



Art Feature



ELLEN DRISCOLL

From the Ground Up

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Bird's Eye

At seven years old, I became fascinated by the story of a girl who had hidden herself in a suitcase, then escaped across the Berlin Wall on a motorcycle driven by her boyfriend. Around that same time whenever things, became too noisy or difficult in my large family I would climb to the top of a large maple tree and sit there cogitating. The view from up high, with its topographical remove, gave me the solitude to cope with things that I couldn't handle on the ground.

The Berlin Wall story: compression, mobility, darkness, and the crossing of borders. My retreats to the tree: a bird's-eye view and a telescopic remove. All of these are spirits inhabiting my recent work.

Compression: Big things become small: flattened and denser. Just as a human body can fold inside a suitcase, I try in my work to “compress” the idea that I am a citizen of the world's largest consuming and polluting nation. Of course, I can neither travel and get away from this fact, nor transform it by shipping myself in a suitcase across a foreign border.

Instead, mind-boggling statistics about the dangers of climate change engulf me from every side. Any apparently innocent action, it seems, can contribute to the impending disaster. Thirsty? Hungry? Buy a drink or snack that comes in a plastic container. The industry tries to convince us it can be “recycled.” Where did this plastic come from? Where does it really go?

I climb the tree for a telescopic view. My eyes alight on Africa's Niger Delta, where for years a guerilla army has fought the Nigerian government and the Shell oil company's despoliation of the Delta's lush farmland and forest.





My lens next travels along the interstate routes of waste-management systems that truck the “recyclable” stuff out of well-meaning, well-off urban centers and dump it in poor states hungry for cash.

Mobility: I climb down from my tree and decide to measure time and space in units of plastic. How many bottles can be extracted from people’s recycling bags in one hour? Between seventy-five and one hundred thirty, as it turns out.

I do this over and over, day after day. Usually three to four urban blocks can be covered in an hour. I forensically examine what people can no longer bear to see—their trash. Cartons of milk gone sour, bottles of expensive distilled water, soiled tin-foil packages left over from church suppers.

The work is meditative—an urban version of blueberry picking. Looking down a street of row houses, I’m able to sniff out where a good haul of #2 plastic might be. Occasionally someone asks why I’m collecting this huge pile of “worthless” stuff. “It’s for art,” I say. “I’m making sculptures.” This is a real conversation stopper. Usually the questioner looks at me like I’m crazy. But there’s always that rare individual whose curiosity is piqued. They too see the value in worthless stuff. We gleaners are a sub-tribe.

Darkness (and Light): I head out on my collecting rounds at daybreak. The time is a strange cocktail of darkness and light. The sheer monumentality, the sheer vastness, of what I encounter is dark: Brooklyn garbage, New York garbage, American garbage, world garbage. Like a sequence from the Eames film *Powers of Ten*, my mind telescopes the way it did when I was put under for a tonsillectomy. I was seven then too and, under the ether I saw galaxies whipping past as I hurtled through space. “Where does infinity end?” I would ask my mother. “It doesn’t, because it’s infinite,” she would reply. This riddle preoccupied me endlessly at that age . . . and still does. The constant clocking and recording of the plastic I collect helps me to understand that my actions are but a blip in a continuum that wraps infinitely around the world.

In the studio, my assistants are waiting. The plastic is cut up into pieces. We save and sort the useful parts like nineteenth-century whalers finding uses for blubber, baleen, and bones. We “quilt” the flat pieces together to fashion expanses of landscape in the shape of continents and regions: North America, Africa, the Niger Delta,





and the Middle East.

We score and make five-sided folds to form micro-architectures of oil refineries, oil derricks, offshore rigs, hydroelectric dams, and surveillance towers. There are McMansions, futuristic hotels, shanties and slums, detention centers, and eighteenth-century water-powered mills.

These structures are tiny and ghostly, their power shrunk down to cause the frisson of the uncanny, a moving shadow as seen through a telescope. They attach themselves to a larger host—a nineteenth-century trestle bridge or a “melted,” drooping, plan-like view of the Niger Delta. The effect is one of continuous interconnectivity between rich nations and poor, between oil and water, between things far away in time and space and things that are right here, right now.

Crossing Borders: The sculptures move around, and so do I. After they are exhibited a few times they are cannibalized and mutate into something new.

In Hiroshima, Japan, my friend the artist Zero Higashida and I exhibit three sculptures in the Bank of Japan building. The building survived the atomic bombing and is treated as a sacred reminder of the horrible event.

Upstairs, an entire floor of the building is covered with thousands upon thousands of paper cranes sent to Hiroshima from around the world as peace messages. Downstairs, where Zero and I are to install our work, it is gray, haunted, and empty. Zero’s sculpture of massive, darkened timbers is based on his mother’s recollection of the atomic bombing. My two plastic sculptures address wars, present and future, being fought over access to oil—and the first world’s insatiable thirst for petroleum. In this setting, little explanation is needed. The people of Hiroshima understand.

In the summer of 2009 I cross a different border. I travel to Ireland where I am given free access to the country’s only oil refinery, the Conoco-Phillips facility in Whitegate near Cork. In the United States, no artist with a camera would be allowed inside such a facility. Ireland, however, with its small population and less oppressive corporate strictures, lets me in, no questions asked (or only a few questions anyway).

Inside the refinery, I feel as if I have parachuted onto the set of





Tarkovsky's *Stalker* or *Solaris*. Great permutations of oil architecture stretch out before me; rows of round tanks, massive refining towers covered in scaffolding, some dating back to the 1950s, and a dense miles-long circuitry of pipes connecting it all. Heading out of the refinery is an archipelago of tiny roads, each threaded with intestinal hoses that move the refined oil to tankers waiting in the harbor.

My visit lasts three hours. I spend the next five weeks living and working monastically in the basement of the Sirius Art Centre in a hundred-year-old building across the bay. I draw from morning to night. I make Piranesi-like collages of the oil architecture, using the hundreds of photograph I have taken. I impose a windowpane grid onto my small collages, based on the grid of the windows in the Smack Mellon exhibition space in Brooklyn, where the drawings will be exhibited in September 2009 alongside a thirty-foot sculpture entitled FASTFORWARDFOSSIL #2.

I begin each drawing the same way, laying down squares of paper on the floor in a grid and gluing them with strips of rice paper to form a "page" six feet wide by seven feet high. I then take the huge sheet of paper outside and pour volumes of ink over it. I fervently hope for rain and no wind. Letting rain pour down on the drawing improves its credibility as a record of an uncontrolled accident.

After the paper is dry, I draw square by square in grisaille, laying down gray tones in varying densities. The massive complexity of the architecture is rendered in pale shapes of gray—a metamorphosis that both compresses it and renders it strangely weightless, not unlike the process of "shrinking" in my sculptures. Then I pour more ink, forming oil spills, rainstorms, floods, and other scary things beyond my artistic control. The drawing process itself becomes a microcosm of a feared and dreaded dystopia.

When the drawing and the sculpture are finished, I mentally climb the tree again with my telescope. Through the lens I can see faraway objects and their shadows, equal shapes of presence and absence. Then the wind blows, and leaves brush against my face, obscuring my vision for a split second. I've traveled from sight to sensation and back again, from far to near to far—and an idea is forming. I hear Italo Calvino's voice in my head: "Knowledge of the world tends to dissolve the solidity of the world, leading to a





perception of all that is infinitely minute, light, and mobile. . . .
The world . . . is made up of the qualities, attributes, and forms that
define the variety of things, whether plants, animals, or persons. But
these are only the outward appearances of a single common sub-
stance that—if stirred by profound emotion—may be changed into
what most differs from it.”

