



Trashmagination Podcast #99 – Robot Sculptures from Recycled Materials

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown. Today's episode is about robot sculptures made from recycled materials. Many artists take bits of wood or metal tins, add facial features, arms and legs to make robots. I would consider it a type of global creative reuse folk art.

In today's episode, I'll share my favorite robot sculpture artists. Also at the end I'll share some simpler robot-themed creative reuse activities that you can do even if you don't have a garage full of metal parts to make your own robot sculptures. You can see images of the artwork on my Pinterest board called Recycled Monsters and Robots - <https://www.pinterest.com/trashmagination/recycled-monsters-and-robots/>.

Robot Aesthetics and Creative Reuse

Robot sculptures from recycled materials are a great mash-up of two very different aesthetics – the streamlined industrial aesthetic from the thirties, forties and fifties, combined with the wabi sabi vintage aesthetic of folk art. We also see this mash-up in steam-punk artwork and costumes.

If you look at the character Wall-E from the Pixar film, he captures a lot of the aesthetics of these robots sculptures. His body is a cube, his limbs look like they are made from random hinges, and his eyes look like camera parts. He is still functioning when many other similar robots gave out because he surpassed his programming and replaced his broken parts from broken robots or items he found while doing his job of crushing trash. Andrew Stanton directed the movie Wall-E and talked about how this juxtaposition of old and new is central to the movie [<https://ew.com/movies/2018/06/27/wall-e-anniversary-andrew-stanton-hello-dolly/>]. He says, "I had always wanted to open with something old-fashioned compared to this apocalyptic, futuristic setting." And that's why in the movie, Wall-E loves watching the video about old French swing music.

Since a lot of creative reuse robot sculptures are inspired by industrial design in the thirties, forties and fifties, they often incorporate materials produced during that time. For example, the bodies tend to be made from objects such as:

- Boxes or containers made from tin or wood, such as tin food packaging – if it has the branding on it still, with the old-timey fonts and messages, that's really good – it could be food packaging or lunchboxes, or machine parts
- Radios and other items with dials and switches
- Bakelite dishes
- Large metal fire alarms

Their heads tend to be made from objects that have a fun shape, such as metal cookware such as funnels, colanders, pails, cake pans and citrus fruit juicers.

Their faces and eyes tend to be made from things that are shaped like eyes and that might contain glass, such as:

- Viewfinders
- Opera glasses and binoculars
- Cameras
- Glass bulbs, headlights and lamps

Even if they do not incorporate glass, almost all robot sculptures use round items like washers or caps for the eyes.

Their hair, limbs and other fun details tend to be made from small fun objects such as:

- Car parts such as hub caps or hood ornaments
- Cooking utensils like egg beaters, graters and silverware
- Watch components
- Antennae
- Farm tools
- License plates
- Old metal toys
- Scrabble and other game pieces
- Small wheels
- Paintbrushes
- Old rulers that fold up
- Any tiny tin boxes – do you remember when aspirin used to come in tiny tins that snapped shut?

When we look at objects, something in our brains causes us to see if we can find facial features. It could be an electrical outlet or a pattern in a floor tile, but something about that formation is satisfying to people. So many of the robot sculptures build upon that human tendency.

So now let's talk about the artists. Something I observed when researching these artists is that they are often passionate about a topic such as cryptids, steampunk or science fiction, and that passion will greatly influence the type of robots that they make. So if you are thinking about making robots, you might think about what topic you find exciting, and that can give you a starting point for the personality for your robots.

Mark May

Mark May lives in Pennsylvania. He makes sculptures of robots as well as cryptids or paranormal creatures such as Big Foot or the Yeti. In an interview from January 2020, Mark shares the story behind many of his sculptures which are based on many folk legends from across the United States. There are so many legends from each area so his sculptures are not only fun to view but they are also a way of exploring folk history.

- Instagram - <https://www.instagram.com/markmayrobots/>
- Etsy - <https://www.etsy.com/shop/MarkMayRobots>
- Interview by The Occult Collector - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ift3aGvWT0g>

Gordon Bennett

Gordon Bennett lives in New York and his website is called Bennett Robot Works [<http://www.bennettrobotworks.com/>]. His passion is industrial design from the thirties, forties and fifties. His robots often have only a suggestion of a face. Each of his robots gets a numbered metal tag to show they are one-of-a-kind, but it also looks like the type of tag that you would see on an appliance.

- Interview - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_UamvbAjrRc

Anthony Pack

Anthony Pack lives in Kansas. He incorporates a lot of wood scraps in his sculptures, combining painted wood with assembled objects. His signature style includes big round eyes, and a rectangle red mouth with many pointy white teeth made from wood. He sometimes puts words on the sculptures made from Scrabble tiles or other sources.

- <http://www.anthonypack.com/>
- <https://youtu.be/hPStNvWy-UY>
- <https://www.instagram.com/antpack261/>

Robin Davis

Robin is our only robot artist who is a woman and my first Canadian artist. She lives in Ontario. Robin makes Minibots or pocket-sized robots. They are adorable! She poses them in situations around her studio and outside and takes photos. Here are some common design elements of her Minibots:

- their eyes are made from hexagon bolts
 - they have an eye screw sticking out of their heads
 - their ears are two small screws sticking out
 - their mouths are made from small metal chain
 - their chests are often decorated with zipper pulls
 - their arms and legs are made from strips of leather which makes them very posable
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- <https://www.robindavisstudio.com/>
 - <https://www.instagram.com/robindavisstudio/>
 - <https://youtu.be/wml7RaFvdu8>
 - <https://www.etsy.com/shop/RobinDavisStudio>

Alexi Devilliers

Alexi Devilliers [deh-VILL-ee-ers] lives in Arizona and he makes robot sculptures from metal cans. He then sells the sculptures and uses the proceeds to buy more food, which he then feeds to elderly homeless people in Phoenix. Alexi has such tremendous energy. He was raised by a single mom who was good at stretching her food budget. Later he started working as a cook in the military, and learned how to cook in quantity. This is such an incredible story of how creative reuse can have a big impact in the community.

- <http://alexidevilliers.com/>
- <https://www.instagram.com/alexi.devilliers/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQQwTzQL8sM>

Nemo Gould

Nemo Gould lives in California. Many of his sculptures do something that the previous do not, which is that they move. This is called kinetic sculpture. Most robot sculptors attach components together by screws and bolts, Nemo welds the recycled pieces together. On his website you can see photos of his elaborate organizational system where he keeps track of the items that he uses. He calls himself the Chairman of the Hoard, which speaks to one of the challenges of making sculptures from found objects. He says, "To all you fellow hoarders out there: If you don't know what's buried under that pile of crap in the corner, then it's just garbage." That is an excellent point and the key to being a productive creative reuse artist.

Nemo has a robust Youtube channel with more than 200 videos showing his sculptures in motion -

<https://www.youtube.com/user/nemomatic>.

- <https://www.instagram.com/nemomatic/>
- <https://nemogould.com/>
- Animated Short - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg-yKfEs_HI
- Artist Profile - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MlzuKzJdsoo>
- At Maker Faire - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_53BZHv1Is

Todd Sloane

Todd Sloane lives in Alberta and his robot sculptures are a mixture of found metal components and other pieces that are closer to dolls. For example the body or the head of his robot might look like it came from a doll, which makes his pieces look more realistically human and I think creepy. He also creates clothing for many of his sculptures. He is draws robots that look like fashion models called Voguebots.

- <https://sloaneconcepts.com/gallery#sculptures>
- <https://www.instagram.com/sloaneconcepts/>

Make Your Own Robots from Recycled Materials

If you are inspired to make your own robots from recycled materials, consider these recycled robot sculptures as an option to use up lots of bits and bobs around your home, while exploring a new art form.

- 1) **Simple Wooden Robots** - You can start by gathering scraps of wood, painting them in bright colors, and adding round washers or screws for eyes, arms and legs. Add a few letters from an old computer keyboard. Add metal caps such as bottle caps, or small metal boxes like Altoid tins.
- 2) **Scribble Bot or Art Bot** – You can make a simple robot that scribbles on paper. You take a piece of pool noodle. You take an engine out of something like an electric toothbrush, and then you put it in the center of the noodle so it shakes. You then attach markers to the side with elastic bands. Put it on a large piece of paper or cardboard and it draws [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AfxC26Ba28>]. If you want to keep the Scribble Bots on the paper and not drawing on your floor or table, you might want to use it inside a pizza box with sides.
- 3) **Capulet** – For our next activity idea, I did this robot creative reuse activity at the KIDFest in 2017 [<https://trashmagination.com/26-maker-faires-and-community-events/>]. I designed a little plastic cap robot from four gray plastic caps. I drilled the caps with my drill press and then I would connect the caps together with string made from a recycled t-shirt. Each robot was made from four caps. I made enough for 500 robots, so that means I drilled 2,000 plastic caps! I called my little robot “Capulet.” You can see instructions for how to make your own Capulet robot in the show notes.
- 4) **Take-Apart Event** - In episode 24, I talked about how to organize a take-apart event for your family or community. Most take-apart events are dis-assembling modern appliances so they might not have the right aesthetic that matches the artists I’m talking about today. But you definitely could have a combo event where you take items apart and then build robots if you supplement the electronic parts with metal packaging that you save separately.
- 5) **Robot-themed Art Curriculum** – I recommend Cassie Stephens lesson plans from March 2020 when she did Robot Week [<https://cassiestephens.blogspot.com/2020/03/robot-week-home-based-art-making.html>]. She provides Idea Sheets for how to draw robots. She makes robot crayon rubbings from cereal boxes. She shows how you can color on aluminum foil with markers and then make a print from it.

Also, I want to tell you about a place that I visited when I was in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It was called the Liberty Street Robot Supply and Repair [<https://onwardrobots.com/>]. This store is one of a series of similar stores across the United States where in the front, there is a store selling humorous items, and in the back there is a non-profit that tutors kids. The store funds the work at the school. I just love this business model. To learn about all the stores in this network, visit 826national.org which gives info about these imaginative stores that are also tutoring centers.

Thank you!

Thank you for listening! If you enjoyed this episode, you might enjoy episode 37 about making monsters from recycled materials. In that episode, I share how I helped a middle school class explore the book Frankenstein through creative reuse sculpture. Please let me know about your favorite robot sculpture artists at trashmagination@gmail.com. Until next time, may you see trash as a source of art in your life!