

aglow: aurora robson

May 20 - August 27, 2019

The Schuylkill Center's summer exhibition, *Aglow*, features artworks by Aurora Robson made from industrial plastic debris illuminated by LED lights. Along with the immersive installation in our environmental art gallery, Robson presents three outdoor sculptures around the Visitor Center.

Intercepting her materials from the waste stream, Robson transforms discarded plastic into mesmerizing, bold sculptures that disguise and transcend their material. Drawing attention to the global challenge of single-use waste, Robson seeks to imbue these often overlooked materials with care and intention, encouraging a viewer to consider their own relationship with waste and the waterways where it so often is discarded.

"People are so confused about plastic," says Robson. "They think of it as disposable when it is precisely the opposite." Plastic's resistance to weathering and decay means it can last hundreds to thousands of years in the environment. This quality, combined with the extreme volume of our current consumption and disposal of plastic, makes it a nightmare for the planet, but at the same time, an untapped resource for artists. Along with other valuable qualities for sculpture like translucence and pliability, it is durable and almost automatically archival – an art conservator's dream material.

Robson is a leading voice advocating for artists to be more conscious of the environmental footprint left by their art making. Her work is close to carbon neutral, made almost entirely from discarded or difficult-to-recycle materials. She also offers courses and workshops on the best practices in low-impact artwork, as well as leads stream clean up efforts to source materials for sculpture out of local waterways and shorelines.

Many of the works in *Aglow* are made from decommissioned highway safety drums and industrial detergent barrels, which are almost always sent to a landfill after their use. Though the warm-toned organic shapes are abstract, for many they call to mind creatures of the ocean, some of the most impacted organisms of the plastic crisis.

Recently, plastic has become the object of much media attention. Statistics like “8 million tons of plastics enter the ocean each year” or “240,000 plastic bags are used globally every ten seconds” or “only 10% of all plastics ever produced have been recycled to date” feel utterly overwhelming, and it can feel difficult to know what to do with or about this information. What if there was a different way to think about plastic – through beauty, and through celebrating rather than lamenting its durability? If we saw this material as precious and valuable, rather than disposable, would we reduce how much plastic we are using and throwing away?

Robson’s work presents a way of looking at plastic that goes beyond simply recycling more. It is activist work, in that it is an active response to a global challenge which activates our imaginations around creative solutions. The work in *Aglow* quite literally illuminates and alerts, but also plays its part to stem the tide of plastic waste streaming into the environment where it will remain for centuries; threatening our health, choking ecosystems, contributing to climate change, and marking our human presence in the geologic record.

This exhibition is supported by the Joseph Robert Foundation.