



## Trashmagination Podcast #89 – Small Plastic Toys

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown.

Today's episode is about creative reuse of small plastic toys. Unfortunately, many families have too many small plastic cheaply-made toys, often from kids' meals at restaurants or from visits to the dentist office. According to one of the sources that I'll talk about later in this episode, 90% of toys today are made from plastic and 80% of those toys end up in landfill or the ocean [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2A6SitzuFLU>].

It's easy to forget that plastic is made from crude oil. While it's amazing how plastic allows people to design just about anything, the truth is we are being very wasteful with this non-renewable resource. The best choice is not to buy any new plastic toys, and this is particularly true as we head into the holiday season. In my community, there are boxes where people put donated holiday toys and most are made from plastic. But kids are aware of the long-term impact of plastic, and surely it creates discomfort in their hearts when they receive plastic gifts from people who they love and trust, while learning about the impact of plastic. So this holiday season, it would be awesome if we could set a goal of not buying plastic toys, and if you really want to give them, to only give secondhand ones.

### How Our Family Creatively Reused Small Plastic Toys

So in this episode, I'm focusing on small plastic toys, meaning toys you can hold in one hand. Larger toys are usually easier to give away if they are not broken whether that is giving it to other families, charity shops or through an online community like Buy Nothing. But smaller toys can be more challenging to give away.

Our family has given away our small plastic toys through two methods – at community fairs and on Halloween night. Our family volunteers every July at a festival called Obon which always has a children's area with prizes. I bring over a bag filled with clean toys in good condition to put in the prize bucket. Likewise, on Halloween night, we offer a bucket with small toys which is especially helpful to families where someone has dietary restrictions. I post a small sign on our porch saying we are offering toys in case a family member has allergies.

One way that I hope to creatively reuse toys is through fidget quilts. These are lap-sized quilts that can be given to someone with dementia. You attach many items with many textures to the quilts so that they will play with those items instead of scratching themselves or pulling on their hair. Toys can be attached by a cord and the recipient can then slip the toy in and out of a pocket on the quilt.

For broken toys, this is more challenging. Sometimes components are interesting, they might form part for an art project. But if the plastic is sharp, very few municipal recycling programs take plastic toys because they are usually made from different types of plastics mixed together, combined with metal or fabric, but check with your recycling program.

### Tiny Toy Co.

Another idea is to mail small plastic toys to a company in Toronto, Canada, called Tiny Toy Co. [<https://tinytoyco.com/>]. They even accept plastic toy components like a plastic shoe that doesn't have a pair. They sort the toys into educational activities or goody bags for parties. The company was created by Rebecca Saha who is a teacher-librarian and an expert on emergent literacy, which means a child's knowledge of reading and writing skills before they learn how to read and write words. As they say on the website, "we can tackle toy waste and create literacy, instead of litter."

You could ship your unwanted plastic toys to the Tiny Toy Co. right now, but another idea is to re-create some of the things they make in your own community. So take a listen:

- 1) **Learning Numbers, Letters, Colors, Shapes** – So they have boxes filled with toys to help kids learn their numbers, letters, colors or shapes. The box contains tiny toys as well as flash cards. For colors, they use the plastic caps from markers as well.
- 2) **Pre-schooler Sight Words** - They also make sets with objects that represent words that pre-schoolers are learning how to read [<https://tinytoyco.com/collections/learning-with-tiny-toys-1/products/vocabulary-development-collection-primary>].
- 3) **Connect the Thoughts™** - One of my favorite kits is called Connect the Thoughts and it contains objects which a student can group into any kind of pair as long as they can explain why they are a pair [<https://tinytoyco.com/collections/learning-with-tiny-toys-1/products/loose-parts-learning-connect-the-thoughts>]. What I love about this kit is that the answers are open-ended. Maybe the objects rhyme, or they are the same shape, or they have the same number of legs, or they both start with W, or they are both mammals.
- 4) **Blends** – Next they have a kit that represents certain sounds in language. For example, they have a kit with S-blends, meaning words that start with sl- sp- sn- squ- sc- sk- st- sw- sm. This reminds me of when I wanted to make a gift for my friend Laura when she was new to her career as a speech pathologist, so I researched sounds that are often difficult and made laminated photo cards of those words for Laura to use with her clients. The funny story about that is that I put a photo of a typewriter and the kids called it a keyboard which did not help them practice the right sounds.
- 5) **Matching and Memory Games** – [<https://tinytoyco.com/collections/learning-with-tiny-toys-1/products/tiny-toy-memory-game>]
- 6) **Play Sets** – They also combine donations to make sets of K'nex, Lego, Duplo, Jenga, Play Dough or Playmobile.

Tiny Toy Co. offers workshops where you make crafts from tiny toys. For example, right now they are making ornaments from Scrabble tiles. You spell your name in tiles on those little wooden holders that come in the Scrabble game, glue it down, add a ribbon and it makes an ornament. They make terrariums with little scenes inside with plastic toys. They also offer toy sorting events for volunteers which sound so fun.

Tiny Toy Co. offers toys that you can put into birthday party loot bags, Halloween and pinatas [<https://tinytoyco.com/collections/party-holiday-supplies>]. They just published a video about upcycling plastic toys for special occasions. They recommend attaching a label on the toys talking about re-gifting and how kids care about the environment [[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9M\\_4YiTmk4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9M_4YiTmk4)]. Another thing I love in that video is seeing how Rebecca organizes her work space with the donated toys.

Something I love about their Instagram feed is when they share photos of donated toys that they don't recognize. They have a game called WTF or What's This For and they ask their fans to identify the toy. I also love that they will make custom toy collections by request. For example a few months ago, they received a request to make a collection of all villain toys [<https://www.instagram.com/p/B2-Uh2PhJLD/>].

If it sounds daunting to ship your tiny toys to the Tiny Toy Co., you could also see if there is a creative reuse store in your area. This is like a secondhand store for craft supplies and many will take tiny toys to incorporate into artwork.

## Hiroshi Fuji

Next I'm going to talk about artists and social activists who work with small plastic toys. The first is Hiroshi Fuji. Hiroshi had an exhibit called Jurassic Plastic that traveled to Australia, Japan and Thailand [<http://www.artspeople.com.au/project/jurassic-plastic-hiroshi-fuji/>] [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wh2WOj4Z-fw>]. Jurassic Plastic included many dinosaurs called Toysaurus which were about 4-5 feet tall. It also included a plastic swamp where kids could rummage through toys and a tinkerspace where kids could transform toys. Hiroshi taught workshops about how to make sculptures from plastic toys [<https://vimeo.com/261966066>].

The exhibit incorporated about 50,000 toys. How did he collect all those toys? Almost 20 years ago, when Hiroshi's kids were small and he was feeling overwhelmed by their plastic toys, he started a barter community called 'Kaekko' [kah-eh-ko] (which is Japanese for 'swapsies'). The way people would exchange items was at events called Kaekko Bazaars. Kids bring in unwanted items, which were often plastic toys, and bankers who were also children would assess the value of the items. The kids would then earn kaeru points which Hiroshi called an international children's currency. The word kaeru means both "to exchange" and "frog" so the program has a frog as its mascot. You could also earn points by attending workshops that were part of the event – workshops where you might learn how to creatively reuse plastic bags for example. There have been thousands of Kaekko Bazaars all over the world since, and he would gather many plastic toys at these events. I'll share a video in the show notes that he made in 2008 called "How to Kaekko" [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uGSrNtVIZdw>] and I'll link to a paper called "An Overview of Art Projects in Japan" which goes into more detail [[https://tarl.jp/wp/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/tarl\\_output\\_38-1.pdf](https://tarl.jp/wp/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/tarl_output_38-1.pdf)].

I read an interview with Hiroshi where he talked about how he wishes that he could make art from something other than plastic. He said, "There are times I wish I could use materials like wood, fabric, and even soil in my works. But today, plastic is much more available. We have to admit we live in a world full of plastic." [<https://www.bangkokpost.com/life/arts-and-entertainment/1725371/japans-plastic-man>] He explained that the actual artwork is not what is important to him, as much as seeing the adults and kids interact to transform the plastic and discuss environmental issues in a creative way.

## Margaux Lange

The next artist is Margaux Lange who makes jewelry from Barbies – mostly from their eyes, ears and mouths, as well as hands, feet, butts and busts [<https://margauxlange.bigcartel.com/>]. She combines the Barbie components with sterling silver, precious stones and resin to make necklaces, rings and bracelets. If you have ever worked or volunteered in a secondhand store, then you know there are a lot of Barbies donated and usually they are naked and their hair looks terrible. At some places I have volunteered, there were volunteers who love dolls who rehabilitate the donated Barbies by fixing their hair and making them new clothes, but most Barbies do not get that special treatment.

Margaux attended an art school near me called the Maryland Institute College of Art. In the show notes, I'll share a video that shows how she dissects a Barbie doll to make her work [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqIAxQvibSA>]. Recently, I was moved by a series of pieces that Margaux made which feature a mother and child. She notes on her Facebook page that these pieces were inspired by her own daughter who has complex medical needs and who has had multiple head surgeries.

[<https://www.instagram.com/margauxlangejewelry/>] [<https://www.facebook.com/margauxlangejewelry/>]

## Freya Jobbins

The next artist also works with dolls and her name is Freya Jobbins [JAW-bins]. She makes assemblages meaning sculptures made from many parts joined together [<https://www.freyajobbins.com/>]. She uses Barbie-style dolls and baby dolls. Freya's pieces are very detailed – they involve hundreds of tiny faces, arms, feet and other parts from dolls. She jokes that she is actually a plastic surgeon. The result is somewhere between funny and creepy. She makes celebrity portraits like Whoopi Goldberg, superheroes like Batman, and cartoon characters like Bart Simpson, as well as sculptures that are more like classic Greek sculptures [<https://www.instagram.com/freyajobbins/>]. She also makes headbands which are made from many doll heads [<https://www.instagram.com/p/Bmy-nZNn5Us/>].

[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8n1Ah6X8gvA>]

Freya was originally a police woman and weapons instructor. At age 28, she had a serious head-on car accident which ended that career. One of the few parts of her body that worked well after the accident was her hands. You can hear an interview with her on the podcast This Wild Song [<https://thiswildsong.com.au/freya-jobbins/>]. In that interview, she talks about how she thinks plastic toys are making it more difficult for children to use their imagination. By making her assemblages, she hopes to get people to think about the consumerism and the ugliness of buying so many plastic toys.

## Tom Deininger

The next artist is Tom Deininger [DIE-nin-ger] [<http://tomdeiningerart.com/>] who makes collage art from many small plastic items and especially toys. These pieces are optical illusions because from most angles and from up close, they look like a mish-mash of nothing. But if you stand at exactly the correct angle, you see an incredibly detailed portrait or landscape [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SAz96tfQnM4>]. One thing about Tom's work is that he doesn't only use toys that are in great condition. He can incorporate broken parts of toys as well. It's easy to find videos of Tom's work if you search on the hashtag #tomdeininger [<https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/tomdeininger/>]. People love taking videos of his work to show how they look meaningless from one angle and then perfect from another.

## ecoBirdy

Next I'll talk about a company in Belgium called ecoBirdy that shreds unwanted plastic toys and makes them into kid-sized furniture [<https://www.ecobirdy.com/>]. As I mentioned at the start of this episode, most recycling centers won't take plastic toys because plastic toys are usually a mixture of many types of plastic, along with metal, fabric and other contamination. But ecoBirdy invented a process to handle those issues. When they receive the toys, they bring them to a sheltered workshop where the workers remove batteries and textiles. The shredding and color sorting is done at a recycling plant, but this initial step is critical in order to successfully recycle toys. After shredding the plastic to pellets, they mold items like chairs and other toys [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xdXdZ70iju8>].

ecoBirdy's products have a distinctive speckled appearance. This is due to ecoBirdy's patented approach to recycling plastic called ecothylene®. The way that they bind together plastic pellets means that they don't have to add new pigments or plastics. This makes it significantly more eco-friendly, because a lot of recycled plastics involve only maybe 10 or 20% recycled plastic, but most of the new item is actually made from new plastic. ecoBirdy's process keeps the source material visible as the source of color.

ecoBirdy's founders are Vanessa Yuan and Joris (Yoris) Vanbriel. You can watch a TED talk by Joris where he talks about the story of ecoBirdy and how it is an example of a circular economy [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O8R7M2xLKAU>].

## Crafts You Can Make from Recycled Plastic Toys

I'll finish today's episode with ideas for crafts you can make from small, plastic toys.

Skaie Knox shared a craft for making a bowl by melting plastic toys [<http://www.homejelly.com/how-to-make-upcycled-plastic-animal-toy-bowl/>]. This involves laying plastic toys in a metal bowl and melting them with a heat gun into a bowl shape. Skaie is a fan of Trashmagination and often likes my posts on Facebook so shout out to Skaie!

The next idea is from the art supply store Blick. They show how you can transform plastic eggs from Easter egg hunts into a Daruma doll which is a good luck charm [<https://www.dickblick.com/lesson-plans/my-daruma/>]. A daruma is a hollow egg-shaped doll. Usually it is painted red and black and looks like an older man with two big round eyes. When you first purchase or make a daruma doll, both eyes are blank white. The tradition is that when you set a goal or make a wish, you color in the left eye, and then you color in the right eye when the wish comes true.

Rebecca Farrant shares a craft called her Happy Meal Toy Wreath where she hot glues plastic toys in a wreath shape [<https://www.infarrantlycreative.net/happy-meal-toy-wreath/>].

Kathy from The Crafty Chica takes plastic animals and repaints them to look more like piñatas and then makes them into keychains or necklaces [<https://craftychica.com/2014/04/pinata-inspired-animal-charms/>]. This is a great craft activity to talk about pattern, line and color as well as learning about Mexican culture.

Bev from Flamingo Toes shares a craft she made called Party Animals where she takes small plastic animals, decorates them with shiny bling and then hangs them from a necklace chain [<https://flamingotoes.com/anthro-necklace-week-bonus-party-animal-necklace/>].

I will link to a video with craft ideas for plastic toys which are bookends, a toothbrush holder, hooks, a clock, soap with embedded toys in them, a serving dish and a lamp. Sometimes this means cutting the toy in half, like cutting a plastic dinosaur toy in half so the head is on one bookend and the butt is on another. Sometimes the toys are painted gold or white to match the décor. [[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFGjMNg\\_8eA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFGjMNg_8eA)].

## **Thank you!**

Thank you for listening! You can see more about these ideas on my Pinterest board from plastic toys [<https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/plastic-toys/>]. If you are looking for how to creatively reuse other types of toys, some of the most popular Trashmagination episodes have been about creative reuse of stuffed toys, as well as how to make dollhouse furniture from recycled materials – so be sure to check out those episodes. What are creative ways that you have reused plastic toys? Please let me know at [trashmagination@gmail.com](mailto:trashmagination@gmail.com). And let's all try our best not to buy plastic toys for the holidays! Until next time – may you see small plastic toys as a source of art in your life!