



Trashmagination Podcast #85 – Sayaka Ganz, Plasticware Artist

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

Today I'm going to do something different from my previous 84 episodes. I'm going to talk about one creative reuse artist instead of deep-diving into a type of material or other theme.

The artist is Sayaka Ganz [<https://sayakaganz.com/>]. She makes large wildlife sculptures from plastic items like spatulas, hangers, spoons, toys and bowls. Last year, I made a list of the five creative reuse artists from around the world who I would most like to meet, and Sayaka was on my list. As a result, I have been keeping track of where she is doing exhibits. She just opened an exhibit at Towson University in Baltimore, Maryland, which is about a 2-hour drive from my home. When I learned about that exhibit, I quickly messaged her and she very generously offered to meet with me.

Unfortunately, I did not record our conversation for this podcast. We were always in noisy places during our time together. So I will do my best to summarize our fascinating discussion. If you want to hear more of her story, I will share plenty of great video interviews that she did on other occasions.

To start, let me tell you about Sayaka's life and how she came to this place of making sculptures from plasticware. Sayaka was born in Japan and moved a few times during her childhood to Brazil and Hong Kong. As you know, I attended an international school when I was a teenager and I could sense that her experiences living in multiple cultures had a big impact on her, similar to my experience living in a multi-cultural environment. It makes you think about things with new perspectives.

When Sayaka was a kid, she loved puzzles and you can see how that led to her work piecing together sculptures from many little bits of plastic. She also learned about the Shinto worldview that objects have spirits. She tells a story about how she learned from a young age that when something is thrown away when it still has life, that object will weep in the trash at night.

Sayaka studied print making at the University of Indiana and then later did her Masters in Fine Arts at Bowling Green State University. She now lives in Fort Wayne, Indiana with her husband Christopher who is also an artist.

I have been following her work for many years, and something that stays consistent through almost all her work is the idea of motion. For her MFA exhibit, she made two big beautiful horses that look like they are leaping out of the wall. She also made a cheetah named Fogo from red plasticware. In all these pieces and many more, the animals are in motion. Sometimes this is communicated by the angles of their bodies – their legs, wings, fins, tails or heads. Sometimes it's because Sayaka attaches extra pieces like twisted wires that seem to shoot out from the animal. They look like the lines in a comic book when something is moving fast and it says "Whoosh."

To make her sculptures anatomically accurate and to capture their motions, Sayaka gathers photos of animals in motion. She needs to see a certain pose from many angles. Like Sayaka, I save many images for inspiration. When I was preparing to go see Sayaka, I quickly sorted through my saved images of wildlife to see if I had any good photos of animals in motion that I could give her. And I was surprised to find that even though I had many, many wildlife images, almost none were in motion. It makes sense that it is easier to take a photo of an animal when it is not moving. But it goes to show that it's can be quite challenging to find the images she needs to do her work.

One of the reasons I really wanted to see her work in person was to understand more about how they are constructed. I had seen videos where she showed the metal armature that she puts inside the sculptures to give them strength. She welds the armature herself and in fact, her journey to make these sculptures started with a one-day welding class. She aims to keep the metal armature to a minimum and she works hard to ensure that the lines of the armature flow with the movement of the animal. For some animals, it's pretty straightforward. For example, she welds something that looks like a football when she is sculpting a penguin. But for other animals, it's complicated. For the cheetah, it would have been much easier to weld an armature with some connecting pieces that went more up-and-down. But the lines of a cheetah are all side-to-side. She sets a goal of keeping all the lines going in the right direction. To achieve that goal with the cheetah, she welded the armature kind of like a zigzag spring. I recommend you look at the photos in my show notes to see what I mean. I was also intrigued by the armature for the horses. They are actually bolted to the wall, which makes sense to ensure they don't fall over and hurt someone.

To attach the plasticware to the armature, Sayaka uses electrical wire, which comes in many colors, so she can color-match it to the plasticware. She also uses color-coded zip ties, especially when she is on the road and might not have access to wire. When we first met at the exhibit, she took some time to fix a few pieces on the sculptures which had come loose during transport. It was funny to see her wrestling with the sculptures. Usually when you are in a gallery, you can't touch anything. But she was sticking her hands into the guts of the sculptures and drilling new holes into them in some cases. She told me that sometimes when she is fixing a sculpture, it makes her want to change how it was put together originally, but of course that's very challenging because her pieces are like puzzles where every item fits into the others. In fact, when she is designing these sculptures in her studio and she changes her mind about a component of the sculpture, she might have to untie a whole bunch of other pieces so she can access the piece that she wants to remove. She says that in her work, removing items is just as important as adding items.

Sayaka has done many exhibits in botanic gardens, which really suits her work because they are wildlife. The sculptures look like they could be in a jungle or a coral reef. In recent years, many of her newer sculptures are whales and other sea life because people really like exhibits with an underwater theme. When I asked her what types of plastics she is most excited to find when she is searching for materials in thrift store, she said it was any piece that was translucent blue because those work really well for marine mammals. She also loves plates designed to serve devilled eggs. They have a scalloped edge and the eggs sit in a circle around a central bowl. These devilled egg platters are the perfect shape for her jellyfish sculptures.

One of my favorite parts of talking with Sayaka was when we compared notes about working with plastic when making art. I don't know that many other artists who drill and cut plastic as much as I do, so it was lovely to find someone else who might understand the joy of finding a purple plastic cap. When you work with a lot of plastic when making art, you learn how it has many quirks. You learn just by picking up a certain item whether that item is likely going to work in the sculpture you want to make. You know which pieces are likely to split if you drill them. Sayaka said there is even a type of kitchenware that looks like plastic but it actually has a core that is something else and you can't drill it at all. She has learned that the plastic color that fades the fastest is red, and that she really only wants plasticware that is curvi-linear and somewhat flexible so she can work them into the body shapes of her animals.

We also talked about the challenges of storing materials when you work with recycled plastic. She stores her materials in about 40 bins sorted by color. For a few projects, there has been a community engagement element where people bring in plastics, but often you get a lot of plastic you can't use because there is so much variability with plastic.

There is also an interesting challenge with plastic as you make larger pieces. So Sayaka describes her work as 3-D Impressionism. She sees each piece of plastic as a brush stroke. When she is making a whale that is 4 feet long, she needs plasticware of a certain size. But when she makes a whale that is 16 feet long, she needs to find plasticware that is bigger. The brush strokes need to make sense depending on the finished piece. So scaling up her work means she needs to collect different types of materials, which means more storage space. And you really need to collect twice as much plastic as you need because as I said, it's like a puzzle, and you have no idea which pieces will make the final cut.

Originally, my hope was just to see Sayaka's exhibit and meet her. But then the next day, she was participating in an event called the Charm City Night Market, which is a festival in downtown Baltimore which featured performances, delicious food and a whole section of visual artists demonstrating their work. She asked if I could come help teach people how to make earrings, necklaces and bracelets from plastic cutlery. So that's what we did.

So here's how people made the jewelry. They would pick out spoons, forks or knives and then cut them with snips to a shape that they liked. They would file down rough edges on a metal file. They would tell us where they wanted us to drill a hole. Finally we helped them attach eyelets and earring components. The results were surprisingly beautiful and professional looking.

I asked Sayaka about her experiences teaching others how to make 3-D sculptures from plasticware. She had taught a general 3-D sculpture class which was not specifically about plasticware and she does love teaching. However, she said it takes a specific kind of student to want to work with plasticware. Since it takes so long to clean and sort, the student would need to already love that part of the process. She joked that she often finds she has spent three hours sorting or snipping plasticware and the time has flown by but there is not a lot to show for it. So the ideal student would love cleaning, sorting and preparing the materials, and they would also like the slow process of building a puzzle where the pieces fit together only based on intuition.

Sayaka and I bring a similar spirit to this work of creative reuse. Like me, she believes that we will motivate people to make a change in their consumption habits by staying positive. She said that change is like a marathon and the only way that people are going to last through the marathon is if they are inspired.

Thank you!

Thank you for listening! I hope you are inspired by Sayaka's story. If you live near Baltimore, Maryland, her exhibit is at the Asian Art and Culture Center at Towson University until December 8, 2019

<https://sayakaganz.com/2019/09/reclaimedcreationstowson-md/>. It's free to visit. Until next time – may you see plasticware as a source of art in your life!