

# Artists and environmentalists seek creative ways to keep plastics out of landfills

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In high school, Jordan Parker wrote a paper on plastic pollution titled: "Is our country doomed to be buried beneath its own garbage?" Decades later, that question continues to galvanize Parker.

In 2017 Parker founded the Triveni Institute, an environmental nonprofit that recently hosted a fashion show in which local designers created looks and outfits exclusively using [single-use plastic](#), thrifted clothes and "found objects."

"The intention of these designs is to create beautiful art out of plastic pollution and help people lean into this issue in a way that doesn't seem so scary," they said. "So it's not about, 'Look at all these amazing things that we can create with this plastic waste!' That's not the message. The message is: We are drowning in single-use plastic pollution, and we have to turn the spigot off. There's no way we can recycle our way out of this. There's no way we can create our way out of this."

Between 150 million and 190 million tons of single-use plastic products were produced globally in 2021, according to international research. That number is expected to triple by 2060, with half ending up in landfills.

"I've been involved in this work for a long time," Parker said. "It is depressing, and it's so easy to fall into deep grief."

But Parker and other Chicago-area environmentalists and artists refuse to give up.

"Trash is just a failure of imagination," said Barbara Koenen, founder and executive director of the nonprofit Creative Chicago Reuse Exchange, which redistributes surplus donations of materials, supplies and equipment to local teachers, artists and [community groups](#).

A group of volunteers spent a Saturday morning at the organization's headquarters in an Auburn Gresham warehouse, making hundreds of notebooks from old spirals and composition books that the nonprofit will give to young Chicago authors in an upcoming festival.

Almost 20 miles from the city, a lifelong Elmhurst resident gives old items a second life and a new purpose through her art, which she creates in her basement studio. Though Donna Castellanos works with just about any materials, lately she keeps coming back to outdated encyclopedias and leather-bound books sourced from estate sales.

Their end goals might be somewhat different: to beautify the world, offer resources to others or create a space to share an urgent message. But they also share the desire to find new approaches to the overabundance of objects humans are quick to discard.

"We need complex thinkers, we need people who are going to nurture a deep sense of empathy for themselves and others and all the creatures that we're sharing this planet with," Parker said

## **'Rescuer of once-loved things'**

Castellanos calls herself a "rescuer of once-loved things," which she often finds at estate sales after owners have died, things they didn't want to get rid of until they had to.

"I've always felt like there's something there; they kept it for a reason," she said. "And I use it in a different way."

Her fascination with pre-owned objects began after she got married and took maternity leave, which gave her time to search garage and yard sales for furniture she could repaint and bring home. She started going to estate sales with a group of friends, armed with paper maps to find their destinations, \$40 and a truck.

She brought home all the bizarre items she came across.

"Things will sometimes sit for years, decades, before they tell me what

they want to be," she said.

Her home is brimming with artwork, all of which begs a closer look. The coat rack by the front door is made of carpenter rulers. Displayed on a wall in the dining area is a massive tree, its rugged trunk and branches made from ripped book pages.

Behind the living room couch hangs a triptych, gilded wood framing scenes that were assembled with vibrant leather from book covers and spines. Resembling a Christian altarpiece, it is a tribute to and portrayal of her mother: "Saint" Joan.

"She's embarrassed about it, but she helps everyone who needs the most help at the time," Castellanos whispered with a low chuckle, her muse in the next room.

She was inspired by the "Virgin and Child with Saints" painting in the Art Institute.

That project follows a portrait she made in 2020 of her grandmother Bertha, part of a traveling National Portrait Gallery exhibition. It was a finalist in the Smithsonian's 2022 triennial Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition, which selected 42 out of more than 2,700 entries from across the country.

For that portrait, she stitched zippers, pins, buttons, knitting needles and other sewing tools onto fabric, honoring her grandmother who in her youth installed zippers at a small-town factory in Missouri.

Castellanos now often finds herself on the receiving end of random gifts. When a neighbor who repaired stringed instruments died, his partner gave her a set of violins and a guitar which became part of two of her shows at the Elmhurst Museum and the Illinois State Museum.

When a friend bought a house that was filled floor to ceiling with pipe organ pieces, she transformed some the pieces he gave her into limbs and a torso for a sculpture called "organ donor" and cut out anatomical illustrations from old medicine textbooks.

Somewhere in her house, she also has a box full of cicada wings.

## **'Finding a new purpose'**

Inside the Creative Chicago Reuse Exchange warehouse, a few dozen University of Chicago students and other young volunteers sat at some tables making new composition notebooks.

"I feel like I'm on an assembly line. Also, that I was born for this," laughed Megan Parker, 29, who was there with her friend Rachel Durbin for their first experience with Volunteering Untapped, which matches Chicagoans with local organizations. "It feels nice. It's gratifying to create something that someone else is going to use."

Kathy Trumbull Fimreite, the organization's development director and a self-professed teaching artist, had walked them through the necessary steps and was looking over their work.

"We take in all sorts of surplus and redistribute it, but we also reimagine it," she said. "And that's something that's really, really fun to do because you're finding a new purpose for something that doesn't have life in its original purpose."

The warehouse is full of shelves upon shelves of objects. There's school and crafting supplies, electronics and fabrics. Then there are more unusual items such as quail eggshells and a World War II-era viewing device known as a stereoscope.

One volunteer said the place was as equipped as an apocalypse bunker, "in the best way."

The microscopes and lab instruments piqued Durbin's attention as a medical student at Rosalind Franklin University.

"That's so cool," the 31-year-old said. "Because that can be so expensive to buy yourself new. It'd be really nice to be able to find something like that in a place like this."

The nonprofit accepts donations of just about anything—as long as it's clean and safe. Local teachers, artists and community groups are welcome to source from their collections by heading to the exchange's website at [creativechirx.org](http://creativechirx.org) to make in-person appointments or shop at their online store.

According to Koenen, the exchange fills a vacuum for things thrift stores such as Goodwill and the Salvation Army won't or can't accept.

"All this stuff is great, and it would all be thrown away," she said. But as landfills fill up, she is concerned about what happens next. "The good news is, we do this, and it's fun and it's rewarding. And we're making a difference."

'Something that we don't talk about'

On a Saturday evening, the seventh floor of the Macy's on State Street became a runway.

Brimming with sequins, studs, bling and feathers, punctuated by a few top hats and even a cape and scepter, the hundreds of event attendees looked like they might be part of the show.

A closer inspection of the runway models, revealed their peculiar assemblages: from run-of-the-mill single-use bags to cigarette butts to a fishing net.

Designer Sophia Fargo of the brand Sisumoirra created a dress with plastic film and old cables, and another model showed off a skirt that artist Eileen Ryan had made entirely out of disposable coffee cup lids all collected from the lakefront.

In May, the Triveni Institute held its first fashion show featuring 36 local designers and 50 runway looks, most made from upcycled single-use plastic products. Parker called the outfits "plastic pollution couture."

"When we started to advertise for it, to call for designers and casting calls for models, all of these people came out of the woodwork who were really invested in the cause," they said. "They wanted to do something to address [plastic pollution](#) and our environmental crisis, using their creativity and their vision. And the end result was just stunning. The works of art that people created for the show were just incredible."

That first show was dubbed "Trashion Revolution," Parker said, to hammer on the need for a revolution in thinking "because clearly our leaders are not taking action." Building on its success, the opening segment of the institute's more recent Shadow Ball was an abridged version of the "trashion" line with 25 looks from 17 returning designers.

Phoebe Whalen of the brand Patched by Phoebe modeled their own creation, a Rococo-style dress, its lower half bouncing with red solo cups, the look's finishing touch a tall white wig made from plastic bags.

The last three looks, created by Luz Maria Díaz of LuDia Couture Designs, included a dress made of intertwined black plastic zip ties, a hooded, floor-length patchwork dress from upcycled denim and a dress

made of tightly woven plastic bags topped with a zip tie shawl—the latter won first prize at the May event.

The models reached the end and posed under a spotlight, in front of a trash can that had been purposely tipped over. Plastic takeout containers, coffee cups and bags—all single use—spilled from within.

The philosophy behind these events, Parker said, is to provide "fun and sexy environments" for people to feel relaxed and open to having difficult discussions that bring plastic and greenhouse gas pollution into broader societal conversations like race and economics.

People need to first resolve their personal issues, Parker said. Once they can do that then they can be open to healing environmental problems such as pollution and waste.

"Because our trash ... is something that we don't talk about. We just get rid of it," Parker said. "Everything goes to landfills.

"We push it away just like we do our own personal stuff," they said. "That inner pain eats us from within if you don't face it, and our pollution and our trash is eating at us because we're not facing that either."

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