybe that’s why, originally, I wanted to be an architect or an engineer—but also I’m a big fan of structure and of understanding how forms function. I read a lot of Buckminster Fuller.

EMG Why did you move to New York?

AR While I was in Seattle, my grandfather, my cousin and my best friend all died within a three-week period. I was having an emotionally difficult time. So my then-husband and I packed a backpack full of paints and headed to New York on a motorcycle, with our money in our boots. I learned welding in New York, and did structural and decorative welding in the early 1990s. I mostly helped my first husband promote *his* work—that same old story. Meanwhile, I was making kinetic sculptures with motors, showing my work at alternative spaces. I was always very interested in the idea of how to negotiate with gravity.

EMG You wound up returning to school.

AR I had been going to galleries in New York, and I had seen Jon Kessler’s work. He was teaching at Columbia. I thought people like Kessler, whom I respected, could teach me something. I had no money, so I got loans and scholarships. At Columbia, Kessler was really crucial to me. So were my environmental science professors and art history teachers, like Rosalind Krauss, who helped me understand that what I had been making until that point actually fit into an art historical context.

EMG In your sculpture classes, did they teach you about mass, gravity, weight, form, structure?

AR No.

EMG Did they

View of What Goes Around, Comes Around, 2008, discarded plastic bottles, tinted polyacrylic and mixed mediums, approx. 16 by 65 by 18 feet; in the artist’s studio. Photo Edward M. Gómez.



Left, *Satori*, 2009, oil on panel, 48 inches square.

Opposite, *Green House Effect*, 2009, ink and junk mail on paper, 17 inches square.

teach you about post-Cubist sculpture, which has often been more about assembling materials than carving or sculpting a form out of raw material?

AR No.

EMG So what *did* they teach you?

AR My studio art education was more about having access to a big welding, metal and wood shop, and getting crits that were pretty brutal. I was a bit older than most of the other students, already a certified welder, so I could pretty much build anything I wanted to. Kessler taught me that art about art was really boring a lot of the time.

After Columbia, I did website design and print graphics, then became a special events art director for MTV—a high-paying corporate job. We made things like giant light-boxes covered with photos I had shot in Times Square. Afterwards, everything got thrown away. I felt like such a devil, helping to waste things and destroy the planet. Finally I quit, and

gave that job back to the universe. I returned to making my own art.

EMG What form did that take?

AR I began making pretty accurate depictions of the nightmares I had had when I was a little kid. All of my sculptures, paintings and collages have this same subject matter. The nightmares were of a landscape, in which I was just this big [Robson squeezes thumb and forefinger together to indicate a tiny size] and trapped in a knot that surrounded me, from which blobs that were diaphanous, gelatinous and larger than me emerged. Maybe this landscape was related to the fact that I had had such a problematic childhood. My idea was to take something negative and turn it into something positive, an idea that has become the philosophical foundation of all of my work.

EMG When did you start making art with plastic bottles?

AR In 2003. One day, I was working on paintings of the nightmares,

when I noticed an irritating beam of light coming in through my window, making it hard for me to see what I was doing. It was being reflected from trash piles of plastic bottles across the street, and suddenly I realized, “That’s exactly the same form I’m working on, full of complex curves.” I thought, “Maybe I should see if I can make the nightmares three-dimensional.”

EMG Did you intentionally set out to find techniques that would be ecologically safe and nonpolluting?

AR Yes. Part of why I have such a hard time with the role of the artist and with dedicating myself to making art is that I really don’t think the planet needs more stuff—even if it’s art. I feel much more comfortable transforming as opposed to producing. If transformation is part of producing a new piece of artwork, I’m cool with that, but if it’s just about mining more materials from our planet to make stuff, I have a really hard time with that.

EMG I understand that the color tints

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you airbrush onto your constructions are nontoxic, and that you no longer use adhesives.

AR I stopped using adhesives to connect the bottles. They’re toxic, they become brittle, and they really don’t want to adhere to the plastic. If I’m going to use any kind of adhesive, it has to be acrylic or a polyacrylic compound. It has to be the same kind of material—like with like: it’s one of the laws of the universe. And I use small rivets. They’re aluminum, although I would prefer it if they were made of a recycled material. I look at the way [Andy] Goldsworthy works and say, “There’s no hardware! It’s brilliant.” But I’m not going to make origami.

I want to exploit the archival integrity of my materials. If plastic is going to be so damaging on an environmental level, let it at least serve a beautiful purpose on an artistic level. These plastic bottle sculptures will last 100 to 1,000 years.

EMG Is color important in your work?

AR I was using color to get people’s

attention but now I’m feeling more subdued. In *The Great Indoors*, for example, all those colors were appropriate. Once again, I was inspired by my nightmares. But I was also thinking about the interior of the human body, thinking that, as we go about destroying the great outdoors, all we’re going to be left with is “the great indoors”—our own bodies’ insides.

EMG You make collages using pieces of junk mail and also oil-on-panel paintings. How are they related to your sculptures?

AR The collages emerged because I was annoyed by all the junk mail I was receiving, with its aggressively friendly, insincere language encouraging me to apply for credit cards or to buy things. Making the two-dimensional works is like making studies for three-dimensional works. It helps me think about new forms to try to create with the bottles.

EMG Who are the artists whose work has influenced you?

AR The list is long! Lee Bontecou.

Kessler introduced me to her work, which, at first, was rather scary. Goldsworthy, Ernesto Neto, Louise Bourgeois, Agnes Martin and Yoko Ono—Martin for the way she builds up large works with great presence from the thinnest, faintest lines, and Ono for the spirit of her work, which promotes peace and harmony. Yayoi Kusama—like my nightmares, her “Infinity Rooms” represent infinitely large spaces that are horrifyingly complex but somehow simple at the same time.

EMG Craftsmanship appears to be very important to you.

AR Yes—for that I look at Judy Pfaff and her use of weight, her technical savvy, the way she takes chaos and makes it work in a space, giving it balance and order. Tim Hawkinson, and Do Ho Suh—what he does with his sewn structures. These are the people I’m particularly impressed by.

EMG Are there other artists inspiring you who, like yourself, are working with recycled materials?

AR I don’t think of them as “recycled.” What I’m doing is interrupting the waste stream—so the bottles I use don’t really get recycled. What I’m doing is transforming them so that they don’t even have to go through the environmentally costly recycling process.

EMG Can you comment on your interest in the vast, 100-million-ton accumulation of garbage in the Pacific Ocean—the one that spreads out over a territory the size of Texas? Greenpeace calls it the “Trash Vortex” or the “Eastern Garbage Patch,” and it has a lot to do with plastic bottles.

AR Most people know nothing about it, but we’re all complicit in the making of this environmental disaster. David de Rothschild, from the famous banking family, is working to raise public awareness about it [and is building a catamaran of recycled bottles to travel to it]. I’m helping to form Project Vortex, a coalition of artists, scientists, designers, architects and other potential “manufacturers” who want to work with plastic. Like me, they would all be willing to commit to using debris rescued from the Trash



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Vortex to create products that would be sold and that, hopefully, would never re-enter the waste stream. I’m setting up a website [www.projectvortex.org] where interested people can find out about this proposal. Cleaning up the Trash Vortex would be a massive undertaking but it could also create jobs in trash-sorting and hauling.

EMG Would you like to see art schools offer courses in the use of waste stream materials?

AR Yes, absolutely. I’ve had students from environmental art programs contact me to ask about doing internships. If artists start making such works, there will be collectors who will want to live with such works.

EMG You call your way of working an “open process.” What does this mean?

AR Sometimes I work with homeless people who are already collecting bottles, paying them more than they would receive at the usual drop-off points, or I gather them from yoga studios, schools—they’re not hard to find. Depending on the scale of a large project, I’ll have from four to 20 assistants helping to prepare materials and construct basic sculptural elements. When each piece is finished, everything gets quality-controlled, inspected by more than one person. My studio is more like a refinery, an anti-factory. I like the sense of community that comes with this process.

EMG Do you feel a sense of purpose about making art?

AR I think art is a reflection of values and, at this point in time, our values are going to have to change. So art is probably going to change. I want to make work that helps people recognize and embrace that fact. I think that art is a way to envisage the future, and artists are—or

should be—visionaries. Otherwise, making art is just a luxurious frivolity, as far as I’m concerned. I’m interested in flexibility and movement in relation to changing something negative into something positive. Ultimately, to me, art-making is creative problem-solving. ○

Right, view of *The Great Indoors*, 2008, discarded plastic bottles, LEDs, solar panels and mixed mediums, approx. 16 by 40 by 40 feet; at Rice University Art Gallery, Houston. Photo Kevin Graham.

EDWARD M. GÓMEZ, a critic, graphic designer and translator, is working on a research project concerning craftsmanship in contemporary art.



