

DOWN AND DIRTY

The Sustainable Art of Justin Gignac and Amy Nugent

by Meg Farmer

In a time when global warming and financial recession are at the forefront of world issues, two young artists from two different countries are finding new ways to reduce, reuse, and recycle.

Justin Gignac of Greenwich Village of NYC and Amy Nugent of Vancouver, Canada have created some pretty incredible and thought provoking objects out of items that are normally discarded. Simply put, we're talking about some pretty gross and creepy stuff: garbage and road kill.

Justin Gignac wants to thank you for littering New York City. He even made a t-shirt that says so. He collects the trash we throw away: Metro cards, scratch off lottery tickets, empty cans, broken beer bottles, food wrappers, and coffee cups to name a few. He thoughtfully arranges these dry objects into a three-and-a-half inch Lucite cube, which is sealed for an air tight, odorless package of New York City garbage. The cube is simply labeled with "Garbage of New York City" in Helvetica font. He then signs and numbers the cubes because after all, they are limited edition. For 50 bucks, you can get a little piece of New York City's landscape!

No doubt Gignac has a sense of humor. The idea to sell garbage came to him in 2000 during a summer design internship at MTV.

"We were having a discussion about the importance of package design. One of my coworkers claimed package design wasn't important and I thought that was ridiculous," recalls Gignac. "I figured the only way to prove them wrong would be to package something that absolutely nobody would ever want to buy. If I could convince someone to buy it, I'd know my package design was successful. So I stared down into Times Square for a few minutes and it hit me: Garbage!"

A former advertising major at the School of Visual Arts, Gignac gave himself a tough challenge. And, as absurd as the idea is, it's totally working!

To date, he has sold more than 1,200 cubes to people in over 45 states and 25 countries. Whether it's tourists buying the cubes as souvenirs, or locals sending them off to friends and family, the cubes have a different appeal for everyone.

"Some purely see the humor in it. Some appreciate the balls of the idea. Others want a memento of the city they love. Some love the commentary on consumerism," notes Gignac. "As much as New York City's



garbage is an eyesore it's also a living part of our landscape and our culture."

In any case, the cubes give us the satisfaction we crave, which is an "I was here" mentality - a phenomena in itself.

Anyone skeptical of his venture is met with great salesmanship. Gignac recalls people asking reasonable questions like "Why in the hell would I want to buy garbage?" To this he answers, "I touch it so you don't have to!" Very sharp, Mr. Gignac, very sharp indeed. We appreciate your determination and the solid faith you have in your product.

For Gignac, each piece of garbage tells a story. He carefully considers the compositions of each cube, finding interesting combinations of formal elements like texture, colour and shape. All are aesthetically pleasing and visually strong.

"If someone is spending \$50 on trash I don't want them to feel like they got ripped off," says Gignac. He also notes that when there's an opportunity for storytelling, he takes advantage of it.

"In a cube I made yesterday I placed a full pack of cigarettes upside down so they spilled out. On top of the cigarette box I put a matchbook that had no matches left, a sort of tragedy for smokers. In another cube I combined religious flyers with a condom wrapper."

One of Gignac's newer ideas is building special edition garbage cubes from important events. When Yankee Stadium closed, you better believe he was there to collect the trash from the last game. Cubes like these are a bit more sentimental and collectable, and give people the opportunity to collect a little piece of history.

Gignac's clear cubes of garbage are like little futuristic time capsules we can peer into. As useless as the objects inside them might seem, the cube remains a little theatre of items elevated from the real world, and sealed off from ordinary space.

Art hasn't always lent itself to the use of such unusual materials like trash. In the past, it's been a simple story of oil paints, marble, pencil, charcoal, ink, watercolour and photography. Now there are endless mediums being used: animals, video, furniture, trash, humans, blood, and even food.

For better or worse, some artists have taken risks and given permissions that expand the criteria for what art can be. One of the masters of pushing the envelope in art is Robert Rauschenberg. Like Gignac, Rauschenberg found himself living in a landscape of the junk-filled streets of New York City. He often would limit himself to walking within one block to find his materials. If he couldn't find what he needed in that block, he knew he wasn't looking hard enough. He claimed once that his art "had to look at least as interesting as anything going on outside the window." There is a level of observation that I think Rauschenberg shares with younger artists like Justin Gignac and Amy Nugent. It's a celebration of transforming the life of a disposed object into something more important.

Amy Nugent works consciously to recycle material that would otherwise be waste. Rather than garbage, Nugent gets down with road kill and turns it into artful jewelry. As a daily commuter in Ontario, she began to notice that there was a huge amount of porcupines, notorious for their poor eyesight, killed on the road. So she pulled over, and using simple tools like gardening gloves, pliers, and plastic containers, she collected the quills from their ill-fated owners.

Nugent's approach to what seems like a creepy process is actually quite sensitive and traditional. She explains that she moves the porcupine to the tree line on the side of the highway, and harvests the quills there. Nugent describes her process poetically, "From finding the porcupine to cleaning the quills to making something of it, I feel a sense of resurrection, extracting and transforming remains to new creative states."

Porcupine quilling has a deep-rooted tradition among Plains and East Coast Natives. It has been a decorative art form for them, and Nugent has embraced this tradition in creating her stunning bracelets.

She uses the same ancient techniques as the Native Americans, by softening and dyeing the stiff quills. Boiling them to soften them and then dyeing them with various methods, such as herbs, vegetables, berries, and leather dye.

The result is a collection of bead-like quills, all with unique details and colour striping. Nugent weaves the quills with silver or gold details to create gorgeous cuffs that look futuristic and well crafted. It's as if she was caught up in the violent highways of a Mad Max film and escaped with a brilliant idea to breathe new life into that which was lost. Her cuffs have a soulful feel and unbridled beauty.

Humorous or poetic, being green is where it's at for Gignac and Nugent. Both artists recover items that have been tossed, lost, or met their end in some way. In doing so, what they create is a sort of redemption. They are not afraid to get their hands dirty and they do not discriminate between what is useful trash and what is not. Whether it seems gross or creepy, Gignac and Nugent are rescuing the environment one Metro card, or one porcupine quill at a time.

Justin Gignac's "Garbage of New York City" cubes and "Thank you for Littering" t-shirts can be purchased through his website:

www.nycgarbage.com

He is also currently working on two other inspiring projects:

"Wants For Sale" www.wantsforsale.com

"Needs For Sale" www.needsforsale.com

Amy Nugent's roadquill cuffs can be purchased through her website:

www.roadquill.ca

