

ARTIST STATEMENT

By converting masses of everyday objects into visually aesthetic and conceptual discoveries, my artworks communicate the optimism in regenerating rubbish. Through my artworks, I aim to stimulate the history embedded within the object, its initial attractions and final deficiencies.

My inventory of accumulated everyday materials includes keys, hooks, plastic bottles, 'Tic Tac' packets, plastic lids, CDs, etc. Items are transformed into organic or recognisable structures, by either brazing or joining with traditionally female or male techniques such as weaving or welding. These structures range from very large public artworks to small, intricate and meticulously detailed works, which often render the original object unrecognisable. My work sits at the junction of sculpture, consumer culture and environmental concern.

When collecting materials, some are sought through serendipitous opportunity, some solicited as donations of waste from organisations, whilst others are collected from friends, family and local community, often portraying and mapping contemporary and consumerist culture. These materials are then hoarded and contemplated until an idea percolates. I begin my artwork by experimenting with the patterns that emerge from combinations, until I am able to manipulate that pattern into a concept that is often site-specific. Many of these patterns, whilst employing mathematical theory and geometry, transform the ordinary basic material into extraordinary, representative or abstract forms.

I have a deep affection for the environment, and am concerned about the impact that waste has upon our land and oceans. Humans exist in such phenomenal numbers on our planet, and we are the only creatures that make inorganic waste in such huge volumes. By reviewing this waste and combining it into a form made of multiples of the same item, I also reflect upon the large population we have on Earth. The use of materials from all this waste, to create spectacular large-scale artworks, helps to focus the viewer's attention on what is disposed of in our community. My aim is to show viewers that one person can make a difference, by presenting the effect that one ordinary item multiplied into the form of a sculpture can have.



Alison McDonald working in studio, 2015. Image Credit: Aaron Ashley.

A travelling exhibition organised by Umbrella Studio contemporary arts, toured by Museums & Galleries Queensland. This project has been assisted by the Australian Government's Visions of Australia program; and supported by the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of the Australian, state and territory governments.

Wanton, Wild & Unimagined

Alison McDonald



Design: Designfront
Cover: Alison McDonald, *Trickle*, 2013, Individually hand cast & reduced recycled plastic lids & wire, 100 x 60 x 1cm.
Photo courtesy of the artist.



FROM UMBRELLA STUDIO CONTEMPORARY ARTS

Director, Jonathan McBurnie

Umbrella Studio contemporary arts is excited to introduce you to the work of Alison McDonald. Alison is a dedicated long-time member of Umbrella, and has been exhibiting regularly for almost twenty years. She has built a name for herself with large-scale public sculptures, interactive installations, and a fascinating artistic curiosity that draws her from one medium to the next.

Alison's exhibition, *Wanton, Wild & Unimagined*, is a strange beast. Made entirely of recycled components, the exhibition puts forth a striking message, drawing our attention to the by-product of our so-called advanced capitalist society: waste. The statistics of waste are mind-boggling. The sheer volume of plastics produced each year, and the deep carbon footprint made in this production, is a sobering aspect of contemporary existence. Alison's work deftly integrates different recycled materials, ironically creating organic-looking forms, creatures that might exist in the ocean, or microscopically.

Artwork with a political bent can be a risky proposition for a travelling exhibition; the political nous of the artist is put on full display, and sometimes in inviting participation by the public, the project itself can become didactic, or even hackneyed, sabotaged by its own moralist intentions or bloody-minded focus on community outcomes. This is not the case with Alison's works, which, while displaying that same determination on outcomes that will better our world, still display delicate artistry, and invite even the most casual viewers to look closely. Alison's secret weapon is a sincere and focused craft, penetrating any resistance to its community-mindedness, or its political intentions, with honest-to-goodness, hand-crafted sense of wonder.

In 2016, Umbrella celebrated its thirtieth anniversary, bringing about a sense of history, reflecting on our artistic and community roots, and gazing into the future, with exhibitions of members new and old, making connections between generations. Something that grows increasingly apparent is the need to not only foster the next generation of artists, but to imbue them with a sense of responsibility and custodianship of this Earth, which is under ever-increasing demand and threat. Artists like Alison are reminders of why we do what we do. There is no greater pleasure than seeing an artist grow and mature.

We at Umbrella are thrilled to be teaming up with our friends at Museums & Galleries Queensland to tour this fascinating exhibition, with the support of Visions of Australia. These partnerships are essential in getting good work out into the regions, and showing Australia what talent we have living and working off the beaten track.

We hope that Alison's show inspires the next generation of artists to think outside the square, and for people of all ages to consider their surroundings, and the delicate balance that we find ourselves in after decades of unthinking consumerism.

Centre: *Global*, 2013. Up-cycled plastic lids, cable ties, PVC, 120cm x 120cm. Image credit: Louise Allgood.
Right (L-R): *Fractal 1*, *Fractal 2*, *Fractal 3*, 2008. Recycled hand-cut PET plastic bottles and monofilament, Triptych, 100cm x 32cm. Image credit: Aaron Ashley.

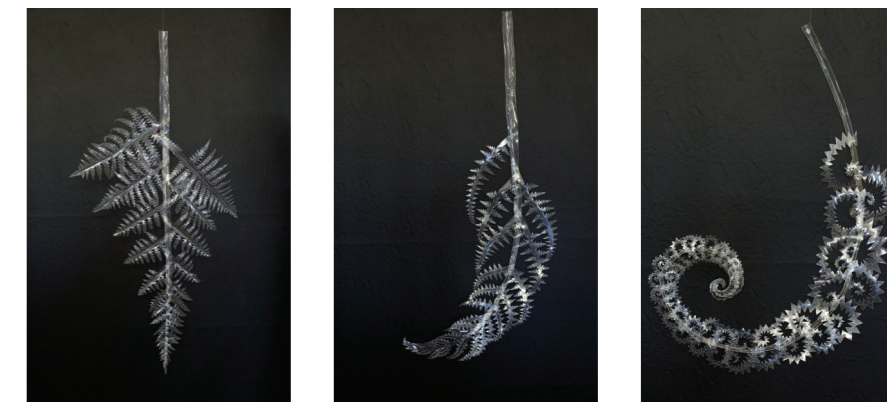
FROM THE CURATOR

Ross Searle

Environmental artist and sculptor, Alison McDonald, brings a focus to the complex beauty of recycled materials in an artistic practice that positions her sculpture within a broader debate about consumer culture and the environmental movement. *Wanton, Wild & Unimagined* is an intriguing exhibition of sculptured recycled plastic that "carefully weaves a strong sense of environmental conscience, attempting to influence and educate"¹. Greatly influenced by her location in the tropical north of Queensland, the material that most dominates Alison's sculpture is plastic; and it is plastic that makes up the majority of marine debris not only seen on northern shorelines but also floating in oceans worldwide. She spends many hours manipulating the humble plastic bottle and collecting thousands of plastic lids to make a variety of unimagined and impossible creations inspired by land-based flora, the depths of the ocean environment and an imaginary world inspired by such things as John Wyndham's sci-fi novel, *The Day of the Triffids*.

By converting masses of everyday objects into a visually transformative and aesthetically charged new form, Alison's artworks communicate the optimism in regenerating rubbish, whilst raising questions about the relationship we have with plastic, the recycling of this material and its supposed sustainability. While the work draws attention to cynical and apathetic consumer culture and the anxious dialogue between contemporary art and environmental issues, there is also great humour in the way these playful transformations engage our senses.

The earliest work in the exhibition is the stunningly elegant *Fractal* triptych from 2008. Made from flattened recycled 'PET' plastic bottles, they are delicate fern-like structures that are reminiscent of crystallised minerals. A fractal is a natural phenomenon that exhibits a repeating pattern that displays at every scale, where nothing changes and the same pattern repeats over and over. Within the natural world, the connection between fractals and leaves, for instance, is currently being used to determine how much carbon is contained in trees. In Alison McDonald's hands, these refined objects gain a particular magic in the way she painstakingly cuts and snips these delicate forms, which are held together with gossamer-thin monofilament. They speak of the magical order and symmetry of the natural world.



Clearly Alison has centred her recent practice on revaluing everyday materials including discarded PET bottles and plastic components. While her early work demonstrates a connection to the figure, her PET assemblages are expansive and are often presented in site-specific contexts. The work *R.R.R.*², 2012–2015, was conceived whilst on residency in Aberystwyth, Wales, UK. Originally titled *Choker* to resemble an oversize piece of jewellery, its purpose was to play on the idea that it was made of rubbish that 'choked' our waterways. Our reaction of recognition arises from perceiving the work as new, complex, and unfamiliar, as well as understandable. Clearly audiences will delight in the simple materiality and narrative of the work, but will also be intrigued by the complexity of its construction.

The final series are the *Triffid* works created between 2011 and 2016. Mostly small and discrete, they gain their impact from being installed *en masse*. These colourful-looking plants are constructed and modified in such a way that their original materiality is lost, whereas large-scale works such as *Flow*, 2010–2013, and *Global*, 2013, leave the original components intact so we can see the impact of small plastic items on an enormous scale. In John Wyndham's 1951 science-fiction book (and film) *The Day of the Triffids*, his Triffids are described as a member of a race of predatory plants which are capable of growing to a gigantic size and are possessed of locomotive ability and a poisonous sting. Capturing this in essence, Alison's *Triffids* too are fictitious, exotic and colourful-looking overgrown plants that derive from single-use plastics, a material that grows to enormous quantities and slowly takes over the world.

Alison's interest in environmental art is long-standing and her influences are multi-faceted³. She is a nationally significant regional artist, whose practice extends beyond the local and engages in questions about sustainability and environmental management, affirming the role that art has in critiquing and engaging with larger global issues. Humour is one of her strongest tools. The absurdity of producing bottled water at centralised urban bottling plants and shipping this product all over the Australian landmass is clearly illogical. Australians spend over \$500 million on bottled water every year. It has to be pumped out of the ground, packaged, transported and chilled before it gets to us. This creates over 60,000 tons of greenhouse gases a year in Australia alone. Alison plays with these issues and she leaves us without any doubt about her intentions. It has been a 10-year journey that commenced in 2005, when Alison created her first work with plastic. Titled *A retribution of rubbish*, it featured in the 2005 *Strand Ephemera* exhibition in Townsville, Queensland. From this exhibition, she hasn't looked back.

¹ 'Art is garbage and garbage is art', Danielle Thorman. Retrieved 10 August 2016
<http://www.eyelinepublishing.com/write-about-art-5/article/art-garbage-and-garbage-art>

² R.R.R. represents Reduce, Reuse, Recycle.

³ For example, internationally recognised El Anatsui (born 1944), a Ghanaian sculptor who has drawn particular attention in recent years for his iconic 'bottle-top installations', distinctive large-scale assemblages of thousands of pieces of aluminium sourced from alcohol recycling stations.