

Our Plastic Trash

Western Illinois University Gallery | August 24–September 24, 2021



Wishcycling: Can Wishes Really Come True?

Viewing the bricolage works by Toby Zallman, we become fascinated with the creative transformations of plastics into objets d'art. Upcycling random materials to make artworks is not a new medium—nor an official movement—yet the level to which Zallman has taken this art form, repurposing plastic materials, is captivating for its environmental message and aesthetic sensibilities.

In the 1950s, life was pretty idyllic in that the American Dream gave people hope for a better future. Polypropylene was introduced and the development of plastics came quickly. However, neither inventors nor manufacturers considered the consequences of how ubiquitous this material would become in the landscape. The impacts on our oceans and all life forms on Earth became visible only thirty to forty years later.

Trained as a painter in the 1970s, Zallman transitioned to sculpture in the 1990s, and began to examine the role of technology in our lives in 2004. She stated in a recent interview, “It was a period where I transitioned from looking inward to becoming conscious of what was happening outside of me, in the landscape.” She learned about the burning of e-waste in China and the resulting air pollution, and subsequently became concerned about safe drinking water. By 2014, the artist was shocked and captivated by the relentless proliferation and neglect of plastic pollution and decided to make her materials the message.

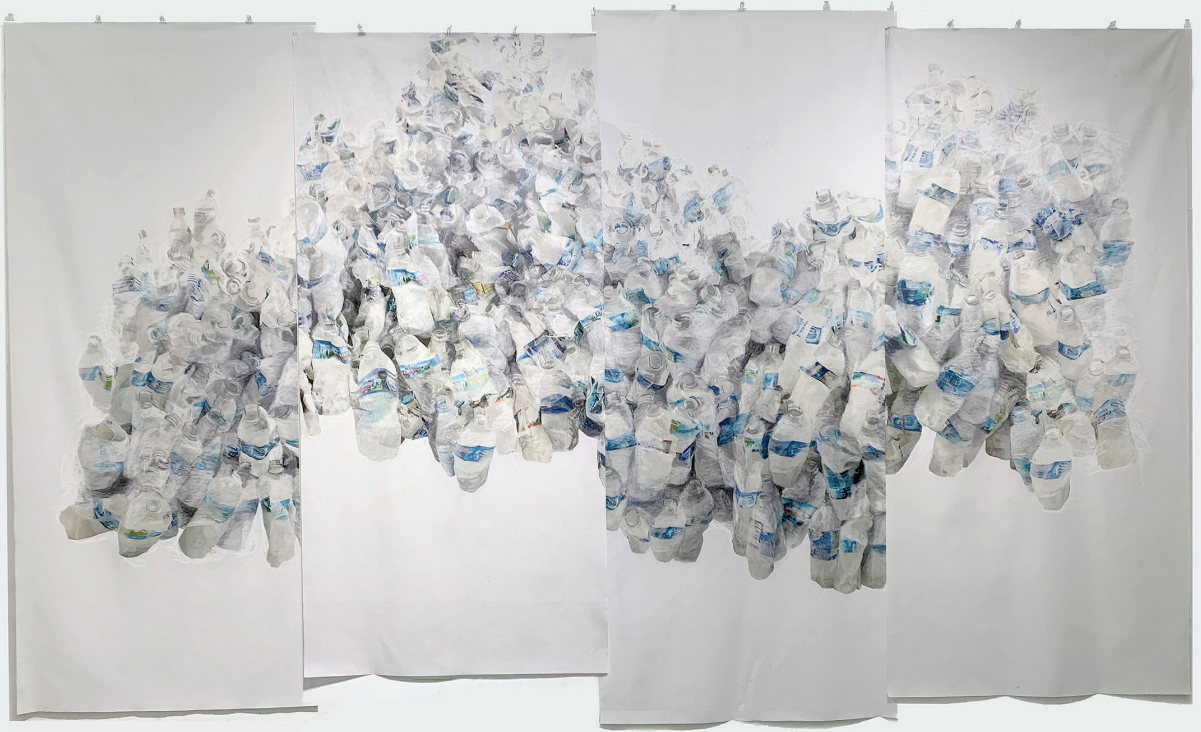
In a lively wall-to-floor installation titled *Plastic Bags in Water 5*, Zallman combines various media, including plastic bags attached to a steel armature. The work stretches out from the wall like a river and waterfall. This three-dimensional collage is fascinating as it's made from the very material that degrades the focus of the work, water. Attached to the wall is muslin, printed with an image of plastic bags in water that has plastic bags collaged on top. At the top are drawings, which appear like sky and water at the same time. We are attracted to the colors and motion, though we question our acceptance of this ecological dilemma despite its beauty.

Zallman's most recent *Complicit* series includes three columns made with plastic containers and packaging standing like ancient columns—speculative relics of a post-consumer culture. Each monument holds a vocabulary of foods and products that only someone who has lived in the last sixty years should comprehend. Zallman intends to create five columns total, which display the plastic waste from her household trash. The first column took six months to complete, the second eight months, and the third, which was made during the pandemic, became immeasurable. Her goal with the last three columns is to reduce her plastic consumption, taking longer to complete each column over time.

Other works include plastic bags wrapped around wire in the shape of ocean corals. *Ice Mountain* consists of melded plastic water bottles with the white necks and caps mostly revealed, appearing like melting glaciers. The title *Ice Mountain* references the label of the water bottles, a Nestle Waters North America product of the Swiss company pumping groundwater in Michigan for almost two decades with much controversy. Her work *Mongo* incorporates a broader range of plastic food packaging. On a pedestal are eighteen *Molluscs*

Cover: *Plastic Bags in Water 5*, 2018

Ink jet prints on muslin and paper, plastic bags and pastel; Approximately 90x104x48 inches



Water Bottle Drawing, 2018

Ink jet prints and pastel on muslin; 85x139 inches

made from plastic drinking cups that Zallman had in her studio for years and decided to use, together forming the *Small Works Group*. The sealife simulations are combined with stones and cloth, all upcycled and assembled as memorial portraits.

Zallman's works on paper add another dimension to the experience of her activist narrative on plastics included in her *Disintegration* series. The artist manipulates and seams together multiple small photographs on her computer to comprise a more extensive work. For her *Water Bottle Drawing*, she combines photographs of existing sculptures and prints and overlays them with pastels; the collective images are printed on four muslin panels, resulting in a twelve-foot wide memorial tapestry. These works depicting water bottles and their ultimate fate are portraits of a new nature, a nature morte.

In the recycling industry, non-recyclable items deposited in the blue bins, such as an umbrella or toy, are Wishcycling. Items that no longer work that need to be repaired or cleaned up are hoped to have another life. Although, the reality is only 9% of plastics are recycled, and that includes all the items with numbers and chasing arrows around them. It's wishful thinking that we can magically make un-useful items somehow go away without any consequence.

Zallman's work is meant to bring awareness and concern to its viewers, confronting horror and triggering activism. However, she's unclear if her art can do that. She is optimistic that the general public is becoming more aware and that new products on the market are replacing plastics. Ultimately Zallman is not concerned about the longevity of her work

as much as she's displeased with the corporate mindset of manufacturers who put the responsibility of recycling on the consumer.

Plastic production is expected to triple by 2050. By then, our oceans will contain more weight in plastic than fish. In 2018 China refused to accept non-recyclable waste from other countries, and it's cheaper for manufacturers to make virgin plastic than recycle. In America, we still have eighteen states that have preemptive laws stopping plastic bag regulations. As John Oliver states in his recent special on plastics in March 2021, "the real behavior change needs to come from manufacturers, the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR). They need to create the infrastructure to recycle the products they make." EPR laws are being proposed now, and it cannot happen soon enough for Toby Zallman.

Patricia Lea Watts, Founder/Curator, ecoartspace

Ice Mountain, 2021

Approximately 1,200 plastic water bottles; 18x20x22 inches





Complicit 6 Months, (left) 2018, *Complicit 8 Months*, (right) 2019, *Complicit Covid*, (center) 2020–2021
Discarded plastic; Approximately 72x20x20 inches each

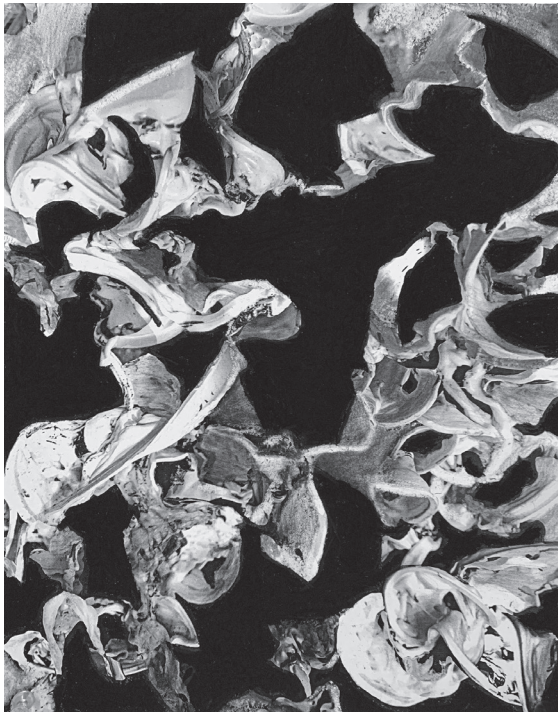
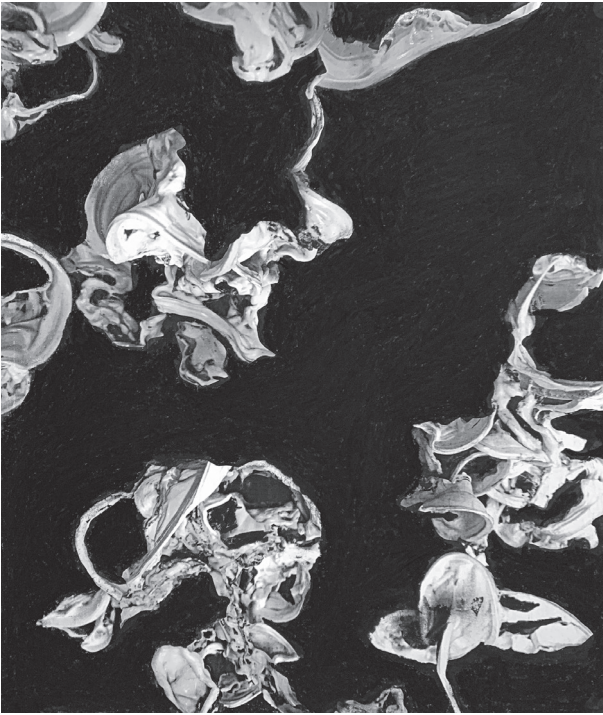


Coral 1, 2019

Plastic bags on steel wire; 39x36x12 inches



TOP *Small Works Group (Molluscs 1-18)*, 2020; Plastic; Sizes range from 2.75x1.75x2.375 to 4x1.5x2.75 inches
BOTTOM *Brain Coral*, 2020; Plastic bags on steel wire; 12.5x20x23 inches



Disintegration Series (1,2,3,7), 2020

Laser print, graphite and charcoal; (1) 10x12.5 inches, (2) 10x13 Inches, (3) 10x12.5 inches, (7) 10x13 inches,