



Fluid
Perspectives
Ellen Driscoll

BY JENNIFER MCGREGOR

FastForwardFossil: Part 2, 2009. Harvested #2 plastic, 7 x 30 x 14 ft. View of installation at Smack Mellon, Brooklyn, NY.

ETIENNE FROSSARD

Ellen Driscoll, the recipient of the ISC's 2018 Outstanding Educator Award, applies a unique approach to storytelling and an inventive use of materials to her public artworks and smaller studio sculptures. In her practice, drawing and sculpture are interconnected and cross-pollinate to open up new ideas and forms. Whether working in ghostly white plastic, mosaic, or walnut and sumi inks, her projects fluidly map place and time while mining historical, environmental, and cultural themes. Over a decade ago, she began to take on issues of consumption, excess, and the effects of the petrochemical industry. More recently, she has introduced the resilience displayed by the natural world in the face of sociopolitical threats.

In January 2007, while in residence at the MacDowell Colony, Driscoll pledged to work exclusively with repurposed or found materials. This promise led her to the Peterborough Town Recycling Center, where she began collecting gallon milk and water jugs.¹ Back in New York, she continued harvesting #2 plastic in the early morning before sanitation department recycling trucks swept it away. These petroleum-based containers associated with essential drinks would become her material of choice over the next few years.

Around the same time, she was creating a new installation for "Thoreau Reconsidered" at Wave Hill. *Phantom Limb*, made in collaboration with Golnar Adili and Aimee Burg, who were instrumental in developing the fabrication methods, introduced the vocabulary that unfolds in Driscoll's subsequent works. These sculptures are all grounded in Henry David Thoreau's ideas about self-reliance and egalitarian relationships based on trust and mutual respect. Collecting, cleaning, and meticulously fabricating these sculptures from material removed from the waste stream are self-reliant acts. They are also collective, in the sense that each piece has absorbed the time, imagination, and effort of many hands. *Phantom Limb* introduces the themes of geopolitical imbalance and futility that Driscoll elaborates on in subsequent works. Its unwieldy landscape of dredging cranes, oil rigs, and surveillance satellites alludes to the vast network of engineering,



Phantom Limb, 2007. Harvested #2 plastic, 7 x 8 x 14 ft.

technology, and transport required to supply the world with petroleum. The McMansion motif signals the conspicuous consumption of the time, when the economy was humming away and real estate values were escalating wildly.

Driscoll exhibited another of these labor-intensive critiques in 2009, after the collapse of the housing, banking, and insurance industries. In *FastForwardFossil: Part 2*, a colossal installation and series of large drawings shown at Smack Mellon's cavernous space, she reconfigured elements from previous sculptures and created a new landscape.² Abstracted North American, Middle Eastern, and African landmasses serve as platforms for oil harvesting and shipping, as well as destinations for oil consumption, each one populated with references to industrial activities that span centuries and locations, from an 18th-century American water-powered mill to oil refineries on the Niger Delta. A sea of plastic water molecules

connected these elements in a space that would be flooded by Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Installed in a former boiler building with soaring ceilings, *FastForwardFossil: Part 2* resonated with views of Lower Manhattan, the East River, and Brooklyn Bridge Park. It also underscored the massive changes altering the social, cultural, architectural, and natural landscape of the DUMBO neighborhood.

The installation brought the sculpture together with a series of large-scale drawings that critique the off-kilter dependence on oil and warn against rampant consumption. Ocean fires, a floating glacier, anachronistic towers, garbage scows, abandoned shopping malls, conglomerated slums, and refugee camps convey cautionary scenarios. Foreboding shifts of scale and perspective in the drawings echo the sculpture's ghostly apocalyptic sensibility. Blue and black ink washes allude to atmosphere and water, disturbed by carefully rendered details of impending disaster.

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While the *FastForwardFossil* drawings suggest water, *Still Life* (2010) actually floated on the surface of a pond at Allandale Farm in Brookline, Massachusetts. The reflectivity of the water immediately altered the reading, amplifying the significance of oil transport and distribution via waterways. The North and South American continents, with an adjacent Tower of Babel, became a platform for addressing global interconnections of oil production and consumption. The floating plastic formation created an unavoidable association with the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, which occurred in April 2010. This water-born installation at a garden center, CSA, and summer camp signaled a sense of hopefulness in community and a spirit of "getting off the shoulders of others" that Thoreau would have appreciated.

In 2011, Driscoll created *Distant Mirrors* for the Providence River, a truly site-specific project that connected global consumption with European settlement of the area that is now Providence.³ Rather than harvesting her materials from the streets, this time she received them from the Rhode Island Resource Recovery Cor-

poration, which donated a 200-pound section of a plastic bale for the sculpture. Driscoll and her team documented the amount of time and energy needed to collect and process the plastic, as well as the amount of water used to clean it. The charts make clear the resources required to recycle plastic (and make a sculpture). When I visited her studio earlier this year, she was undergoing a major reorganization and releasing elements from the sculpture back into the recycling stream.

A floating archipelago of islands, *Distant Mirrors* locates Providence in a continuum of choices related to land use. The shape of one island is based on the map given to Roger Williams by the Narragansett people, which he divided to mark 52 equal plots and common land for his followers. This community, which welcomed people persecuted elsewhere, was short-lived, but it made an indelible mark on the area. The other two islands invert the size of the North American landmass in relation to clusters of oil fields from major suppliers to the United States: Canada, Venezuela, Mexico, and Saudi Arabia. Familiar structures populate the islands, including an oil refinery and an "economic seesaw" with a McMansion at

one end and a triple-decker house (typical working-class housing in New England at the turn of the 20th century) on the other. Echoing Driscoll's drawings, the continents shifted and rearranged themselves as they floated in the river.

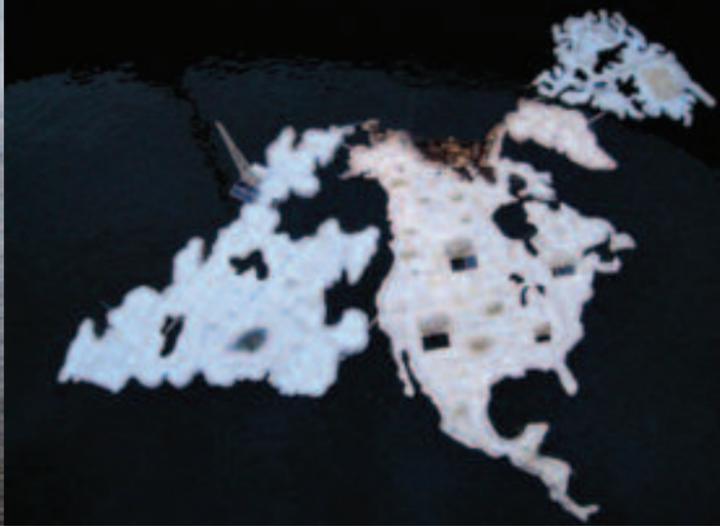
The islands were illuminated at night by solar lights, accentuating the aerial view from the parapet walls along the river. Though *Distant Mirrors* began with the same reflective qualities as *Still Life*, being sited in a flowing river, it immediately collected debris and scum, which established a dialogue with trash and other floating detritus. Here, the place of Driscoll's sculptures in the waste stream became visibly apparent.

Over the past few years, residencies and exhibitions have extended Driscoll's reach. In 2015, she created a new body of site-specific work for "Soundings," an exhibition at Kentler International Drawing Space in the Red Hook neighborhood of Brooklyn. The project was conceived and developed in dialogue with Margaret Cogswell, a long-time friend, whose fugue-based video installations address post-industrial rivers. For "Soundings," Cogswell's drawings focused on the sur-

Still Life, 2010. Recycled plastic, 3 x 13 x 20 ft. View of work as installed at Allandale Farm, Brookline, MA.



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Distant Mirrors, 2011. 3 floating islands made from harvested #2 plastic, 2.08 x 30 x 14 ft.; 2.08 x 14 x 13 ft.; and 1.25 x 14 x 13 ft. Clockwise from top left: View of work as installed on the Providence River, RI; smaller island of North America surrounded by Canadian and Nigerian oil fields; and detail of apartments.

face of the water, and Driscoll turned her eye to “small, lowly, and humble plants” rather than the industrial architecture so prevalent in Red Hook.⁴

Driscoll was struck by the resilience of volunteer plants pushing through pavement. Hurricane Sandy had devastated the neighborhood three years earlier, which made the plant life more pronounced and hopeful. Considered weeds, many of these species arrived with the assistance of ships and birds, or on the soles of shoes. Driscoll notes that the presence of these plants, which flourish in adverse conditions, is a reminder of those journeys. Birds also appear in silhouette and add a sense of theater. Driscoll calls them vectors that direct you around the drawings. Two horizontal drawings in the series emphasize the role of trade through diagrammatic maps connecting the port of Red Hook in

New York Harbor to its active trading partners, Shenzhen and Guangzhou, China. These works have a reduced palette of walnut and sumi inks poured onto and removed from paper. For the vertical drawings, Driscoll joined four pieces of paper; the seam is subtle, but it gives a sense of considered construction while also suggesting a window.

Driscoll spent the fall of 2015 as a resident at the Siena Art Institute, where she continued working in the same mode as the “Soundings” drawings. This time, plants became a way to address the refugee crisis, as intensive immigration from the Middle East was felt throughout Europe, and E.U. countries struggled to absorb and resettle thousands of traumatized people. Driscoll observed that earlier waves of immigration to Italy from Albania and China had resulted in more settled communities. Using the metaphor of plant migration, she focused on oak (whose charcoal is used in bioremediation) and acanthus (a highly successful migrating plant, whose leaves are familiar elements of architectural ornament).

This drawing trajectory continued during a 2017 residency at the Dora Maar House in Ménerbes, France, where Driscoll began a series devoted to plants used for phytoremediation of toxic sites. In particular, she draws the pattern of sunflower seeds on the flower head and lavender. Sunflowers remove lead and other contaminants from soil; lavender serves multiple functions, from repelling mosquitos to disinfecting corpses.

Birds come to the forefront in *Bower* (2016), a collaborative project with Joyce Hwang and Matt Hume. Hwang, an associate professor in the department of architecture at the University at Buffalo, directs Ants of the Prairie, an architectural practice that focuses on confronting ecological problems with creative solutions, such as incorporating wildlife habitats into constructed environments. Hume, an architect who also teaches at the University at Buffalo, supervised the project’s construction with SUNY Buffalo graduate students. Mary Miss and Olivia Georgia introduced Driscoll and Hwang and then invited them to collaborate on a project in New York’s Chinatown for City as Living Laboratory (CALL). When that project did not transpire, they created *Bower* for Artpark in Lewiston, New York, as a CALL project, drawing on their related expertise and interests. The installation features framed sections of a house containing birdhouses and glass window panels that draw attention to local species as well as to the rising rate of bird-strike deaths. These panels give a new form and function to elements developed in Driscoll’s drawings. Located on the migration path for the purple martin between Canada and Latin America, *Bower* raises awareness about potential disruptions to flight patterns. Accompanying information allows park visitors to learn how human development is threatening birds.

The use of maps has been a consistent element throughout Driscoll’s sculpture, drawings, and public art. She often shifts scale and orientation to underscore the

Ellen Driscoll and Joyce Hwang in collaboration with Matt Hume, *Bower*, 2016. 3 architectural fragments in the landscape with 40 birdhouses and 4 glass windows with bird-strike pattern, wood, and glass, 15 x 10 x 10 ft. each. 2 views of work as installed at Artpark, Lewiston, NY.

subjectivity of a map, highlighting its specific perspective and inability to convey the entirety of experience. Maps are the focus of *CartOURgraphy* (2016), two mosaic murals commissioned by Public Art for Public Schools for Middle College High School and the International High School located on the LaGuardia Community College campus in Long Island City, New York, where students are recent arrivals to the U.S. and speak more than 40 different languages. Driscoll conducted six mapping and geography workshops during the process as a way to orient students to the project.

To create the design, she made watercolor drawings of “upside-down” and “right-side-up” maps of the world, which she then cut into strips and wove together. This method shifts how color typically delineates countries and continents, mixing up the orientation and understanding of land and water. Deciphering the finished product requires familiarity with geography. A similar weaving technique characterizes a mural map of the five boroughs. Punctuating a horizon line, the boroughs read as islands floating on a ground of reflective silver mosaic tiles, an effect that underscores the city’s global nature. The firm Mosaika fabricated the work, and Driscoll hand-painted areas on site to create a shimmering surface.

Together, these recent projects demonstrate how Driscoll’s practice interweaves the studio and the public realm. In the midst of teaching and mentoring students, first at RISD and now at Bard College, problem-solving public commissions, and immersing herself in the studio, she ruminates on the sociopolitical climate. She reaches widely for sources in nature, history, art, and politics, synthesizing the results of her explorations in provocative sculpture and drawings.

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Notes:

- ¹ These became the basis of *Hunter-Gatherer* (2007), an installation at the Humanities Gallery of Long Island University, Brooklyn, New York.
- ² *FastForwardFossil: Part 1* (2009) was exhibited at Frederieke Taylor Gallery in New York, and *Part 3* (2010) at West Cork Arts Centre, Skibbereen, Ireland.
- ³ *Distant Mirrors* was created with Rose Heydt, Dianne Hebbert, Megan McLaughlin, and Ponnappa Prakkamakul, with funding from the Robert and Margaret McColl Johnson Fellowship of the Rhode Island Foundation, co-produced with Waterfire, with thanks to Artists in Context, Rhode Island Resource Recovery Corporation, the Roger Williams National Historic Park, and Clay Rockefeller and Doug Borkman. The self-published catalogue has an essay by Jenn Joy.
- ⁴ Artists’ talk with Margaret Cogswell and Ellen Driscoll, September 19, 2015, <<https://vimeo.com/139871961>>.

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TOP: JOYCE HWANG / BOTTOM: COURTESY THE ARTIST