



Trashmagination Podcast #111 – Hair

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown. Today's episode is about hair – both natural and synthetic hair. A lot of people haven't had a haircut since social distancing started, including me, so I have a lot more hair than normal to think about.

I hesitate to do podcast episodes about things like hair or teeth or other substances that come from people because it seems creepy. On the comedy show Conan O'Brien, he has a recurring character named Melody who makes crafts from recycled materials, and spoiler alert, her crafts seem okay to start but get weird. I'm afraid Melody is not a positive spokesperson for creative reuse artists, but if you want to see a pop culture reference to creative reuse, I'll link to her videos in the show notes.

- Melody Crafts on Conan O'Brien – Thanksgiving Edition - <https://youtu.be/6SFxl6JtwTU>
- Melody Crafts on Conan O'Brien – Valentines Edition - <https://youtu.be/ipNHRh5NsgY>
- Melody Crafts on Conan O'Brien - Gingerbread Houses - <https://youtu.be/rQFPEL5QRIA>

Can You Compost Hair?

To start this topic, let's talk about the qualities of hair. Unlike many natural materials, hair does not decay quickly. Hair is really tough. If you put hair in a regular home composter, it is unlikely to break down any time soon. Also, some gardeners are concerned about the chemicals in hair and thus would not add it to compost that you might use to grow food. You can still compost hair because it is a natural material, but it just doesn't break down to become dirt as quickly as most materials. It can take years. Some people instead use hair in their gardens to repel deer.

While I'm talking about composting, I'll also bring up the question of dryer lint. So I had this idea of doing an episode about dryer lint, but first I thought I would collect my own dryer lint and see if I could make something from it. What I learned was that most of my dryer lint was hair, and as such, I did not want to make anything with it. The only thing I do with my dryer lint is use it as fire starter for campfires. The people who do dryer lint sculptures for real are not using dryer lint from regular laundry. They are specifically washing and drying towels that are all one color or doing other similar techniques so that their dryer lint comes out with a specific color and is not full of hair. To me, that's a lot of energy use to make dryer lint since dryers generate a lot of carbon emissions. Instead it's less impactful to the environment to just get wool that has been dyed to the color that you want to make that kind of sculpture.

Victorian Hair Crafts

Since hair is so strong, it has been used for centuries to make crafts. This was a trend in the Victorian era. When Queen Victoria's husband Albert died, she was in mourning for so long that some art forms related to mourning became more popular. Making crafts related to being in mourning was called making a mementos mori. It was also popular during the American Civil War.

One popular type of mementos mori was called "hairwork" or jewelry made from hair. Sometimes it was a little braid of hair in a brooch or attached to a bracelet. I'll link to an article on the Artsy website that shows incredible hair crafts that look like intricate flower bouquets [<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-curious-victorian-tradition-making-art-human-hair>]. There is a hair museum in Independence, Missouri called Leila's Hair Museum where you can see lots of hairwork and hair sculptures [<https://leilashairmuseum.net/>].

Even today, there are artists who still specialize in hairwork such as Gina Iacovelli [https://www.instagram.com/mementos_entwined/] and Courtney Lane [<https://www.youtube.com/c/HairandNow/videos>]. They make unbelievably tiny braids and weaves that they incorporate into jewelry. When you look at the finished work, you would hardly guess they are made from hair. They make videos all about their intricate techniques and even if you never want to creatively reuse hair, the videos are very interesting in terms of using fibers.

- <https://www.instagram.com/victorianhairworkersint/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4K8ob3fLFwE>

Contemporary Hair Artists

While it's not common to make jewelry from hair anymore, there are many contemporary artists who incorporate hair into their work. Spencer Merolla did many pieces in a series called Hairwork which involved attaching hair to a flat board in geometric patterns [<https://www.spencermerolla.com/hairwork1>]. It looks - from a distance – similar to a hardwood floor with varying shades of wood stain.

- <https://www.instagram.com/p/BDO6qmRpZer/>
- <https://www.instagram.com/p/BDLuRtLJZaX/>
- <https://www.instagram.com/p/0vlgTKJZfA/>

Chi Nguyen [Nyu-win] does an annual performance art piece called I Hope to Find You [<http://whatchidid.com/ihopeto2>] every October 10. She started this piece in 2015 dedicated to a past lover and to raise awareness for suicide prevention. At this event, people donate locks of their hair and she then weaves them into a woven piece using a backstrap loom. All donations from the performance go to the It Gets Better Project to raise awareness, fund suicide prevention and anti-bullying programs for LGBTQ youth.

- <https://www.instagram.com/p/BOAs-0OgCPz/>
- <https://www.instagram.com/p/BCvSQ8pJRVb/>
- <https://www.instagram.com/p/8x3t23JRfg/>
- <https://www.instagram.com/p/7xuOPOJRV3/>

Laetitia Ky is a hair sculpture artist and something amazing is that most of the hair is still attached to her head and armpits [<https://www.instagram.com/laetitiaky/>]. She says in one video about her art that sculpting with her hair is part of her feminism, and that as a grown woman, she can decide what to do with her own body, including her hair. She had sculpted her hair into so many imaginative shapes. For example, she sculpted it into a light bulb, two eye balls and a mouth, a microphone, a pair of hands – it goes on and on. She has sculpted many animals such a giraffe, a fish, a butterfly. She does sculptures about issues such as the body positivity, gender inequality and mental illness. She sculpted her hair into a jump rope that she could actually use to jump while still being attached to her head [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ieZg6OQj6L8>]. She uses wire inside the hair to provide the structure and she incorporates hair extensions to get enough material for her sculpture. She brings such a sense of humor to her sculptures which I hope you check out in the videos in the show notes or on her Instagram or Tik Tok feeds.

- <https://www.facebook.com/freedaeng/videos/793525804805744/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9btWkNopVo>

I talked about the artist Noora Schroderus in my episode about creative reuse of money. She made a series was called Hairy Herbarium which features 22 plant shapes sculpted from human hair [<http://www.nooraschroderus.com/project/hairy-herbarium/>]. These look very realistically like plant specimens that a scientist might collect and preserve.

Jenni Dutton made a dress from human hair that she collected from her hairdressers shop [<https://www.instagram.com/p/BhSCqU2AdIV/>]. Jenni is best known for her very realistic embroidered portraits. She also made dresses, corsets and shoes from unusual materials, including a dress made from hair.

Mark Bradford doesn't work with hair itself, but his whole art journey started in his mother's hair salon in South Los Angeles. He noticed that the hairdressers uses little pieces of paper called end papers when they were giving their clients a perm. He took those end papers and made his first art pieces which are giant murals filled with texture. Now his pieces sell for millions of dollars. He represented the United States at the Venice Biennale in 2017. He also started a non-profit organization called Art + Practice where his mom's hair salon used to be. It is now a center for young adults transitioning out of foster care. Creative reuse has always been a big part of Mark's work. For example, he has worked with posters that he finds plastered all over his neighborhood to bring in the voices of his neighborhood.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5mhdCvhDtQ>
- End Papers - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3UbK5H5Uul>
- <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/artist-mark-bradford-the-60-minutes-interview-2019-05-12/>

Pet Hair or Fur

There are another group of contemporary creative reuse artists who work with pet hair or fur. I mentioned Noora Schroderus who made plant sculptures from hair. She also did an exhibit called *Canis Lupus Familiaris* where she wrote the names of various dogs using their own dog hair or fur [<http://www.nooraschroderus.com/project/canis-lupus-familiaris/>].

Maybe you have seen people who take the hair or fur from their shedding pets and then felt the fur into sculptures. There is a popular photo that has made the rounds many times on social media of a cat wearing a bunny hat. It was made by Japanese photographer Ryo and Hiromi Yamazaki who have made many hat designs for their cats. Each hat is felted from their cats' own fur [<https://www.instagram.com/rojiman/>]. There is even a book called *Crafting with Cat Hair* by Kaori Tsutaya [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGnRcdiV57o>]

Jeannie Sanke specializes in spinning yarn from the dog hair she retrieves when brushing her dogs [<https://youtu.be/i97E4merYMg>]. The official term for wool spun from dog hair is chiengora. Sometimes people send her the fur from a pet who has passed away and she makes a memorial item that they request such as a sweater or mittens. She has an Etsy shop called Knit Your Dog [<https://www.etsy.com/shop/KnitYourDog>].

- <https://knityourdog.com/>
- <https://www.instagram.com/p/BVZ6FwsFsgs/>

Donating Hair

If you are like me and long overdue for a haircut, then you might have long enough hair to donate it. There are organizations such as Locks of Love [<https://locksoflove.org/>] or Wigs 4 Kids [<http://www.wigs4kids.org/donate-hair.html>] who take donated pony tails and make them into wigs for people who have lost their hair for many reasons. Usually these donations need to be at least 10 inches long and the hair cannot be bleached.

Making Synthetic Hair More Sustainable

Next let's talk about synthetic hair such as extensions that you weave into your own hair. Most synthetic hair is made from low-quality plastics and it is not a highly regulated product.

So there are two creative reuse challenges when it comes to synthetic hair. The first is – can we reuse the low quality synthetic hair that already exists instead of sending it to landfill? And second – can we make synthetic hair from something other than plastic – like maybe creatively reuse something?

So for challenge #1, an organization called Rebundle is now starting to collect used synthetic hair to ensure it is properly recycled [<https://www.rebundle.co/>]. You can hear a full interview with founder Ciara Imani May on the Brown Girl Green podcast, which I will link in the show notes [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1dcnECt4Y>].

- <https://www.instagram.com/rebundle.co/>

For challenge #2, a start-up called Lillian Augusta is making synthetic hair from invasive plants [<https://lillianaugustahair.com/>]. This start-up was created by Jannice Newson and Nana Britwum who got their start through a University of Michigan student start-up program. Their prototype is made from phragmites (frag-my-tees) which is an aggressive reed that can grow 12-15 feet tall and crowds out native plants in wetlands. The synthetic hair made by Lillian Augusta is actually compostable, which is impressive considering that natural hair doesn't even compost that quickly.

- <https://youtu.be/wYv2CRzWbsU>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8eEi4-JfpU>
- <https://www.instagram.com/lillianaugustahair/>
- Nature Conservancy about this phragmites - <https://youtu.be/k-zLviub3VI>
- <https://www.secondwavemedia.com/concentrate/innovationnews/lillianaugusta0539.aspx>

Thank you!

Thank you for listening! Please let me know if you have ever creatively reused hair – natural or synthetic - at trashmagination@gmail.com. Until next time, may you see hair as a source of art in your life!