For These Artists, The Raw Material Is Close to Home

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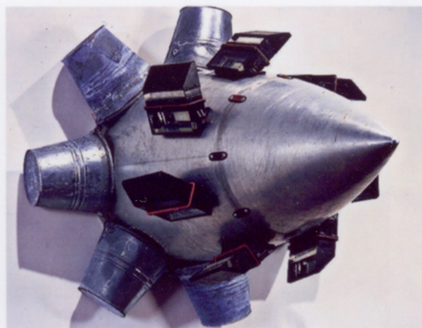
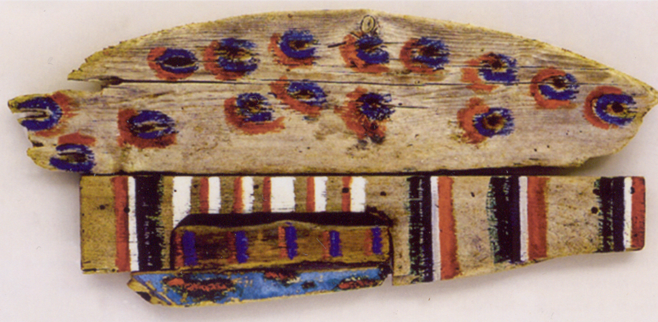
Maxine Hicks for The New York Times

Jeffrey Allen Price, below, making his images of Long Island. A video still from Chris Coffin's performance piece "Water Drawing," above, which he created in 2001, in waters off Newport, R.I.. Top, Donald Lipski working in the salvage yard of Grumman Aerospace Corporation in 1986.





Dorothy Zeiman, left; Jim Strong

Donald Lipski's sculpture "Broken Wings No. 3" (1986), left, and Betty Parsons's wood-and-acrylic construction "Eyes of the Sea" (1981).

By HELEN A. HARRISON

THE Long Island landscape has inspired artists for centuries. Painters have captured its scenery; sculptors have portrayed its birds and beasts; and photographers have chronicled its development. But for as long as there have been artists on the Island, some have responded to the landscape in a more literal way, by using it as their medium rather than as their subject.

According to archaeological evidence, the earliest known examples of Island art are two inscribed tablets made of local stone, one found on the North Fork and the other in Montauk. Both bear carved images of a hunter and a pictographic figure. Although their age and significance are unknown, they may well predate white settlement.

But they have a modern counterpart, made hundreds of years later, in the 1950's, when the sculptor Wilfrid Zogbaum created welded steel structures to hold rocks scavenged from the Montauk cliffs. He used the naturally rounded shapes of the rocks to suggest the heads and bellies of schematic figures that bear a kinship to their Native American ancestors.

Other artists of Mr. Zogbaum's generation were also attracted to the expressive potential of environmental materials.

Jackson Pollock added local matter to many of his paintings, perhaps inspired by the Mexican muralist Siqueiros, whose New York City experimental workshop he attended in 1936. When Siqueiros wanted to depict the rubble of a bombed building, he collected gravel from the city street and mixed it with his paints; after Pollock moved to East Hampton in 1945, he began using beach sand and pebbles in much the same way, adding texture and variety while incorporating aspects of the real world into his abstract imagery.

In Hans Namuth's famous 1950 film of Pollock painting on a sheet of plate glass, the artist can be seen sprinkling pebbles across the surface and gluing them down with loops of liquid enamel.

In the late 1940's, at Louse Point, the sculptor Costantino Nivola and the architect Le Corbusier experimented with sand-casting relief designs for use as building decorations. They carved into wet sand and filled the carvings with plaster which, when set, had a naturally gritty surface and was often studded with pebbles, shells and seaweed flecks.

Mr. Nivola refined this technique and built a sand-casting area near his Amagansett studio, where he executed decorative elements for many architectural commissions using Island sand.

Driftwood is another beach material that many artists find inherently sculptural, but few have exploited it as inventively as Betty Parsons.

Best known as a vanguard art dealer, Ms. Parsons was trained as a painter and tried to balance her two careers. After 1960, when she started summering in Southold, she began to make sculpture out of materials salvaged from the beach below her house, which overlooked Long Island Sound. Every day she would scour the shoreline for fragments that sparked her imagination. Neighbors, like the choreographer Paul Taylor, made contributions.

"I used to take her carloads of boards and stuff that had washed up on my beach — old beat-up boards that had already been painted several times," Mr. Taylor said. "Those were the kind she liked best. She would study their possibilities, nail them together and add stripes or whatever."

Many of the constructions Ms. Parsons created this way are nautical in theme, a reminder that their components acquired their weathered shapes and rich patinas from interaction with the sea.

The tradition of using local materials continues to this day. Chris Coffin, a conceptual artist who is a native of Rockville Centre, uses materials scavenged from local beaches, but he is often motivated by a general concern with the environmental influence of the elements. He has created pieces dealing with specific aspects of phenomena like tidal flow and the movement of huge storm systems.

On his daily beach walks, Mr. Coffin said, he "started thinking about the ways people were disposing of consumer products, and the impact it had on my home."

While living in Long Beach, Mr. Coffin collected detritus washed ashore by tides, sealed it in glass jars filled with sea water and exhibited them as if they were specimens in a science museum. This Strand Line Series, which he pursued during the 1990's, documents the man-made clutter that fouls our beaches and its effect on the environment.

Noticing how flotsam deposits on the beach varied according to the weather, Mr. Coffin began to investigate the action of storms through aerial photography, satellite imagery and computer mapping programs. His most recent work is a series of wave prediction model drawings based on those observations.

For many years, Mr. Coffin has collected fishermen's floats — cork or Styrofoam used to mark the location of traps and moorings — that have come adrift and washed up on shore. In 2001, he used them to make "Water Drawing," a performance piece in which the artist swam while towing scores of the floats roped together like an oversize string of multicolored beads. Working with the current and against it, Mr. Coffin drew mobile linear patterns in the water off Newport, R.I., where the event was documented on videotape.

Mr. Coffin is not the only artist to find creative uses for the Island's discards. Two projects in the 1980's demonstrated that, in the right hands, even the least promising materials may have aesthetic potential.

In 1983, the Islip Art Museum invited Mierle Laderman Ukeles, the New York City Sanitation Department's artist in residence, to develop a work based on the town's innovative recycling program,

Chris Coffin's "Specimen from the Strand Line Series" (1990's).

known as WRAP (short for Wednesdays Recyclables Are Picked Up). Ms. Ukeles found the WRAP personnel to be remarkably cooperative.

"They had just initiated recycling, and it was really cutting edge," Ms. Ukeles said. "They had to close their incinerator and the landfill was about to close, so they had to find an answer fast. They were very inventive, very experimental — in fact, their attitude was not so different from an artist's."

In addition to staging a performance at the WRAP plant, which involved sorting materials and recording the sounds on tape, Ms. Ukeles created an installation at the museum, using 3½ tons of recyclables separated into categories and displayed in four cribs. A section of tubing replicated the plant's delivery chute.

As she explained in a letter to WRAP workers, she wanted to "re-site the consciousness of recycling" by putting it in a museum context, where objects are respected. "I want it to be considered a cultural thing," she wrote, "a cultural process."

A similar project, instigated in 1986 by the Hillwood Art Gallery on Long Island University's C. W. Post campus, paired the sculptor Donald Lipski with Grumman Aerospace Corporation.

A native of Chicago who now lives in Sag Harbor, Mr. Lipski was given the run of Grumman's Bethpage salvage yard, where he sorted through acres of scrap to find components with sculptural possibilities. The result was "Broken Wings," a group of discrete pieces and temporary installations exhibited at the Hillwood Gallery the following spring.

Echoing Ms. Ukeles's attitude toward WRAP workers, Mr. Lipski expressed admiration for the inventiveness of Grumman's engineers, and also for the craftsmanship of military hardware. "It's high, high tech manufacturing," he said in the exhibition catalog, "and at the same time, it can be like handicraft."

But his regard was tempered by the nature of the materials, many of which were weapons components. He did not intend his work to be construed as an anti-war statement, but neither did he want to be seen as glorifying weaponry by displaying it as art.

His solution was to combine the Grumman remnants with incongruous elements like buckets, matchbooks and billiard balls to create ambiguous objects. Simultaneously menacing and absurd, dangerous and harmless, they balanced the fine line between their original destructive purposes and their new creative incarnations.

Another form of artistic recycling involves materials that are, in a way, nature's gifts to the artist.

Charles Balth, a Sag Harbor carpenter and contractor, began to make found-object sculpture after his retirement in 1973, when he was 80. His fanciful creatures and eccentric buildings were fashioned primarily from shells and fish bones collected along the shore of Noyac Bay and cemented with a mixture of plaster and glue. His pieces were admired by professional artists, who encouraged him to exhibit and sell them in local galleries.

"I never had any dream I could do that kind of work," he was quoted in a catalog to a local show.

Mr. Balth died in 1988 at age 95.

When disease decimated East Hampton's venerable elms in the 1960's and 1970's, a local tree surgeon and self-taught sculptor, Albert Price, was among those called in to remove the casualties. But instead of taking the wood to the dump, Mr. Price took it home and turned it into folk art. Using the tools from his tree business, he carved whimsical human and animal figures, giving new life to the dead wood.

In the aftermath of the 1985 hurricane that felled many trees on the East End, the sculptor David Slivka created "Gloria," a cleverly balanced assemblage of massive broken limbs that pays homage to the storm's awesome power.

In her environmental art, Barbara Roux focuses on living trees, but she is attracted to examples that show damage, disease or the depredations of human interference. She collects specimens for installations, and photographs wooded areas and wetlands in which she places family snapshots, mirrors or fragments of poetry to amplify her personal identification with the surroundings and encourage viewers to become similarly involved.

Growing up in the Huntington area, where she still lives and works, Ms. Roux experienced what she described as "the friction between people and nature," as more and more undeveloped land was lost to suburbanization. Much of her art documents aspects of that conflict, as well as the sometimes harsh realities of extreme weather, fire and other hazards.

Jeffrey Allen Price, a multimedia artist who lives in Rocky Point, was interested in potatoes as a component of art before 2000, when he came to the State University of New York, at Stony Brook, as a graduate student. But while living here, he became aware that many of the Island's potato fields were paved to create Levittown and other subdivisions. Among his efforts to raise public consciousness about the potato's cultural significance are his Web site, www.potatoengine.com, and "Potato House," his installation at Mills Pond House in St. James.

He is also interested in the changing character of the Island. To this end, he creates Long Island-shaped multiples, which he described as "disposable, replaceable and immediately recognizable symbols." The shape, similar to that of a fish or whale, is often seen in corporate logos as well.

Mr. Price called his interaction with Long Island "an act of locating oneself in the landscape," which is, in one way or another, the purpose of all artists who use their environment itself as the raw material for their art.