



Trashmagination Podcast #104 – Insect Creative Reuse in Art

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown. Today's episode is about creative reuse and insects. We'll learn about creative reuse artists who are inspired by insects. We'll learn ways to repel insects through creative reuse. But first let's explore how insects teach us about creative reuse.

What Insects Teach About Creative Reuse

Insects are pros at creative reuse. They decompose materials and bring nutrients back to the earth. For example:

- Wasps chew up wood fiber to make their papery nests¹.
- Bees are constantly reusing wax to make honeycombs².
- Dung beetles roll manure into balls and creatively reuse them as food.
- For camouflage, lacewing larvae attach soil fragments to themselves³ and caddisfly larvae make a tube from pebbles⁴. The masked hunter bug covers itself with wood chips and sand when it is in the nymph stage⁵.
- When the blotched emerald moth is in the larval stage, it attaches pieces of oak leaves to bristles on its body⁶.
- Assassin bugs actually stack dead bugs on themselves like a costume to hide from their predators⁷.

Not only do insects creatively reuse all the time, but humans have also creatively reused insects. For example:

- For centuries, if someone wanted to dye fabric red, they would crush a type of beetle called a cochineal⁸.
- Beetle shells have been incorporated into jewelry designs.
- Some people eat insects. I ate a dried mealworm once at a science fair. And my parents like to tell a story about when I was a toddler and ate a dried up old fly from the window sill.

Here's a great story about an architect who learned about creative reuse from insects. Mick Pearce grew up in Africa where he observed termite mounds. From those observations, he designed a shopping mall that kept cool without standard air conditioning. This mall is called the Eastgate Mall in Harare, Zimbabwe. The way this mall works, it creatively reuses the cold night air by capturing it and then blowing it through the mall during the day, saving 90 percent of the energy it would take to keep the mall cool. You can hear an interview with Mick Pearce on the podcast Green Dreamer which I will link in the show notes [<https://greendreamer.com/podcast/mick-pearce-biomimicry-architect-eastgate-mall>].

These examples show that humans have been learning about creative reuse from insects for a long time. So now we'll learn about creative reuse artists who are inspired by insects.

¹ <https://www.thoughtco.com/how-wasps-build-wasp-nests-1968103>

² <https://beehivehero.com/how-do-bees-make-wax/>

³ <https://morethanadodo.com/2018/11/14/crafty-camouflage/>

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caddisfly>

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reduvius_personatus

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blotched_emerald

⁷ <https://www.treehugger.com/amazing-examples-of-insect-camouflage-4869256>

⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20180202-the-insect-that-painted-europe-red>

Insects Creatively Reused in Art

I'll start with an artist who works with dead insects. In 2015, I saw an art exhibit with a piece called *In the Midnight Garden* created by Jennifer Angus. She is a professor of textile design and she makes huge exhibits of insects arranged on the wall like a fabric design. In this case, the walls were painted a pink-ish red, which was a color she made by grinding up those cochineal beetles that I just mentioned. Then all over the walls, there were very large insects arranged in circles and other designs. Jennifer uses real insects that have been collected by indigenous people mostly in Peru, Malaysia and Indonesia. She uses insects that are only commonly available in those places. [<https://youtu.be/f-B1wnReiB8>] [<https://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/wonder/online/jennifer-angus>]

Artists Who Partner with Insects

Now let's move from artists who work with *dead* insects, and talk about those who work with *live* insects. These artists are actually creating artistic collaborations with insects.

The first is **Stephen Kutcher** who makes art by painting on insects and then placing them on canvases. The insects walk all over the canvas to make a painting [<http://bugartbysteven.com/>]. He is an entomologist who specializes in handling insects for Hollywood movies.

Agenetha Dyck [<http://www.aganethadyck.ca/>] takes objects such as porcelain figurines and sports equipment. She places them in hives and the bees build honeycomb around them. The effect is eerie. For example, the bees might build a big honeycomb hat on the head of a porcelain figure and that hat might droop down over their face. Even though the results might seem eerie, Agenetha says that the bees like to fix things, so she purposefully places objects that are broken in some way, and the bees are drawn to build there. [<https://vimeo.com/27487390#at=1>]

Finally, I wanted to know if any artists collaborate with wasps. Like bees, wasps build honeycomb structures but from wood pulp. **Mattia Manchetti** was working with a captive colony of European paper wasps [<http://www.mattiamenchetti.com/outreach/wasp-is-art>]. He gave them colored paper to make their nest, one color after another, and they made a rainbow-colored nest. It made an artful object that he shared around the world. Making the sculpture was not his number one goal – he was focused on the scientific study of wasps. Still, I think anyone who works with wasps to make art deserves recognition for bravery!

Now here's a story I am adding at the last minute. I already recorded this episode but something quite magical just happened related to wasps and creative reuse, so I delayed publishing this episode and added this story. I have been working on reducing the amount of paper in my house by scanning documents and then recycling the originals. I was scanning journals from when I was in high school. Reading these journals inspired me to reach out to people who I have not talked with in thirty years! One of those people is **Johanna Griffith** [https://www.instagram.com/johannagriffith_art/]. Johanna and I travelled to Australia together for a Girl Guide Jamboree when I was 14 years old. Johanna and I did not keep in touch after that but she went on to become an artist who does printmaking and other media. You can imagine my surprise when I looked at her Instagram and her most recent post was about making paper from an old wasp nest. This was a defunct wasp nest that she found on the ground. Johanna often has scraps of very high quality paper cut from her prints. She took those off-cuts and blended them up to make new paper. She incorporated the wasp nest in her paper and it blended perfectly well because it was also made from wood fiber. But she added nice big chunks of wasp nest in the paper which made a cool visual effect, kind of like sedimentary rock [<https://www.instagram.com/p/CBjnYXSMh36/>]. Johanna facilitates workshops where her students sew together paper of varying densities, so this will make a great project for that work. Mostly I am amazed that we were both thinking about insects and creative reuse at the same time when we hadn't talked for thirty years, and then somehow I felt compelled to find her right at this moment. I have mentioned in previous episodes how I believe there is a such thing as creative reuse magic where artists are out there in the world working on something just when I'm about to do an episode, and I get so excited when they shared their work with the world only a few weeks or a month before, and somehow that's when I did that topic.

Insect Sculptures from Creatively Reused Materials

Next I'll talk about artists who make sculptures of insects from creatively reused materials. These artists make insects both tiny and huge. I think audiences are attracted to sculptures of insects even if they don't like real insects because the artists are taking something small that you can't examine very easily and then blowing it up to a size so you can really look at the detail. For the artists is likely a lot of fun because there are so many kinds of insects – it's like a never-ending artistic muse.

These sculptures remind me of the work I featured in my recent episode about robots from recycled materials. In some ways, insect sculptures have a similar feel as robots in that they have an exoskeleton. However a key difference is that insects are alive, and the artist must communicate that alive-ness through the sculptures attitude and position.

The most famous sculptor who makes insects from recycled materials is **Edouard Martinet**. He was asked if he would make sculptures like cats or dogs, but he said that he prefers to sculpt scary animals. His first sculpture was a mosquito from bicycle parts. He finds materials at flea markets and junk dealers – mostly metal but some plastic lights. The bright orange eyes on his praying mantis are plastic signal lights. He collects parts from cars, bicycles, mopeds, broken typewriters, cutlery and kitchen items. He became interested in insects as a child because he had a teacher who was an entomologist. They had a nature club where they would keep insects and draw them. He does not weld his sculptures together but only connects everything with screws.

I love watching videos of creative reuse artists such as Edouard at work. It looks like magic how he starts pulling items together and gradually the sculpture looks like a fly or a fish. I know from experience that he is running through a list of objects in his mind from his huge collection, imagining how things would add detail or bulk. It's almost more about remembering what you have than any other activity.

- <https://www.sladmorecontemporary.com/edouard-martinet>
- <https://www.boredpanda.com/steampunk-recycled-insect-sculptures-edouard-martinet/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1pKZu9wf40Y>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aEuOhwRRPY0>

Circuit boards and other e-waste are popular item for many artists to make insect sculptures. Maybe there is a natural connection between e-waste and insects because many insects buzz and many electronics buzz. Also, some artists make insect sculptures from watch parts, which is like e-waste in that it has lots of fun small parts and watches make clicking and ticking sounds like insects.

One of my favorite insect sculpture artists is **Lex Talkington**. He makes his insects mostly from e-waste. He makes some three-dimensional insects but more often he lays his insects or other creatures flat on a rectangular-shaped mold, and then pours resin over the sculpture to hold the items in place. This creates a solid block of plastic that encases the art. His pieces are incredibly detailed with little tiny hairs on a fly for example. When he pours the resin into the mold, he uses long tweezers to move the sculpture in the exact position that he wants because pouring the resin can cause it to get out of position. You can see videos of how he makes his sculptures on his Instagram feed.

- <https://lexalkingtonart.com/>
- <https://www.instagram.com/lexalkington/>
- <https://www.etsy.com/shop/lexalkingtonart/>

The next creative reuse insect artist I want to talk about is **Kym Latter** who started a project during social distancing due to COVID-19. In Australia, they call this time "Isolation" so Kym started a project called "**Isolation Beetle Project**" on Facebook [<https://www.facebook.com/groups/isolationbeetleproject/>]. She suggested themes and people made beetles from recycled materials that fit the theme. Some themes were Bright, Horn and Rainbow. Kym made her beetles from cardboard toilet rolls painted with sparkly paints.

There are many other artists who sculpt insects from recycled materials and I'll just quickly name a few who use materials that I haven't mentioned:

- **Mr. Finch** sews giant moths from vintage fabrics – I mentioned his work in my episode on vintage fabrics.
- **Raku Inoue** sculpts insects from flower petals [<https://mymodernmet.com/natura-insects-raku-inoue/>, https://www.instagram.com/reikan_creations/, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DP4uvP4bN5E>]
- **Mark Oliver** made a series of insects called "Litter Bugs" from a wide assortment of materials such as book covers and broken glasses [<https://mymodernmet.com/mark-oliver-litter-bugs/>]

I don't know if you have ever looked at fishing lures, but they are an art form as well. People tie the lure that best match a fish's preferred meal. People use items like corks, metal spoons, skateboards, bottle caps and other recycled materials to make lures. If you know about using recycled materials to making fishing lures, please let me know at trashmagination@gmail.com because I'd love to do an episode on fishing and creative reuse.

Insect Crafts Made Recycled Materials

If you work with young children then you know there are millions of insect-themed crafts and many of them use recycled materials. The two I have mentioned many times before are milk jug butterflies and cap-perillars which are caterpillars made by stringing plastic caps in a row. Egg cartons, wine corks and walnut shells make great bug bodies and lots of plastic packaging can be cut into wings. When you paint on bubble wrap and print with it, it looks like honeycomb. One of the best insect crafts I have seen was designed by the Craft Train – their grasshopper looks quite realistic with jointed legs and it's all made from toilet paper tubes [<https://www.thecrafttrain.com/cardboard-tube-grasshopper/>]. I saved a bunch of these crafts to the Pinterest board that goes with this episode if you'd like more inspiration - <https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/insects-art-and-repellants/>.

Creative Reuse Tips to Repel Insects

The last topic is repelling insects with creative reuse. Many people make insect traps made from plastic bottles. They cut off the top of the bottle and turn it back inside the bottle, then put in sugar water. The insects go down the spout to seek the sugar but can't find their way back and eventually drown.

Another project is called a tick tube [<https://www.myfrugalhome.com/how-to-make-tick-tubes/>]. You take cotton balls and shake permethrin powder on them. This is an insecticide made from chrysanthemum flowers. You put the cotton balls in a cardboard tube and place it around your property. Small animals like mice take the cotton to their nests. This kills the ticks that tend to live on the mice without hurting the mice. Some people recommend using dryer lint instead of cotton balls, but dryer lint is actually a terrible insulator for nests because it includes many synthetic fibers that come from your clothes. When it gets wet, it is useless. So in general it's not a good idea to give wildlife dryer lint.

The last insect repelling idea that involves creative reuse is to make a pretend hornet nest and hang it on your property. The idea is that hornets are territorial, and when they see a hornets nest, they will avoid your property. You can purchase pretend hornet nests online. I found people making them by crocheting creatively reused materials. I will link to a pattern in the show notes.

- <https://www.thriftyfun.com/How-to-Make-a-Crochet-Faux-Hornets-Nest.html>
- <https://www.ravelry.com/patterns/library/valeampiaispesa---fake-hornets-nest>

Thank You for Listening!

Thank you for listening! If you have made insect-inspired art from creatively reused items, please let me know at trashmagination@gmail.com. Also, I just wanted to let you know that there is a global event happening right now called Plastic Free July. It's a challenge where you aim to reduce your plastic use in at least some ways. You can get inspiration for actions to take by listening to the podcast Sustainable Brown Girl which I will link in the show notes. Until next time, may you see trash as a source of insect art in your life!