



Trashmagination Podcast #116 – Dried Paint, Paint Cans and Paint Brushes

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown. In today's episode, we'll talk about creative reuse of dried paint, graffiti, paint brushes, paint palettes and paint cans.

Did you know that acrylic paint is made from plastic? Most people use acrylic paint or latex paint instead of oil paint because we don't have to use smelly chemicals to clean up. But the huge downside of acrylic paint is that it is basically liquid plastic, so we are effectively washing plastic down the drain when we clean up. With that in mind, today I'll talk about artists who creatively reuse paint and the tools we use for painting.

Reducing the Impact of Acrylic Paint in our Waterways

I first started thinking about the impact of acrylic paint on our waterways when listening to the podcast Practical(ly) Zero Waste, episode 80. Theresa Godin shared how she minimizes the impact of her painting hobby [<https://anchor.fm/practicallyzerowaste/episodes/080--Non-Zero-Waste-Hobbies-edgqe4>]. She researched to find paint that was not plastic based and she found a brand called Natural Earth Paint [<https://naturearthpaint.com/>]. They sell the pigments in powder form. You mix it depending on what type of paint you want – acrylic, oil, watercolor etc. They also sell eco-friendly face paint, glitter, paint thinners and varnishes. So that is a great option if you want to avoid putting more plastic into the environment when making your art.

But Theresa had a bunch of plastic-based paint that she wanted to use up, so she researched how to address her painting waste water. If she pours her paint-filled water down the drain, the dissolved paint goes with it, so instead she made a container filled with sand and poured her waste water there. The water evaporates, and her plastic waste is contained in that box rather than polluting the water in the wider world. By using the same box for many years, she reduces the potential reach of her paint waste. You can hear her explanation for her sand box water filtration project starting at around the 42 minute mark in the podcast episode.

Paint Pouring and Dried Paint Skins

It's one thing to clean out a paint brush and it's another thing to pour a whole bucket of paint down the drain. There is a popular craft right now called paint pouring, where you sequentially pour cups of acrylic paint on a canvas. As each color hits the canvas, it pushes the other one further out, making designs that look like a nebula or some other fluid abstract space. It's fun to watch. However, what makes me nervous is imagining a lot of paint sliding off the canvas and getting washed down the drain. I assume most artists use the paint for other projects, but I'm not sure because the extra paint from these paint pouring projects is many colors mixed together.

I learned that some artists take that swirly paint and make acrylic paint skins. This involves pouring swirled up paint on plastic sheets. You let it dry and then peel them off like a piece of colorful, translucent, swirly skin. If you want inspiration for how this might become part of a larger piece of art, check out the work of Seonna [Sana] Hong [<http://www.seonnahong.com/>]. I heard an interview with Seonna on the podcast The Jealous Curator – it was episode 150 from November 2018 [<https://www.thejealouscurator.com/blog/2018/11/16/peeling-paint/>]. At around the 43 minute mark in the interview, Seonna talks about how she started using acrylic skins in her paintings. When she used to make dimensional paintings, she applied paint to a canvas with a palette knife. But then she had situations where she didn't like the result, and she wanted another approach so she could change it more easily. She tells a story that she was in her studio struggling to get started on a piece. I think we have all experienced how when you are procrastinating, that

is when you realize that you need to organize your materials or clean up your studio. So she decided to see how big a piece of dried old paint that could she could peel from one of her painters palettes. When she pulled off these paint skins, she saw all kinds of color combinations that she probably would never have chosen otherwise. She started incorporating them into paintings. Those imaginative landscapes are Seonna's trademark as an Emmy award-winning animator. She specializes in painting the backgrounds in cartoons.

The next artist who works with paint skins is Jen Noone. She is an art professor at Northern Virginia Community College right here in my county. Jen uses latex paint which is similar to acrylic in that it contains plastic, but it is less expensive than acrylic paint. It is usually used to paint inside your home. Jen specifically uses the latex paint that people return to hardware or paint stores, which is a type of creative reuse in that she is likely diverting that paint from landfill.

To make her work, she repeatedly paints flat surfaces like glass sheets with latex paint. She then scrapes it off in strips which she describes as ripping the paint into sculptural ribbons [<https://www.jennoone.com/home>]. Sometimes the pieces are flat on the wall with the paint ribbons hanging down or sometimes they are on boxes. By painting on glass, she can have one effect on one side of the glass, and then the paint on the other side of the glass can show through.

A lot of Jen's work is about beauty and how there is a contrast between what goes into something versus what you see, which is a great metaphor for creative reuse – when we know there is so much waste behind the materials we use, but we aim to make something beautiful.

- Video interview from August 2020 - https://youtu.be/jow2_Xsya-g
- <https://arlingtonartscenter.org/exhibits/2019/jen-noone-sort-of-kind-of-almost/>
- <https://www.instagram.com/p/By8v946BA75/>
- <https://www.instagram.com/p/B1evsLqITr4/>

The next artist, Shelley Heffler, combines acrylic paint with paper and then crumples the paper so that it dries in a three-dimensional way [<http://www.shelleyheffler.com/altered-hybrid.html>]. She is using the plastics in the paint to make paper behave like plastic. It's like a painter who wanted to be a sculptor. Often the paper that she uses are creatively reuse maps. She also made a series of pieces called "Skins" from acrylic paint skins. They are representative of how our actions are changing our world, from ice bergs melting to oil spills contaminating the earth

[<http://www.shelleyheffler.com/skins.html>]. Shelley also weaves painted paper and recycled vinyl billboards. You know how much I love weaving non-traditional materials.

- <https://www.instagram.com/shelleyheffler/>
- Artist talk – https://youtu.be/NdX_4V6CcWc
- Video of the artist at work - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZgPzdFtEWO>

Another artist who works with dried paint is Amanda "Rusti" Burkman [<https://www.rustiart.com/about>, <https://www.instagram.com/rustiwillow/>]. She did a portrait of Greta Thunberg and Jane Goodall. She calls her style "paint chip mosaics" where she scrapes off chips of paint from an easel and uses them like mosaic stones.

If you think you'd like to try making mosaics with paint chips, I'll share a Tiktok post by Tianna Lee which shows she explains how she carefully removes bits of dried acrylic paint from a palette in chips, and then makes a mosaic painting with it [https://www.tiktok.com/@ti_leaf/video/6886148824344120578].

Graffiti

You can also creatively reuse chunks of graffiti that fall off a wall. This is likely to happen because the layers of paint get heavy and the art is exposed to the weather, or because people paint on surfaces that are already falling apart.

In Detroit, there is an organization called Rebel Nell started by Amy Peterson and Diana Russell in 2013. They gather the graffiti that has fallen on the ground. They hire women who were formerly homeless and trains them how to make jewelry by sanding and carving graffiti slabs. The resulting jewelry has all these tiny layers and swirls of color. They have done limited edition collections where they get an opportunity to gather graffiti layers from inside specific locations. For

example, they were part of a huge project related to Michigan Central Station which opened in 1914 and closed in 1988. After that, graffiti artists painted a lot of graffiti on walls inside. In 2018, Ford purchased the building with the goal of refurbishing it. Before they tackled that huge job, they invited Rebel Nell to come into the space and harvest graffiti to make into jewelry. This is a creative reuse project within a creative reuse project! It's like a creative reuse turducken!

- <https://www.rebelnell.com/>
- https://youtu.be/Xtp0Cj_HYcG
- Michigan Central Station project - <https://youtu.be/ia9AbitCAC>
- <https://www.instagram.com/rebelnell/>

Another artist who works with graffiti is Carina Shoshtary who lives near Munich, Germany. She makes very surreal jewelry and face masks. The way she reuses graffiti is that she uses very tiny pieces which she calls "scales" and she attaches them to other objects. The result is an item that looks like it has reptile scales on it. One of her techniques is to put a bioplastic made from corn and rice starches in a 3-D pen. She then traces other objects that are underneath a piece of glass. Once she has made her copy, she can then heat it up again and shape it into jewelry or masks.

- <https://carinashoshtary.com/work/>
- <https://www.instagram.com/carinashoshtary/>
- Carina explaining her process - <https://youtu.be/w3PRdYOinVQ>
- Video showing how she draws with the bioplastic and a 3-D pen - <https://youtu.be/zrPt9k7UeE>
- Studio visit with Carina - <https://youtu.be/EcDclOwIvsQ>

Another type of jewelry made from layers of paint is called Fordite. It is also called Detroit agate or Motor City agate. In the Ford factories, the cars were on tracks as they were painted. They used to be painted by hand but now they are painted by robots. Paint would fall on the ground in layers. The painters noticed this material and chipped it off the tracks, bringing it home and grinding it into jewelry. Many artists continue to work with this material today. The hashtag #fordite has almost 20,000 posts on Instagram.

- <https://fordite.com/>
- <https://urbanrelicdesign.com/>
- <https://www.boredpanda.com/car-paint-deposits-fordite-detroit-agate/>
- <http://michellespanyard.com/catalog.htm?keyword=fordite>

Spray Paint Cans

So now let's talk about creative reuse of spray paint cans. In most places, these are household hazardous waste and you must bring them to a special depot for processing. Unless the cans are completely empty, those cans are under pressure. There is something called a propellant inside the can which causes the paint to spray when you press the button. So I am not going to recommend any home projects that involve creative reuse of spray paint cans because it takes special procedures to creatively reuse them safely. However, there are artists who creatively reuse spray paint cans.

CanLove is an artistic collaboration started by artists DJ Neff and Paul Ramirez in Los Angeles [<http://www.canlove.org/>]. They have already creatively reused 25,000 spray paint cans. One place where they collect cans is the Venice Art Walls which is a legal place for graffiti artists [<https://veniceartwalls.com/>]. There are special containers there where artists put empty spray paint cans for CanLove.

They dis-assemble the cans by first using up all the paint in the can, which releases all the propellant. Next they cut off the tops and bottoms, and use the tube portion either as a tube or by unrolling it to make a flat rectangular piece.

Sometimes they make something called "Spray Bouquets." If you look at the top part of a spray paint can separated from the can, it looks somewhat like a rose. They use the tube part of the spray paint can as the vase. These "spray bouquets" have a fun industrial appeal. They also make more delicate-looking flowers like lilies where the actuator buttons form the center parts of the flowers. They use the tube part of the can and they cut it into petals.

In another project, they took the tube part and unrolled it to make a flat rectangle of metal. They put those rectangles together into something called “can-scapes” that look something like a metal quilt where you place different colors of geometric shapes together. In Taiwan, they made a huge mural from the bottoms of the cans which are metallic circles. They drill holes in the circles so they can be connected with wire in patterns. In that project, they laid out the circles in shiny colorful diamond shapes and then attached them up to a wall. You can support their work by purchasing these items on their website. On Vimeo you can see how they dis-assemble the spray paint cans and re-assemble the components into their sculptures.

- <https://theinspirationgrid.com/canlove-recycled-graffiti-spray-can-art-by-chalk/>
- <https://www.instagram.com/morecanlove/>
- <https://vimeo.com/canlove>
- <https://vimeo.com/canlove/1500project>

Another artist who creatively reuses spray paint cans is Mr. Mars [<https://instagram.com/mrmarsstudios>]. He specializes in making art about popular super heroes or cartoon characters. He calls his sculptures “customized toys” which involves taking an existing toy and then combining it with other materials to make a sculpture. One type of sculpture he makes involves making a toy looking like it is exploding out from inside a spray paint can and he calls those “bombers.” It involves cutting, melting and painting the toys to get the appearance that he wants. Each “bomber” currently sells for \$400. Mr. Mars was a graffiti artist before this, and he got into this type of art in 2013 when he was working in child care and he started making items for the children he was caring for.

- <https://mr-mars-studios.myshopify.com/>
- Interview - <https://youtu.be/Qaer1M2iy5o>

Dried Out Paint Brushes

Next let’s talk about how artists creatively reuse old dried out paint brushes. When I was growing up, my mom was a painter and one skills she taught me was how to carefully wash my brushes to prolong their life. But inevitably brushes do get to the point where they are no fun to use, especially the wider paint brushes that you use for painting houses.

Some artists make “altered paintbrushes” which involves decorating the paint brush so it’s a piece of art. In 2012, Donna Downey hosted something that she called the “Altered Brush Project” where she encouraged artists to share photos of their altered paint brushes [https://donnadowney.typepad.com/simply_me/2012/09/br.html]. People altered their brushes by adding objects like ribbon or antique photos, as well as inspirational quotes. Typically they display the brushes on the wall with a nail through a hole in the handle so the bristles are facing down.

Many artists painted the brushes to make them look like a face, and in particular, they painted them to look like Santa Claus where the beard was made from the bristles of the brush. Cassie Stevens has a great tutorial where she shows how to make cute bearded faces from old brushes [<https://www.instagram.com/tv/CHyFSYTHOxn/>]. She showed how to make the eyes and nose of the faces with polymer clay. By putting the clay on the metal part of the brush, they were more likely to stick.

Another artist who makes old paint brushes into faces is Sabine Timm [<https://www.instagram.com/p/BnWVFSxHCXh/>]. She makes lots of fun sculptures from every day objects. This is a style of art that I really enjoy which is that they find humor in everyday objects and I’ve mentioned a few others like Gilbert Legrand who I mentioned in my episode on creative reuse of medical supplies [<https://www.instagram.com/p/Bh9mrCvjAwq/>].

Carrie Bloomston had a great idea which was to display a series of paint brushes each painted a different color of the rainbow along the wall [<https://www.instagram.com/p/BoCEMLZBHjT/>]. It looks super cheerful but she calls it her Paintbrush Graveyard. It would be a lovely way to add color to any room.

Plastic Paint Palettes

Next I want to talk about plastic paint palettes. Often these come with a tiny oval of paint in each color. Sometimes they are hard plastic and sometimes they are flexible. One year when I was teaching art classes at my kids' school, I asked the art program if I could take the decrepit-looking palettes home at the end of the school year instead of having them go into the trash. Most colors had been used up and were messy where kids had dipped a dirty brush. I popped out all those little scraps of paint and sorted them in small glass jars. But then I was left with 50 plastic palettes. I rinsed them off and tried to think about how I could reuse them.

I have yet to find a way to reuse them, but the great news is that someone in my town just announced that she is collected paint palettes for a Terracycle program with BIC. So I am going to bring them to her, and her charity can get a donation for each palette. That made me feel very pleased!

The only other item I have for paint palettes is that I saw someone made silly sandals from paint palettes and I'll link to that photo in the show notes just for fun [<https://www.instagram.com/p/B4kmRcule9I/>].

Empty Paint Cans

Our last topic is creative reuse of empty paint cans. So hopefully you know that if you have acrylic or latex paint cans, you let them dry up all the way, pound the lid on and bring them to landfill. Paints that contain chemicals need to go to the hazardous waste depot.

Pillar Box Blue painted the insides of paint cans a nice bright color, and then decorated the outside of the cans with paint color chips [<https://www.pillarboxblue.com/upcycling-empty-paint-cans/>]. Then she used them for storage.

Other crafters reuse paint cans by covering them with twine or mosaic rocks. But most crafts marketed as creative reuse of paint cans involve using new cans that are not covered in paint drips.

Thank you!

Thank you for listening! Of course I linked to a bunch of these materials on a Pinterest board for you. I made one for the dried paint and graffiti ideas [<https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/graffiti-dried-paint-spray-cans/>] and one for the paint brush ideas [<https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/brushes-paint-cleaning-hair/>]. Let me know if you have ever made art from those items at trashmagination@gmail.com. Until next time, may you see all those dried out painting items as a source of art in your life!