

Plastopia

An Exhibition Statement  
Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research  
in Partial Fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of Art and Art History  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon

By  
Elizabeth Babyn

## **PERMISSION TO USE**

In presenting this exhibition statement in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Graduate Degree from the University of Saskatchewan, I agree that the Libraries of this University may make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for copying of this exhibition statement in any manner, in whole or in part, for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor or professors who supervised my exhibition statement work or, in their absence, by the Head of the Department or the Dean of the College in which my thesis/exhibition work was done. It is understood that any copying or publication or use of this exhibition statement or parts thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of Saskatchewan in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my exhibition statement. Requests for permission to copy or to make other uses of materials in this thesis/dissertation in whole or part should be addressed to:

Head of the Department of Art and Art History  
University of Saskatchewan  
Murray Building  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5A4

OR

Dean  
College of Graduate studies and Research  
University of Saskatchewan  
107 Administration Place Saskatchewan S7N 5A2  
Canada



## **Acknowledgments**

I am forever grateful and indebted for all of the selfless support, challenging questions, expert advice and encouragement provided by my graduate supervisor, Susan Shantz, and from my committee members, Joan Borsa and Alison Norlen. Their contributions have greatly enriched my MFA experience. I would also be remiss if I did not also acknowledge all the other U of S faculty members for their inspiration and wisdom, as well as the support staff within the Department of Art and Art History for their assistance throughout my MFA program.

I would like to thank my MFA peers for their encouragement, friendship and stimulating discourse during our two-year experience together. In addition, I wish to extend a special thank you to Anahita Akhavan and Xiao Han for their performances in the making of the video component within my final MFA installation.

Finally, I would like thank my loving husband, Paul, for his continued support throughout this process, my son, André, for assisting in editing my paper and son, Jonathan, for assistance when technological difficulties arose in the writing of this paper.

## Table of Contents

Permission to Use .....	i
Acknowledgement .....	ii
Table of Content .....	iii
List of Images .....	iv
Plastopia .....	1
Interconnectivity and the Fibonacci Sequence .....	2
Turning Point .....	7
Subconscious Shifts .....	10
The Genesis of Plastopia .....	13
Seduction: The Hook .....	21
Video: <i>Rêver en Plastique</i> .....	24
Conclusion .....	28
Citation List .....	30

## Image List

- Figure 1. Elizabeth Babyn. *Cosmic Fishnet* Installation, mixed media. 2013.
- a) Embroidered *Cosmic Fishnet* motif on veil, 2013.
  - b) Hand cut detail on Ginwashi paper, 2013.
  - c) *Cosmic Fishnet Scroll*, on 3 layers of Ginwashi paper with veil, 2013.
  - d) *Cosmic Fishnet Plinths*, mixed media, light, veil, 2013.
  - e) *Cosmic Fishnet Hexagonal Sculpture*, made with acrylic painted Tyvek<sup>®</sup> wrap, 2013.
- Figure 2. a) Elizabeth Babyn. *Hieroglyphs*, installation with scrolls, plinth, video, 2014.
- b) Side detail of Scrolls, 2014.
- Figure 3. Elizabeth Babyn. *Hieroglyphs*, video still, 2014.
- Figure 4. Cho Hyan. *Trail 11*, 39' x 49" scroll paper, [www.geogiascherman.com](http://www.geogiascherman.com), 2012.
- Figure 5. Ann Hamilton. *Ghost...a Border Act*, Source, [annhamilton.com](http://annhamilton.com), 2000.
- Figure 6. a) Elizabeth Babyn. *New Age Junky*, installation with cards, books and crystals, 2014.
- c) Elizabeth Babyn. *New Age Junky*, installation with video projection, mirrors, mirrored-Mylar<sup>®</sup> and cardboard, 2014.
- Figure 7. Elizabeth Babyn. *Amorphic Consumption*, video still, 2015.
- Figure 8. Crystal McLaughlin. *Debris*, silver branches, with monofilament, 2014.
- Figure 9. Elizabeth Babyn. *Antipodites*, installation with fabric, thread, wire, and monofilament, 2015.
- Figure 10. Elizabeth Babyn. *Ephemeral*, video still that was later incorporated into the final version using the green screen. 2015.
- Figure 11. Elizabeth Babyn. *Ephemeral*, video still, 2016.
- Figure 12. Elizabeth Babyn. *Tsunami-Waterfall*, in *Plastopia* installation, 2016, plastic wrap, chicken wire, water bottles, LED lights, CD's and mirrored-Mylar<sup>®</sup>, 2016.

- Figure 13. Diane Landry. *Knight of Infinite Resignation*, photo by Ivan Binet, water bottles, bicycle wheels, light, 2009.
- Figure 14. Elizabeth Babyn. *Plastopia's* Multi-faced creatures, costume worn by Xiao Han; plastic wrap, water bottles, chicken-wire, LED lights, 2016.
- Figure 15. Elizabeth Babyn. *Plastopia's* Shaggy faceless creature, costume worn by Anahita Akhavan; plastic wrap, chicken-wire, 2016.
- Figure 16. Colette Urban. *Consumer Cyclone*, film still from *Pretend Not to See Me*, Katherine Knight (Producer), 2009.
- Figure 17. Lily Wachowski (Director), *Matrix 7*, film still of mirror scene, 2003.
- Figure 18. Lee Bul. *Sorry for Suffering - You think I am a puppy on a picnic?* Fabric costume/sculpture, 1990.
- Figure 19. Aurora Robson. *What Goes Around Comes Around*, plastic refuse, 2008.
- Figure 20. Angela Hazelton Pozzi. *Shark*, in *Art to Save the Sea*, coastline refuse, 2016.
- Figure 21. Elizabeth Babyn. Video still of Multi-faced Creature, in *Rêver en Plastique*, 2016.
- Figure 22. Elizabeth Babyn. Video still of Multi-faced Creature shadow, in *Rêver en Plastique*, 2016.
- Figure 23. Elizabeth Babyn. Video still of Pregnant Protrusion, in *Rêver en Plastique*, 2016.

## Plastopia

*The moment you have found something you are already lost; it is the anchor to which the mind clings.*

— Jiddu Krishnamurti<sup>1</sup>

My Master of Fine Arts research has been primarily concerned with exploring my core belief in the interconnectedness of humankind, nature and the universe. In recent years, I have created artwork that highlights humanity's connection to nature and the universe. This viewpoint has been largely shaped by my spiritual and artistic development, advanced through my investigations of a wide range of philosophies and religions. It is this utopian desire that has guided and informed my artwork over the past eight years and, in particular, the past two years of working towards my MFA degree. However, recently I began to question some of my assumptions regarding interconnectedness, noticing contradictions about presumed truths that I held. I thought I had discovered an all-encompassing mathematical theorem in fractals and in the Fibonacci sequence that proved interconnection to "all that is" in a spiritual sense. I slowly began to notice that I was, in fact, lost, as the spiritual teacher Krishnamurti suggests in the above quote. These insights have led me to reconsider my initial intention behind interconnectivity as the core idea in my work and to challenge this impulse with my culminating installation for the MFA degree, *Plastopia*. The world of *Plastopia* is not utopian, but dystopian, with obscene amounts of plastic refuse and mirrored-Mylar® creating an environment for disturbing, mutant creatures constructed of plastic and submerged within a multi-coloured, dimly-lit plastic landscape. This weird, off-kilter, futuristic world is my response to the revelations I experienced regarding my belief in interconnectivity that I made in the course of obtaining my MFA degree. In the following paper, I

---

<sup>1</sup> Krishnamurti, 15.

will trace the development of my artwork and ideas from just before I entered the graduate program up to the creation of my final exhibition, *Plastopia*.

### **Interconnectivity and the Fibonacci Sequence**

Just prior to commencing graduate studies at the University of Saskatchewan, I began to shift my art materials and processes from paint-on-canvas to exploring more installation-based work. Conceptually, I was interested in mathematical theorems that might explain metaphysical ideas contained in “sacred” geometric figures. I was specifically interested in the inter-relationship between sacred geometry and the Fibonacci number sequences where each number within the sequence equals the sum of the two prior numbers. The golden mean, an important ratio in art and in architecture, can also be obtained from this infinite sequence, resulting in proportions that are constantly being repeated throughout sacred geometry and nature. I saw these ideas as key to explaining our interconnection to the universe and to each other.

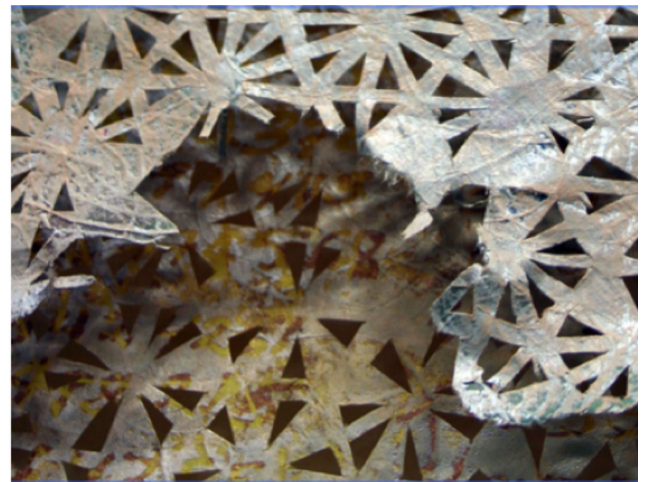
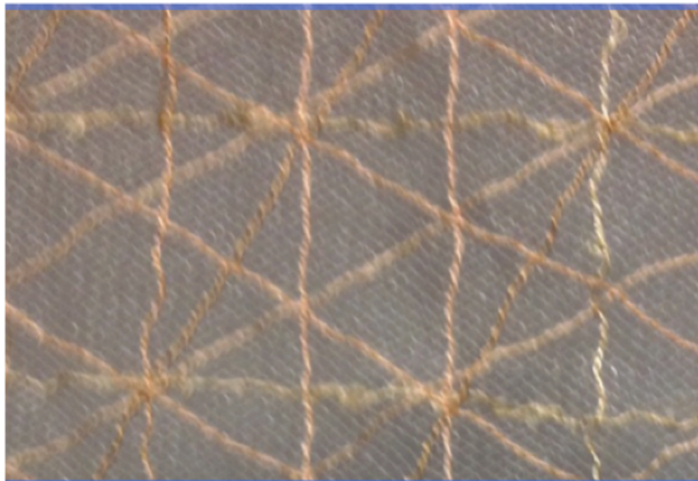


Figure 1. Elizabeth Babyn, *Cosmic Fishnet*, 2013. Fig. 1a. Embroidered detail on veil. 1b. Hand-cut detail on Ginwashi paper.



Figure 1d. Mixed media, *Cosmic Fishnet Plinths*, with light and veil.



1c. *Cosmic Fishnet Scroll*, 24" x 60," on Ginwashi paper with veil. 1e. *Cosmic Fishnet Hexagonal Sculpture*, approximately 18" x 48," made with acrylic painted Tyvek® wrap.

These concepts, and their corresponding shifts in art materials and processes, resulted in the creation of a body of work called *Cosmic Fishnet* (Fig. 1). The name, *Cosmic Fishnet*, is derived from the claim that every known sacred geometrical structure in existence is contained within this particular motif or fractal. *Cosmic Fishnet* references the connection between mathematics and spirituality. Fascinated by this possibility, as well as the beauty, elegance, and complexity that this motif offered, I integrated both the *Cosmic Fishnet* design and the mathe-

mathematical sequences throughout this body of work. I layered and incorporated these elements using a variety of mixed media and textiles in two-dimensional and three-dimensional objects.

The overall aesthetic of the *Cosmic Fishnet* installation was reverent with ritualistic overtones reminiscent of spiritual practices, both past and present. I exhibited this work at Loop Gallery in Toronto in 2013. A few gallery visitors asked me whether my work was specifically addressing a particular religion, such as Judaism or Catholicism, since some of my pieces seemed redolent of ancient scrolls or scriptures; however, religion was the furthest thing from my mind. Instead, I meant to equate the fundamental mathematical elements in *Cosmic Fishnet* with a more universal truth. Although I enjoyed the challenge of producing installation-based work that incorporated various material and sculptural processes, I also recognized that further development was needed. Having no previous experience with sculptural installation, I recognized a need to expand my formal vocabulary within this new territory. This led to my decision to enter the MFA program at the University of Saskatchewan.

In my first term as a graduate student, I produced a new body of work, *Hieroglyphs* (Fig. 2), that continued to explore the link between mathematics and spirituality. Equipped with black sharpies, I chose to laboriously handwrite a portion of the Fibonacci number sequences onto five 120" x 49" sheets of Tyvek<sup>®</sup> (a synthetic material used in building construction for water proofing) that were hung like scrolls from a height of eight feet, cascading onto the gallery floor. This intensive, laborious process, meant as a form of meditation, included transcription errors that were highlighted and bracketed whenever I became aware of their occurrence. The overall aesthetic of each of the five individual hanging scrolls appeared minimalist until the viewer digested the excessive numerical content that was written onto these sheets.





Figure 2. Elizabeth Babyn, *Hieroglyphs*, 2014. 2a. *Hieroglyphs*, installation with Tyvek<sup>®</sup> scrolls, plinth, and video, 2b. Side detail of scrolls.

Included within this installation was a looped DVD video performance (Fig. 3) that depicted my hand and pen laboriously writing out the number sequence. This video included moments of visible hesitation—a nod to the difficulty and imperfection of human transcription and to the limits of the body and mind, as this repetitive task resulted in both fatigue and boredom. Once the video frame was full, the numbers appeared to mysteriously disappear, as if dissolving into whiteness. I used a video-editing technique of reversal to create this illusion; this was my attempt to return these eloquent numbers back into the realm of the unknown.

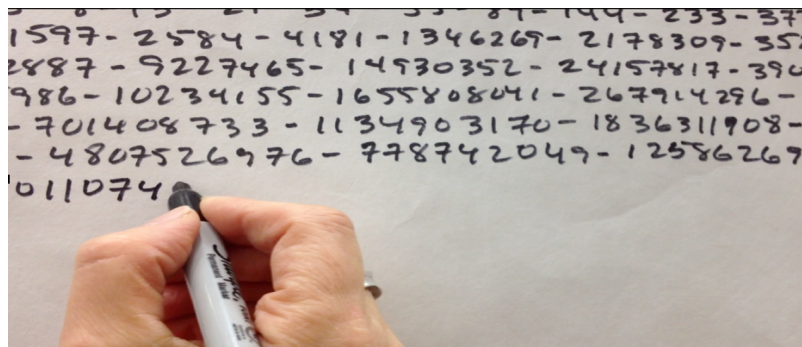


Figure 3. Elizabeth Babyn, *Hieroglyphs*, video still, 2014

The final installation piece within my *Hieroglyphs* series included a plinth heaped with tiny strips of paper, on which was inscribed a pictogram of the golden mean and the Fibonacci equation. These were offered to patrons who could take away the paper equation as a memory. This gesture, as well as the process of surrounding and enveloping gallery visitors within this fundamental mathematical equation, was my attempt to physically suggest humanity's interconnection to each other and to "all that is."

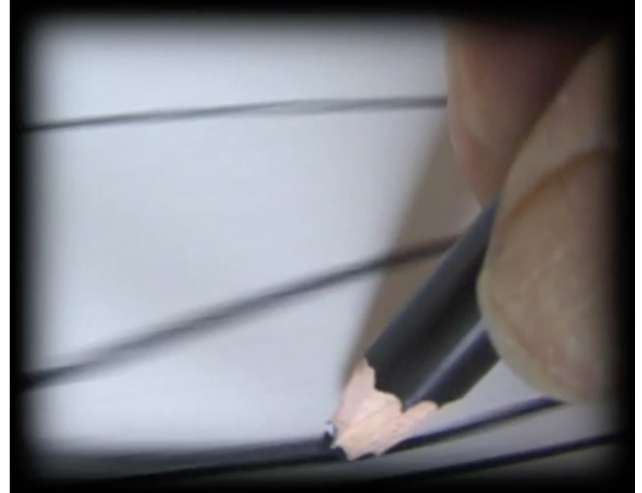


Figure 4. Hyang Cho, *Trial 11*, 39" x 49" scroll paper, [www.georgiasheran.com](http://www.georgiasheran.com), 2012. Figure 5. Ann Hamilton, *Ghost...a Border Act*, [annhamilton.com](http://annhamilton.com), 2000.

Strategies of ritualistic transcriptions, such as those incorporated in *Hieroglyphs*, are evident in the artwork of the Canadian and American artists, Hyang Cho and Ann Hamilton. After completing *Hieroglyphs*, I saw Cho's *Trail 11* (Fig. 4) at the College Art Gallery on campus. Like me, Cho utilized a minimal/obsessive aesthetic in regards to process and execution as she attempted to transcribe an English audio recording of Franz Kafka's, *The Trial* (1925, unfinished). Cho had handwritten these transcriptions in pencil on a white paper scroll with endless, compact, but ultimately illegible, sentences. My use of the video-reversal technique is similar to that of Ann Hamilton in her installation, *Ghost...a Border Act*, 2000 (Fig. 5). In this work, Hamilton created a blurred apparition-like effect that was further enhanced by an accompanying hiss-

ing sound, as the tips of her finger and pencil “magically” ate up the pre-existing lines, gliding eerily in and out of focus across a white paper surface in reverse. Like Cho’s evolving translations, and Hamilton’s video reversal, my transcriptions of the Fibonacci sequences never reached perfection and ultimately disappeared; that frustration, made continual through the use of video, serves as a metaphor for the failures and imperfections of human endeavour.

### **Turning Point**

A major turning point occurred in one of my early MFA projects, when I created a New Age “funhouse” that ridiculed my over-the-top consumption of all things New Age (crystals, tarot cards, angel cards, medicine cards, runes, and books)(Fig. 6). Through their consumption, these products promised me personal and spiritual fulfillment—but, in fact, they had the very opposite effect! I was left deeply unsatisfied, wishing for more tools to assist me on my quest, whether they were spiritual books, videos, or the latest meditation techniques. Social theorist, D.P. Cushman, connects this phenomenon to twentieth-century consumerism and how it depends on “‘the empty self,’ a feeling of interior lack, absence, emptiness, and despair, the desperate yearning to be loved, soothed and made whole through acquisition and consumption.”<sup>2</sup> This desire for material accumulation extended beyond my spiritual practice and into my day-to-day life. What void had I been trying to fill?

---

<sup>2</sup> Branaman, 115.





Figure 6 a) Elizabeth Babyn. *New Age Junky*, installation with cards, books, crystals, 2014.



6 b. Elizabeth Babyn. *New Age Junky*, installation with video projection, mirrors, mirrored-Mylar<sup>®</sup> and cardboard, 2014.

Another turning point that further jolted my belief in a cohesive, all-encompassing system came when I had a studio visit from the Regina artist, David Garneau. He pointed out that the Fibonacci number sequences do not work in all instances. I had counted on this theoretical equation to answer and prove our interconnection to “everything”— indeed, this had been the premise of much of my work! When I did some follow-up research and I learned that Garneau was correct that the Fibonacci sequences do not apply in all cases, I was disappointed and dumbfounded! How could I be so gullible?

The shattering of my beliefs in a universal mathematical system or “truth”, and a growing awareness of my desire to consume were all instrumental in propelling me towards a different approach in my MFA research. My addiction to the latest New Age remedies and the revelation of the delusions that I held accentuated my own personal “disconnect” from the “interconnectedness” that I was seeking. Overconsumption within every aspect of our lives (psychological, environmental, dietary, social and spiritual) is a major dysfunctional pitfall that plagues many of us in western society today. When considering overconsumption, theorist, Jane Bennett, gives agency to “thing power” and how things as “actants” can influence both human and nonhuman forces. She discusses that materialism:

... requires buying ever-increasing numbers of products purchased in ever-shorter cycles ... even discarded material goods are never truly disposed of, for they continue their life activities as discarded waste. Although our discarded refuse may no longer be part of our personal space, they do not lie dormant, they continue to be active as they intermingle within our ecosystem.<sup>3</sup>

I decided to harness my own vulnerabilities and to confront the psychological trappings that have been largely responsible for disrupting and undermining what I believed to be the ultimate “proof” of our interconnection to “all that is.

---

<sup>3</sup> Bennett, 5-6.

## Subconscious Shifts



Figure 7. Elizabeth Babyn, *Amorphic Consumption*, video still, 2014

During the course of my MFA research, I seemed to be drifting towards the concepts that would inform my final installation, *Plastopia*, without fully realizing it. In retrospect, I can see it was often the unexpected occurrences within my explorations and process that led me to reconsider and question my tendency to “anchor” materials, processes and concepts too tightly. Unexpected missteps and a growing awareness of other possibilities breaking into my well-planned, technically-controlled use of materials and processes provided fodder for the development of my

art practice and research. For example, towards the end of my second term in the MFA program I had been cutting out an intricate fractal design (the flower of life motif) on a large piece of Tyvek<sup>®</sup> that I had painted metallic copper. Since Tyvek<sup>®</sup> material responds to heat in interesting ways, I decided that I wanted to use my heat gun to alter the intricate, lace-like design that I had just completed. Depending on how much heat was applied to the surface, the material seemed to come alive as it pulled away, bubbling up and, at times disintegrating (Fig.7). This heat-response gave me the idea to film this process. After playing around with my video footage, I was intrigued by the little one-second segment that I decided to repeat and loop. The constant repetition of the image-sound clip seemed to imitate the sound of labored breathing, which was matched by the rise and fall of the Tyvek<sup>®</sup> swell. I called the piece *Amorphic Consumption* since the disturbing nature of the video brought to mind science fiction cyborgs or the horrors of science gone wrong.

Another example of the shift that occurred in my artmaking happened last summer when I was involved in a collaborative studio class with students from the University of Southern Queensland. We were to make work in dialogue with that of an Australian student and I chose Crystal McLaughlin and her installation entitled *Debris* (Fig.8) which was composed of multiple, small, silver branch-like structures suspended at varying heights with monofilaments which cast delicate shadows on the wall. McLaughlin's artist statement indicated that in her work she wished to address or confront the idea of lingering traces of illusory time.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> McLaughlin, 27





Figure 8. Crystal McLaughlin, *Debris*, 2014, silver branches with monofilament.

Figure 9. Elizabeth Babyn, *Antipodites*, 2015, fabric, thread, wire, monofilament.

In response, I decided to make a body of work that mimicked past and present stories that are rooted in, or include aspects of, reality, myth and fiction. I wanted to blur the boundaries of how and what we know and to do this via the presentation of an alternate fictional world. This installation, *Antipodites* (Fig. 9), was comprised of fish-like entities, some with marsupial pouches, made of a light transparent fabric with loose, hanging threads. They were suspended in a darkened space with minimal lighting to dramatize the resulting shadows that loomed on the walls; the shadows became more substantial than the material pieces themselves. I decided to harness those qualities of shadow and movement in a video piece that I entitled *Ephemeral* (Fig.10,11).

The immaterial shadows were of particular interest to me since they alluded to both the presence



and absence of the body, to breath and to death, and also seemed to further reinforce the idea of reality being rooted in the mystical and the metaphysical. The resulting video depicted transparent, fish-like creatures, swimming or floating within a continuously changing, atmospherically-coloured environment, their movements transitioning from fluid and languid to awkward and jerky. I found myself more interested in those odd contrasts that resulted, in part, from technological imperfections and that helped morph my original concept from the physical and metaphysical into that of a distorted, artificial realm.

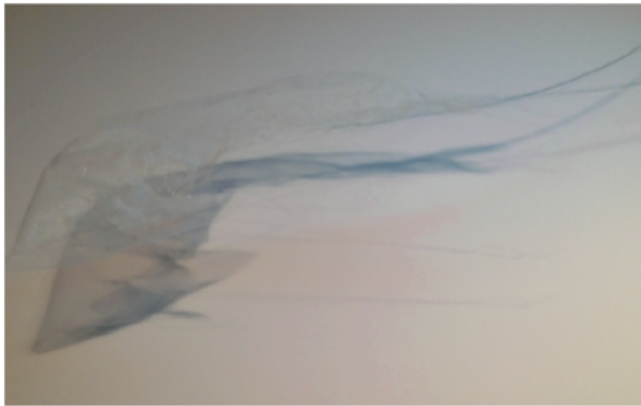


Figure 10. Elizabeth Babyn, *Ephemeral*, video still that was incorporated into the final video using a green screen, 2015. Figure 11. Elizabeth Babyn, *Ephemeral*, video still, 2016.

### **The Genesis of *Plastopia***

Much of my process begins with an idea that gradually evolves and changes through working with my chosen materials. While thinking about the theme of consumption, I had a compelling dream that was related to my subject matter and my process. I saw the shadow of a rather confused and lost character, wearing a headdress with antlers, who was slowly walking through an installation of hanging, translucent cloth and inter-woven, suspended plastic wrap. I decided to construct this headdress out of chicken-wire and plastic and then to make a coat using the same materials. Since the shaggy plastic wrap on the coat reminded me of translucent grass

or water, this directly led to the construction of *Tsunami–Waterfall* (Fig.12), which became the central installation piece of *Plastopia*.

Since the theme for my installation is consumption and we live in a world where oil-based materials have infiltrated so much of our consumer society, I chose to incorporate plastic materials throughout my *Plastopia* installation. Considering the large amount of discarded water bottles that end up in our trash, landfills and water-ways, I was motivated, as this idea progressed, to recycle and incorporate clear, colourless water bottles throughout the waterfall and the installation. I sliced the bottles from the neck down into spiraling ribbons. I degraded plastic, hexagonal crystals that I had previously used in my work, oil-based refuse of my own, by melting them with my heat gun. I became interested in the characteristics that are inherent within the plastic, such as how it reflects light, is translucent and highly malleable. When knotted onto the chicken-wire frame, I could manipulate the plastic with objects behind it, allowing it to undulate and bulge out. The chicken-wire also allowed me to weave coloured LED lights onto the frame. I was pleased with how these strobing, coloured lights reflected back through all the plastic's translucent layers and transformed my *Tsunami-Waterfall* into something beautiful. This effect was not unlike the deceptively beautiful, shimmering, rainbow-colours that are reflected back from the ocean surface as a result of a toxic oil-spill.

I further enhanced the dynamic, visual appeal of my installation by deliberately introducing movement. Most of the kinetic sound and movement within my installation arises from the piece, *Wind Station*. Thanks, in part, to the technical expertise and assistance of Saskatoon-based artist, Andreas Buchwaldt, a number of fans were computer-programmed to turn on and off intermittently at varying intervals, to achieve an artificial wind-system. These fans are positioned behind a large-chicken-wire support and anchored by two plastic-wrapped, tree-like structures

that are loaded with long, mirrored-Mylar<sup>®</sup> streamers. The *Wind Station*'s mirrored-Mylar<sup>®</sup> ribbons of differing lengths intermittently flutter in an artificial breeze that also generates a Styrofoam<sup>®</sup> windstorm. The effect is disquieting, yet playful. The background sound of the fans, as well as the rustling of the streamers, generates a sonic ambience. Although *Tsunami-Waterfall* appears frozen, the strobing lights provide a hyperkinetic visual movement through the constantly changing colours reflected in the plastic.



Figure 12. Elizabeth Babyn, *Tsunami-Waterfall*, with other creatures in *Plastopia*, 2016, plastic wrap, chicken-wire, water bottles, LED light and mirrored-Mylar<sup>®</sup>.

My work with refuse, light and kinetic movement has similarities to Canadian artist,

Diane Landry's work. Her installation, *Knight of Infinite Resignation* (Fig.13) is a mixed media piece composed of multiple units of plastic water bottles positioned in a Ferris wheel fashion. Each unit contains a bit of sand and is affixed with lights, rotating in the darkened space. Landry describes her piece as: "The intricate web of turning lights and darks [that] appear and disappear with the rotation of the wheels, referencing both the hours of the clock and the months of the year while the hiss of the falling sand draws attention to the threat of our most precious resource, clean water".<sup>5</sup>

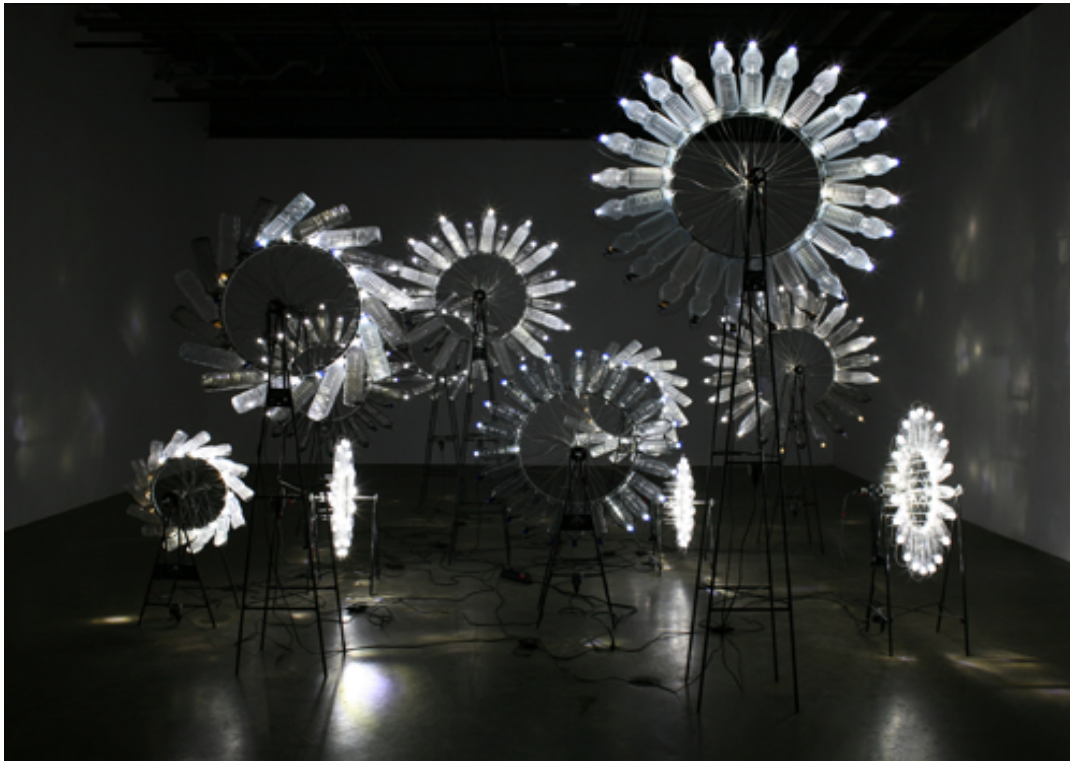


Figure 13. Diane Landry, *Knight of Infinite Resignation*, photo by Ivan Binet, 2000, water bottles, bicycle wheels, light.

---

<sup>5</sup> Landry.



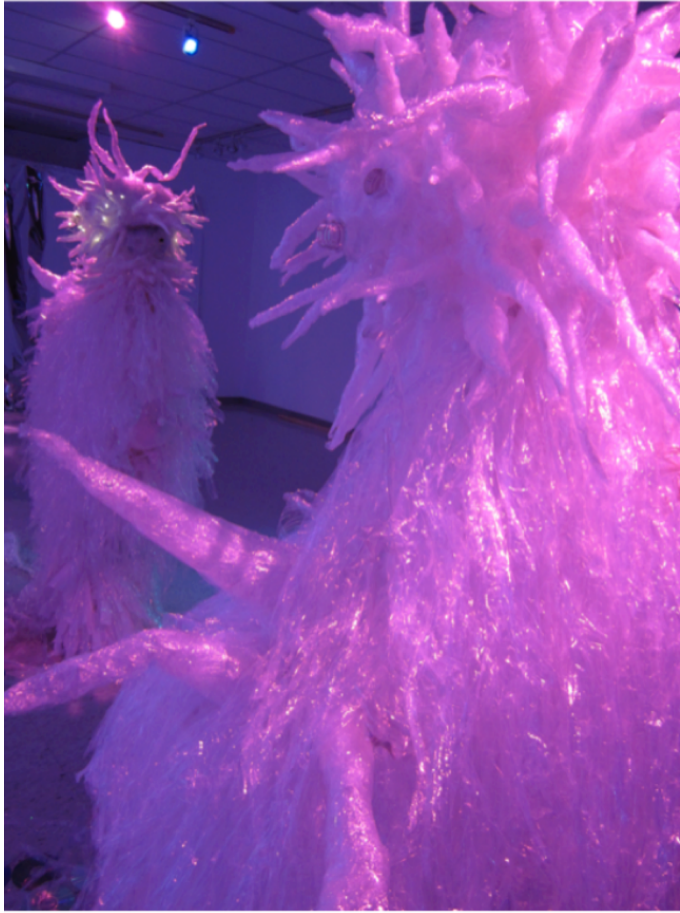


Figure 14. Elizabeth Babyn, *Plastopia's* Multi-faced Creatures, costume worn by Xiao Han, 2016, plastic wrap, water bottles, chicken-wire, LED lights. Figure 15. Elizabeth Babyn, *Plastopia's* Shaggy Faced-creature, costume worn by Anahita Akhavan, 2016, plastic wrap, chicken-wire.

In addition to the installation elements of plastic, light and movement, I decided to include a number of creatures that appear to have evolved from the oil-based materials that saturate my installation. These weird-looking entities are based on scientific speculation regarding the hazardous effects of toxic waste, as well as my own imagination. I began building my creatures on a tripod that I fashioned with chicken-wire and covered from top to bottom with shaggy plastic wrap. I made root-like extensions with lots of plastic wrap at the bottom of the support (Fig.14). Piercing through multiple layers of plastic within the bulk of this huge body are stubby, limb-like structures, made of the same material, that project out from the back and the

front of the torso. I gave this creature a huge head with multiple, conical, plastic-wrapped projections as well as, multiple eyes and breathing apparatuses that are made from deconstructed water bottles. Along with a shaggy, faceless creature made of the same material, a similar second figurative creature was made to serve as a sculptural component in my installation; both of these became costumes for performers when I decided to include a video component (Fig. 15). My vision was complete: my creatures had morphologically become what they had consumed—a reminder that we are all assemblages of our environment, whether that be the minerals, chemicals, and vitamins contained in our food or the air that we breathe<sup>6</sup>. Environmentalist and author, Robert Sullivan, notes a similar sinister aspect of our connection to garbage in his walk along the edge of a compacted, urban, garbage hill:

There had been rain the night before, so it wasn't long before I found a little leachate seep, a black ooze trickling down the slope of the hill, an espresso of refuse. In a few hours this stream would find its way into the... ground water of Meadowlands; it would mingle with toxic streams... But this is the moment, here at its birth... this little seep was pure pollution, a pristine stew of oil and grease, of cyanide and arsenic, of cadmium, of chromium, copper, lead, nickel, silver, mercury, and zinc. I touched this fluid—my finger tip was a bluish caramel color—and it was warm and fresh. A few yards away, where the stream collected into a benzene-scented pool, a mallard swam alone.<sup>7</sup>

A similar garbage dump became the actual site for an influential performance by Canadian artist, Colette Urban. She wore a costume made of recycled clothing that seems to smother and enclose her as she walks through the trash in her performance, *Consumer Cyclone* (Fig. 16). On the back of her costume were multiple mirrors, providing an uncanny sense of surveillance as she called out playfully, “Look at me look at you.” Her callout seems to function in multiple ways, one of which is to call attention to our own overconsumption.

---

<sup>6</sup> Bennett, 20-38, suggests that we are assemblages of what we consume (food, minerals, metals, contaminants) and that these agents play a role in what we become; I found this aligned with the ideas in *Plastopia*.

<sup>7</sup> Bennett, 5-6.



Figure 16. Colette Urban, *Consumer Cyclone*, in film still from *Pretend Not to Know Me*, Katherine Knight (Producer), 2009.

Although my work differs in materials from Urban's, I have used mirrored surfaces in a similar way to surround, distort and fragment objects and individuals who occupy the space of my installation. The mirror, in Lacanian psychological theory, is also equated with the ego and a false perception and willed misrecognition. Art theorist, Claire Bishop, connects this to the effect of "mimetic engulfment" in contemporary installation art with its distorted sense of space.<sup>8</sup> My use of multiple-reflected surfaces and fractured repetition within my installation are consistent with Lacan's view that they cause a false sense of space and a false perception that can add confusion and be quite disturbing. In *Plastopia*, I have created a strange, surreal, dream-like quality in my work through the use of coloured lighting materials and reflective surfaces: the

---

<sup>8</sup> Bishop, Chapter 3.

mirrored-Mylar<sup>®</sup> sheets are activated by air movement creating the sensation of a dense, reflective liquid. A similar disturbing possibility of a reflective, viscous goo taking over our environment and our bodies is exploited in the movie, *The Matrix*, (Fig.17), as described by theorist,

Timothy Morton:

The beautiful reversibility of the oily, melting mirror speaks to something that is happening in a global warming age... the simulation and dissolution of reality and the overwhelming presence of hyperobjects which stick to us, which are us. The Greeks called it miasma, the way blood guilt sticks to you... In a sense all objects are caught in the sticky goo of viscosity, because they never ontologically exhaust one another even when they smack head long into one another. A good example of viscosity would be radioactive materials. The more you try to get rid of them, the more you realize you can't get rid of them.<sup>9</sup>

In *Plastopia*, the installation objects symbolically repeat themselves as they obscenely fill the space through the use of mirror fragmentation, “never able to get rid of” the multiplying effects of overabundance and hyper-consumption. This is most evident in the *Plastopian* creatures, which, as weird sculptures/costumes in this dystopian world, are weighed down with shaggy lengths of plastic wrap and awkward outgrowths to various parts of their bulky bodies.



Figure 17. Lily Wachowski (Director), *The Matrix* 7, film still of mirror scene, 2003.

---

<sup>9</sup> Morton, 34-35



Mutant cyborgs and monsters also inhabit the installations of Korean artist, Lee Bul, and have doubled as costumes in her performances. She has created numerous installation works that reference futuristic utopian worlds. In 1990, over a twelve-day period, Bul performed *Sorry for Suffering - You think I'm a puppy on a picnic?* (Fig.18). With the exception of her head, her body was covered with a soft, red costume which included varying sizes of lumpy protrusions extending out from her body. Bul describes her “monstrous” creatures as “exceeding the prescribed boundaries, touching upon our fear and fascination with the uncategorized, the uncanny;” art critic, Michael Amy, called these deformities “a metamorphosis gone hopelessly awry.”<sup>10</sup> The creatures in *Plastopia* are similarly monstrous, but within a context of a plastic environment that exaggerates the consequences that accompany our destructive consumptive practices.



Figure 18. Lee Bul, *Sorry for Suffering - You think I am a puppy on a picnic?* 1990, fabric costume/sculpture.

---

<sup>10</sup> Amy, 2.

## Seduction: The Hook

*Tsunami-Waterfall* provides a strong, appealing “visual hook” that first mesmerizes people who might later realize the more sinister components of the “garbage” from which it is made. My use of beauty and enticement alongside cheap “garbage” materials is similar to that of two other American contemporary artists, Aurora Robson and Angela Hazelton Pozzi. Robson harnesses the potential longevity of recycled materials to create beautiful works of art including her epic, sixty-five foot suspended sculpture made from 9,000 discarded water bottles entitled, *What Goes Around Comes Around* (Fig. 19). Robson notes that she wants “to exploit the archival integrity of [her] materials. If plastic is going to be damaging on an environmental level, let it at least serve a beautiful purpose on an artistic level”.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Pozzi and her team of artists reclaimed 3,800 pounds of plastic washed up from a portion of the Pacific coastline. From the refuse that they collected they sculpted a number of beautiful huge sea creatures that were showcased outside the National Smithsonian in Washington (Fig. 20). As in the case of my *Tsunami-Waterfall*, the audience is first drawn into the beauty and scale of both Robson and Pozzi’s work. It is not until they have examined the work more closely that the source materials begin to reveal themselves. The beauty of these pieces act as a metaphor for what we superficially see when looking out onto the surface of the vast ocean landscape. Evidence of the 315 billion tons of garbage currently in our ocean system is not immediately apparent to the viewer since much of it is submerged; however, it is an inescapable and persistent fixture, as it can take anywhere from 450 to 1000 years to biodegrade.

One consideration that I must face includes how to recycle my work since I am making artwork with “garbage” to emphasize our negligent “consumption practices”. The plastic wrap

---

<sup>11</sup> In Stunda, 1.

and many of the other plastic materials can be recycled locally; the most problematic components of my installation are the mirrored-Mylar® sheets and the Styrofoam® peanuts. Unfortunately, unlike the packaging wrap, these materials are not recyclable in many municipalities, and pose new challenges moving forward within my own art practice. The perceptual paradox of seduction and repulsion in my installation reflects the way in which my materials confuse and disorient us as both viewers and consumers within the space of *Plastopia*.



Figure 19. Aurora Robson, *What Goes Around Comes Around*, 2008, plastic refuse.





Figure 20. Angela Hazelton Pozzi, *Shark*, in “Art to Save the Sea,” 2016, coastline refuse.

### **Video: *Rêver en Plastique***

The three-minute video that accompanies my installation is entitled *Rêver en Plastique*, or *Dreaming in Plastic*. Originally, when planning my video, I had a clear narrative in mind and gave this as a loose instruction to my two performers. However, after looking at the footage I’d filmed, I realized I wanted something more surreal, dream-like, and fragmented. In order to create this video, I broke down much of the raw footage that I had taken into short, individual frames that I further stitched into random, illogical sequences. In doing so, the resulting assemblage within my video appears confusing and is devoid of a comprehensive storyline, which corresponds more closely to the strange world of *Plastopia*.

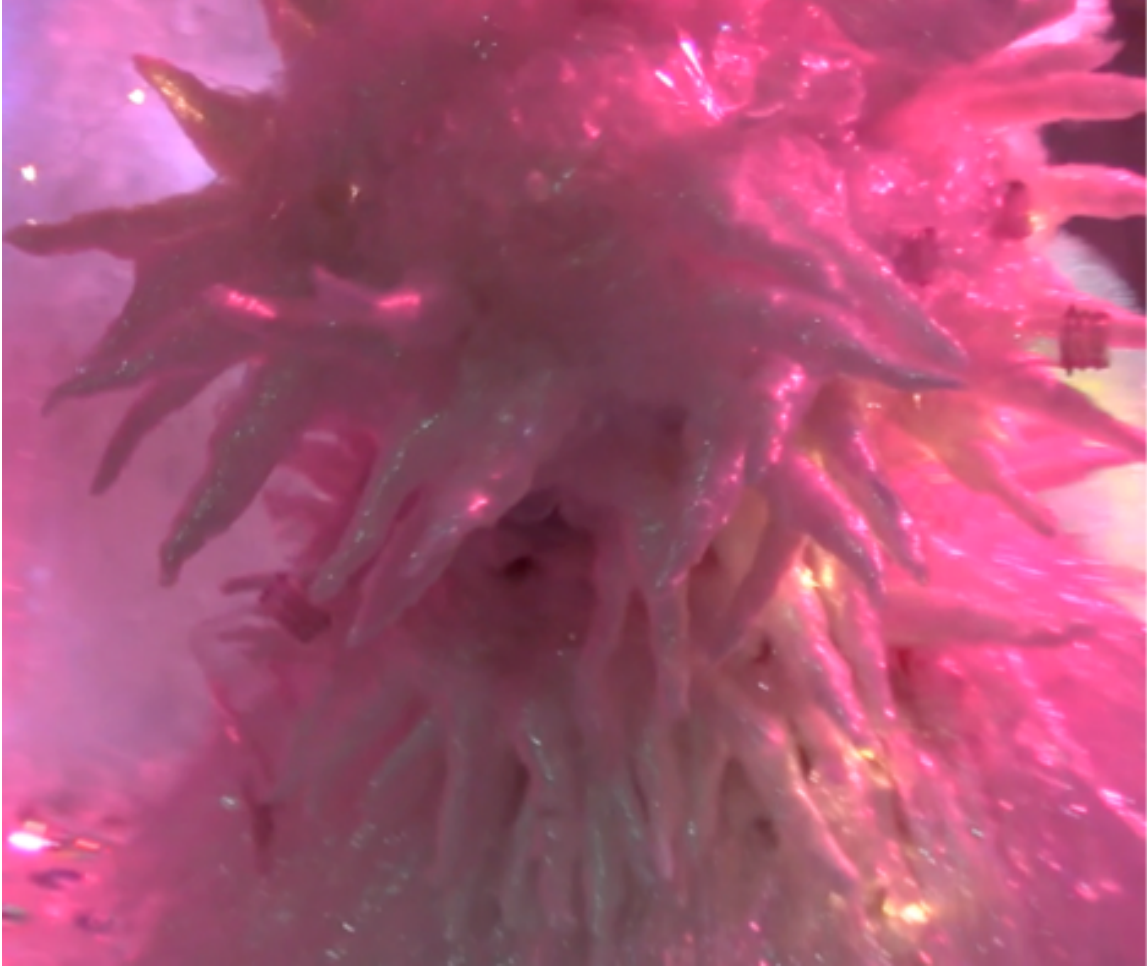


Figure 21. Elizabeth Babin, video still of Multi-faced Creature, in *Rêver en Plastique*, 2016.

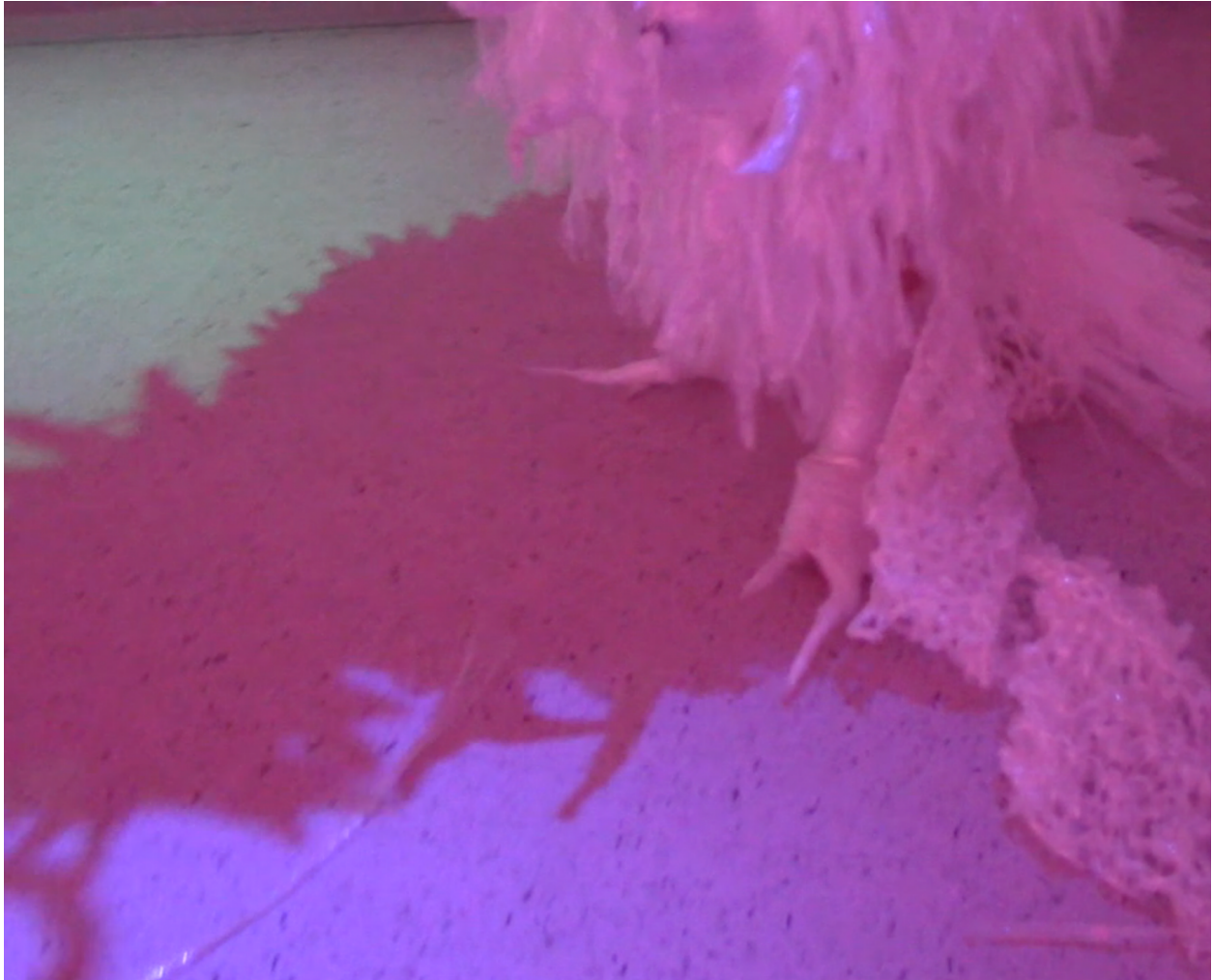


Figure 22. Elizabeth Babyn, video still of Multi-faced Creature Shadow, in *Rêver en Plastique*, 2016.

Filmed within my colour-infused *Plastopia* installation, the video opens with a close-up shot of one of the glistening, plastic, multi-faced creatures slowly turning its head in front of the *Tsunami-Waterfall* (Fig 21). This segment is followed by an eerie, slow-motion depiction of this creature's shadow on the floor (Fig. 22). These two short film fragments are repeated often in the video, along with another segment that shows a rounded-plastic protrusion ejecting copious amounts of glittery plastic material from its orifice (Fig. 23). These sequences are randomly interspersed and repeatedly cut with other very brief, slow-motion shots of buoyant, anti-



gravitational creatures moving within this dystopian, artificial world. The total effect is nightmarish, ominous and surreal.



Figure 23. Elizabeth Babyn, video still of Pregnant Protrusion, in *Rêver en Plastique*, 2016.

When discussing dream-like qualities in contemporary installation art through a Freudian lens, Claire Bishop notes that a dream is a collection of visual perceptions, that, when taken as a whole, seem to be nonsensical and create meaning “through individual affective or verbal connections through ‘free association.’”<sup>12</sup> Contemporary artist, Matthew Barney, also uses fragmented film techniques in his *Cremaster* series that cause them to be reminiscent of surreal dreams or nightmares. Although his films are more epic in nature than the short, looped video that I have made to complement this *Plastopia* installation, it is their emphasis on the use of the

---

<sup>12</sup> Bishop, 16.

fragment which reinforces their psychologically-bizarre unreality. As in *Rêver en Plastique*, a weird combination of the surreal and science fiction seems to inform Barney's *Cremaster* series: "You can find yourself thinking of *Bunuel* and *Dali*. But you can also think of *The Fly* and *Alien*, not to mention *Ghostbusters*, when Mr. Barney is slimed by goo in the tunnel."<sup>13</sup>

In the *Cremaster* series, Barney symbolically references the "male cremaster muscle," the raising and lowering of which has, perhaps, a feminine equivalent in my video: a pregnant protrusion that repeatedly spews out Mylar<sup>®</sup> seedlings. As in *Rêver en Plastique*, Barney uses symbolic references to point to overconsumption and commodification and to put a magnification lens on self-inflicted problems we have created for ourselves within our society, culture and environment. As filmic artworks, both *Plastopia* and the *Cremaster* series are catalysts that could potentially wake us up from this nightmare if we care to take a closer look at their symbolic meanings and implications.

### **Conclusion**

Prior to commencing graduate studies at the University of Saskatchewan, I anticipated that my work would change considerably due to my burgeoning interest in exploring installation art and moving away from painting and craft-based work. However, I would never have guessed that the change would be as dramatic as it has been. Although the subject matter that brought me here—our interconnection to each other and to nature—still resonates deeply within me, it is now more complicated and grounded by a critical practice. New revelations that I have uncovered about myself and my subject matter have altered my approach completely. The more playful and subversive strategies that I utilized in *Plastopia* have allowed me to approach the subject of my art—cultural disconnect—with more subtlety and nuance. By focusing on my own habits of

---

<sup>13</sup> Kimmelman, 2.



consumption, I recognized a potential disconnect that contradicted my desire for perfect “oneness.” I now feel liberated to let go of the more “perfect” art and craft-making processes that I had used in my previous works.

This new awareness has altered the ideas that inform my work as well as my materials and processes. However, they have also created a new set of obstacles and contradictions. By using vast quantities of oil-based material to highlight over-consumptive practices, I have become complicit by creating more garbage. In order to address this dilemma going forward, I will commit to recycling the plastic and Mylar<sup>®</sup> in future works, or to research ways in which I can collaborate with engineers and scientists to make work that biodegrades the excess of material that went into the making of *Plastopia*. I see new avenues for the exploration of solutions to these practical and conceptual issues.

Contradictions and dilemmas emerged in this new work which will continue to challenge me—foremost among them, is, perhaps, my new awareness that interconnectedness cannot be so easily assumed, explained or achieved. Whereas I had once thought that mathematical equations and sacred geometry would provide me with a sure way of understanding interconnectedness, I now realize they will never truly provide the solutions that I was searching for. I suspect this uncertainty is part of the new force that will orient my art practice and life as I continue my quest.

## Citation List

- Amy, Michael. "Lee Bul: Phantasmic Metamorphologies." *Sculpture*, vol. 30, no. 4, May 2011.
- Bennet, Jane. "Thing Power 1: Debris," *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*.  
Duke University Press, 2010.
- Bishop, Claire. "The Dream Scene," *Installation Art: A Critical History*. Tate Publishing: 2005.
- Branaman, Ann. "Contemporary Social Theory and the Sociological Study of Mental Health."  
*Mental Health, Social Mirror*, Edited by Bill Avison, Jane McLeod, and Bernice  
Pescosolido, Springer Publishing: 2006.
- Kimmelman, Michael. "Matthew Barney's Surreal Visions, on Film and in the  
Gallery," NYTimes.com, April 28, 1995.
- Krishnamurti, Juddi. "What are you Seeking," *Total Freedom: The Essential Krishnamurti*.  
Harper Collins, 1996.
- Landry, Diane. *Knight of Infinite Resignation*. at Judith & Norman ALIX Art Gallery. Sarnia,  
Ontario, <http://Jnaag.ca/>, 2009.
- Morton, Timothy. "Viscosity", *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the  
World*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- Pozzi, Angela Hazelton. "Art to Save the Sea." Washed Ashore.org, PBS News Hour, "Turning  
315 Billion Pounds of Plastic Ocean Pollution into Sea-Saving Art." 2016 YouTube.  
LLC901 Cherry Ave. San Bruno, CA 94066.
- Stunda, Hilary. In "Metamorphosis: Media Artist Aurora Robson Pioneers the Growing Medium  
of Reuse". [www.aurarobson.com/uploads/2/3/8/7/23872254/aurarobson-9-06.pdf](http://www.aurarobson.com/uploads/2/3/8/7/23872254/aurarobson-9-06.pdf), Aug.  
11, 2016.

Wagner, Keith B. "The Neo-liberal Auteur: Commodity Fetishism and Decadence in the Mise-en-scène of Matthew Barney's 'Cremaster 3.'" *Film International* (16516826);2008. vol.6, issue 3.

Wakefield, Neville. "Ann Hamilton: Between Words and Things." *Mneme: Ann Hamilton*. London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1994.