



aglow:
aurora robson

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Curated by Christina Catanese

The Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education
Catalog edited by Liz Jelsomine



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foreword

By Christina Catanese, Director of Environmental Art
The Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education

The Schuylkill Center's 2019 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 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.

about the artist

Aurora Robson is a multi-media artist known predominantly for her work intercepting the plastic waste stream. Her practice is about subjugating negativity and shifting trajectories. Her work formally references recurring nightmares she had as a child. Robson was born in Toronto in 1972 and grew up in Hawaii. She lived and worked for over 2 decades in New York City until recently moving to the Hudson Valley. Robson holds a double major (B.A.) in visual arts and art history from Columbia University.

Robson's work has been featured in *Sculpture Magazine*, *Art in America*, *WIRED*, *Art & Antiques*, the cover of *Green Building + Design* and other publications. She is a recipient of the Pollock Krasner Grant, a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship in Sculpture, a TED/Lincoln Re-Imagine Prize and a National Endowment for the Arts Art Work Grant.



Aurora Robson with *Troika* installed at the Schuylkill Center

She has exhibited her work internationally in museums, galleries and non-traditional spaces. Robson is also the founding artist of Project Vortex, an international collective of artists, designers and architects who also work with plastic debris. She has been focusing on the development of a college course called "Sculpture + Intercepting the Waste Stream" designed to foster creative stewardship through academia. Her goal with the course is to encourage shifting of paradigms in art and science education while helping restrict the flow of plastic debris to our oceans. For more information see her TEDx talk entitled *Trash + Love*.



Aurora Robson's *Aglow* installed at the Schuylkill Center



Aurora Robson's *Aglow* installed at the Schuylkill Center



Aurora Robson's *Aglow* at the Schuylkill Center

a conversation with Aurora Robson & Aglow curator, Christina Catanese

Christina Catanese (CC): So, start at the beginning, Aurora: at what point during your artistic career did you start working with plastic? And what motivated you to do that?

Aurora Robson (AR): Oh, the plastic? Yes, I guess it was pretty early on. I studied sculpture and photography in college and I think it didn't take me very long after graduating from college to realize that I would likely become a burden on society if I didn't do art. You know what I mean? I think I had just recently read Joseph Campbell and I was convinced that I needed to follow my bliss – otherwise I would run the risk of not being a valuable member of society who can contribute in some way, or I might find myself prone to depression or something like that. And I think that's a very common artist disposition. Artists are typically very sensitive, and in a way that is our biggest asset. If we're very sensitive, we're better at doing our work, whether it's charcoal on paper or dance – any type of art form really requires sensitivity in order to excel at it. So I knew that if I didn't do art, I had zero chance at bliss. Meanwhile, I had amassed a huge amount of student loan debt and I was working full time at Viacom, which is basically the umbrella company for MTV and VH1. It was a very lucrative position. Working there I would fly all over the planet installing elaborate sets that would be used for just a matter of hours, for human and cartoon celebrities, like SpongeBob Squarepants.



Aurora Robson speaking at *Aglow's* reception at the Schuylkill Center



Visitors listen to Aurora Robson speak about *Aglow* at the Schuylkill Center

All these things I would make for people to perform on for like an hour and then they would all be thrown in the garbage.

CC: Oh my God.

AR: Yeah. And it was terrible, but great because I developed a lot of experience in thinking things through in terms of how to create large scale things, scaling things, transporting things, and considering logistics and all that. A lot of artists I don't think get that experience. They don't teach us how to use a scale ruler or do scale drawings or create scale models in art school. Typically that's more done in architectural applications, not so much fine arts – but how can you plan an exhibition if you don't know how many paintings you need to put on the walls or what the sculpture will feel like in a space and if it will fit through the door? Anyway, long story short, I had this job and everybody was like, "Yay, you're set, we don't have to worry about Aurora. She's got this great job. She's getting goody bags from Kiehl's and Puma with MTV logos on them." And meanwhile I was just becoming more and more miserable. I was like, I'm working for the wrong team. It just felt like complete subterfuge. I felt so dirty. I decided I needed to do something about it. So, I arranged to get myself fired, so that I could collect unemployment for six months and focus on my art work exclusively.

CC: [laughing]



Aglow installed at the Schuylkill Center

AR: And it was during that period, I created a website, I started making paintings and works on paper. It was all just this really quiet meditative practice where I was going back to these childhood nightmares that I had, recurring nightmares that were what most people would consider abstract. But in my mind they were landscapes in which I was trapped, in this knotted, curvilinear complex of web-vessel type knots that just continued forever in every direction. It was mostly dark, umbers, and rusty mineral reds. It felt like I was a cell trapped inside of a body or something. Anyway, I thought, I'm going to see if I can make a viable practice of painting and illustrating those nightmares just for myself, in such a way where I play with the color

and composition but maintain the structural integrity of the nightmares. And I thought that was all I wanted to do as a quiet, meditative, personal practice. Then I ran into a sculpture professor from college at a thrift store in Brooklyn.

CC: [laughs] As one does.

AR: [laughs] Yeah, and I was super excited to tell him about it. I was like, "hey guess what? I quit! I got myself fired so I can reduce my overhead and focus on my art for six months straight and I'm trying to make a go of it." And he was like, "well, that's great. What are you making?" And I told him I was making works on paper and paintings and he looked at me and said, "but Aurora, you're a sculptor." [laughs] And I was like, why did you have to remind me of that? It's not an easy road to be a sculptor! Our society isn't set up to support contemporary practice. Also, a lot of people have mixed feelings about what they perceive artists to be doing with their time. Most people seem to think that we're all from affluent families or have trust funds or institutional support of some kind. I've even had relatives ask me, "do you ever sell your work?" It's so mysterious to most people that artists are active members of society that aren't just schmoozing and partying on private yachts or something. Anyway, there's a lot wrapped up into the

whole making it a real thing that I was doing. And it was like literally, I think, the day before I saw a giant pile of plastic garbage bottles outside my window while I was painting. I was making these paintings for a group show in Italy, which was really exciting, just to be sending my work to Italy. But there's this thing that you see happen in movies where they take a mirror and they catch light with it as an SOS signal or something – it's a real thing that happened to me with the bottles. I was painting and kept getting distracted by the glare of the sun hitting the bottles outside my window.

CC: Oh, interesting!

AR: It was back when Williamsburg, Brooklyn was really sort of desolate. They found bodies from the Brooklyn Strangler in the dumpster outside of my building.

CC: Oh God.

AR: It was dangerous and very dirty then. Anyway, from that experience I became enchanted. Like, wow, look at the shapes of those bottles – they're similar to what I'm exploring in these paintings! It's all curvilinear and sort of jumbled together with forms emerging out of other forms suggestively. Diaphanous, kind of see-through, blobby, shapeshifting.



Aglow installed at the Schuylkill Center



Aurora Robson processing plastic for use in artwork. Images courtesy of the artist



Aglow installed at the Schuylkill Center



Trioka installed at the Schuylkill Center

And that is when I started thinking about how the bottles themselves are shapeshifting and people probably aren't paying that much attention to them. A Poland Spring bottle of water from today is different from that bottle from five years ago. It is a different shape, has different structural integrity, and a different chemical composition. So it's this morphing material. And suddenly, I noticed nobody was using it for art applications. My art education included going to all the galleries and museums in New York quite regularly, so I would have known if there were any exhibitions featuring this kind of work. It just suddenly dawned on me, all these contemporary artists in the late nineties and early two thousands are working with everyday materials. They're using pencils, they're using toothpaste, they're making soap and chocolate sculptures. Plastic trash seemed like fair game.

It doesn't matter what the matter is. I also thought, this is material that we're all taking for granted. It's free. It's everywhere. I think it was a few years before I had set up a welding shop in the meatpacking district in Manhattan. Because I studied welding prior to college at a vocational technical school. I wanted to learn how to weld so I could do structural things. I thought that maybe that was going to be complementary to my sculpture practice; that could be how I paid my bills to make sculpture. Long story short, I discovered I had an extra vertebra and I'm not really designed to do heavy lifting of any kind. So I don't do that anymore.



Ding Dang installed at the Schuylkill Center

But the plastic was just there and I was like, gosh, it's lightweight and it does everything we want it to do as a material. It's got plasticity built into it, which is a term people use for sculpture all the time – they want materials that have plasticity, and by that they mean it will bend to your whim. Whatever your idea is, plastic can pretty much do it because it's so mutable. And that's exactly why it's such a problem for the environment. So why not explore that and use it for an application where it won't do any harm, instead try to elevate it? So that was how it started – it's been increasingly present in terms of the landscape, the world, and also therefore in my practice.

CC: That's so interesting. Your work feels like it has an activist sort of message to



Ding Dang installed at the Schuylkill Center

me because you talk a lot about the ecological impact of the work, and that by intercepting the waste stream, it's sort of like lower impact artwork. But it's interesting that you came to it through the materiality of it versus coming to it with a goal of environmental activism.

AR: Yeah, I had no idea. I think my first sculpture made out of plastic trash was spray painted and hot glued together [laughs]. And I think that's what most people do. Later I was like, "this spray paint is really toxic, I don't want to die!" Originally I was just thinking about myself and my own interest in expressing myself as an artist, but it really made me a better human to learn about the material. Because after a year or so it started to really unveil, layer after layer. And the more I learned about the implications – the way this material is impacting our environment and not just water creatures who don't have a choice in the matter, but our own food chain – the more determined I became. Recently scientists in the Pyrenees mountains are finding horrifying amounts of microfiber plastic in the air that we're breathing in. It is everywhere.

CC: Good lord.

AR: So yeah, it's pretty much our most valuable natural resources being adversely affected by this material. Even if it's just a matter of turning it into a sculpture for as long as we're alive, that's better. So, I have my own practice with the work and trying to create a zero-waste situation. It seems to me that we're at this point in history when more and more people are waking up to plastic pollution footprints.



Ding Dang installed at the Schuylkill Center

“I think people are most receptive to beneficial influences when we are in natural settings. A dialogue about a topic like plastic pollution can be depressing and make us feel powerless, but with sunlight and trees, it is easier to see how we can all be active agents of positive change in our world.”

—Aurora Robson



Aurora Robson speaking at Aglow's reception at the Schuylkill Center



Trioka installed at the Schuylkill Center

I just don't understand why it's taking such a long time for academic institutions to adopt a sustainable curriculum that focuses on this issue. I realize that academia tends to be a bureaucratic behemoth and is slow moving, but what I don't understand is why more artists aren't engaging in this type of practice. Artists are visionaries who are using our visionary skills, creating something out of nothing, taking a slab of marble and turning it into a bust. Whatever it is, it doesn't matter what the material is. So I'm sort of trying to just develop techniques that are adaptable by as many creative people for as many different practices as possible; to create a framework to make it easy for creatives to do what's good for them and for all the other creatures, in the classroom and in the studio.

CC: Yeah, totally. I think when you first started to say that you realized you were going to be a burden on society, I thought what you were going to say was that it was because of the environmental footprint of your artwork.

AR: [laughs] Nope.

CC: [laughs] Yeah, you went in a very different direction. But I do think it's something that isn't talked about enough, the environmental footprint of art itself. I think sometimes, because I'm working with almost exclusively artists who are engaging with environmental topics on some level, that there's sort of this excuse-making for the environmental footprint of the work because it is trying to shed light on an environmental topic. And that's tricky for me.

AR: Yeah, I understand exactly what you're talking about, and I feel like it's not their fault though. Like in academic settings you don't find plastic debris welding as an option. You find metal and you find wood, which are expensive and environmentally costly approaches. Whereas if plastic debris working were taught in academia, more artists would know how to do it and they would likely embrace it as part of their practices. I think a lot about all the trappings of being an artist – for example, when I have to make crates for these objects made out of plastic garbage so they can travel safely from here to a museum. It feels a bit gross, you know? And I think, how can this make sense? For example, I'm leaving on Monday for Beijing to install a bunch of plastic garbage that I've configured into an installation – it's been crated and shipped to Beijing and now I am going to fly there. The footprint of the whole engagement is very hard to wrap my head around when you're trying to have an environmentally sustainable practice. The way I've been thinking about it with my own work is that the work itself is made out of a material that we're intrinsically confused about. Everybody thinks of plastic as disposable when it's exactly the opposite. So if I can use my skills to help people see value or change their perception of value, so that it's less about the material and more about the craft, the idea, the message, the purpose in a way – then it's worth crating it because if I don't it'll get destroyed or damaged and then go into landfill. So what ideally happens is that the work ends up in a museum or collection or permanent public space, and an art work made of plastic debris that would have otherwise ended up in our waterways, or our air, or any other problematic place, is now safe. It's almost like a toxic time capsule that serves multiple purposes.



Trioka installed at the Schuylkill Center



Troika installed at the Schuylkill Center

But yeah, **there are many, many artists who are making work about the environment and talking about the environment without actually honoring the environment in the process.** And I have a big problem with that approach. We all need to relearn how to best live here now. We need more creative stewardship.

CC: I feel like some of the most press I've ever seen on environmentally engaged artwork was about Olafur Eliasson – the artist who brings icebergs from the arctic and puts them in cities, so people can see them melt. It's just like, okay, what had to happen to get that, how many people had to fly to Greenland and back, and how do you ship this thing and keep it cold? It's just so much. It does make this kind of sensational visual impact, but what was the cost of making that happen?

AR: [laughs] I believe the term is greenwashing.

CC: Yeah, [laughs] there's definitely that.

AR: I know, it's horrible. I know exactly what you're talking about. Here's the thing with art too, historically you have a very small proportion of society that have had the access, or time or luxury, to actually engage in art and art dialogue, right? So chances are that proportion of society typically is on the more affluent side. And commonly the more affluent you are, the more power you have to affect global change. I think we're all doing our best, most of the time. When people do things like that, I'm like, "oh no", and then I have to think to myself, "they're probably doing their best". There's probably always going to be a dark and a light to everything. It's the construct we're all in – on or off, day or night, positively charged or negatively charged. We all have to figure out how to navigate that every day. We're all very lucky and unlucky at the same time. But the fact that some people who have a lot of power and money are maybe thinking about icebergs melting more now, well that's great. Maybe they'll factor something about their footprint moving forward in a way that they wouldn't have before. Even if he gets one billionaire to think differently, to behave differently as a result, that's a huge success.

CC: Yeah, that would be great! I also just wanted to pull out something that you said that I think is so important about your work: that there's usually two different ways we think about plastic, right? We think about it as trash and disposable, or we think about it as this evil behemoth that's like going to destroy us all. Just this kind of terrible material. Either way, we don't have good feelings about plastic, and I just really appreciate that you are trying to really reframe that. That there's

things about plastic that you actually like, and that you're trying to make it into this precious and valuable material rather than something that's either terrible and should never have been invented, or a material that just doesn't matter and can be thrown away and repurchased at any time. **I think if we had more of a perspective of [plastic] as precious and valuable, maybe that would change how we are consuming it.**

AR: I really appreciate that. That's so nice to hear you say. I think it's this whole epidemic of carelessness, it's tied in with the velocity of the pace at which we're all living in these days. We're sort of accustomed to this instant gratification. You just swipe and your purchase is made. It's done. You like it, you don't like it, it's all so fast, right? It's not in tune with the cycles of nature. And I think that's part of why I find the practice of working with the plastic debris so satisfying; it forces me and everyone who works this material to slow down, because you can't achieve results unless you slow down. I mean, you first have to clean it. It's dirty. It's gross [laughing]. It's not fun, that part! But when you slow down to clean it, you start to have a tactile experience that a lot of people are missing in their lives. An article on the BBC, in which all these professors of surgery in London reported a huge decline in terms of med students with the manual dexterity to stitch people up and perform complex surgeries, because everybody's just swiping. Everybody's going faster and faster and nobody knows how to use their hands anymore. The turn away from craft-based arts education into the more analytical, theoretical, digital, ephemeral art practices (which are wonderful and I love them, art is and should be a vast landscape), but that loss of hand-eye coordination and manual dexterity is having all kinds of unanticipated negative impacts on our species. So I think craft and what it does in terms of our sense of appreciation and value, plus how we see more clearly and accurately if we slow down a little bit – is necessary and timely.

It's the same as if you're on a train and you're moving really quickly. Sure, you'll have a wonderful idea of what the landscape is like, but it will be deceiving. You look and it's beautiful and exciting, but it's so different if you actually get out of the train and you stand there and smell the grass and flowers, or you walk through the field and feel all the prickly bushes – then you get a sense of reality.

And what good art is, in my opinion, is a reflection of reality, but when somebody's actually, really, paying attention.

CC: I'd love to talk a little bit more specifically about the pieces that are in the show here. My impression from knowing your body of work is that the works here in the show are a newer direction for you. With these, you're using industrial plastic and incorporating light, whereas your earlier work with plastic was more often made of familiar consumer materials, like plastic bottles. So, is there anything you'd like to talk about with that shift in your work?

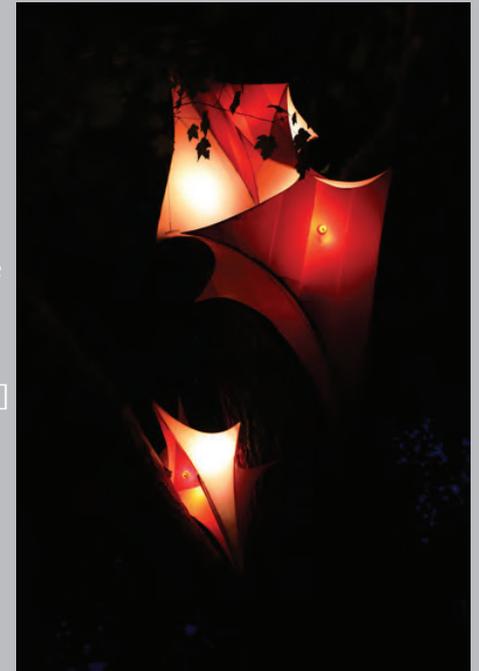
AR: Yeah. I'm not so sure that's a defined change in direction, but it does certainly mark a really exciting chapter. I feel so grateful that I get to do the work that I do. I mean my childhood was so complicated and now every morning I pretty much wake up, and I'm like, "wow, this is great, I'm not in a gutter" [laughs]. I get to do art, I get to be a mother, I get to have an amazing husband. And I get to do art that's not just going up on a gallery wall or something, but that gets people to talk about important things, to make changes that are necessary and to be of service. And that's awesome. So when I discovered this tool, the Drader Injectiweld, which is what I used to create all the pieces in *Aglow*, it was such a liberating, exciting moment, because I've been doing this work that's of and for the environment in



Gypsy Moths installed at the Schuylkill Center

in a way, but couldn't really exist safely in the environment itself. Making work that can live outside so people could have more of a direct connection to it in nature is exciting to me. Non-traditional art spaces, like the Schuylkill Center, can share it with their audiences now. If it were only single-use, disposable plastic bottle work, it would just get destroyed if it were outside for very long – then ultimately find its way into the waste stream again anyway. With these works you can just power-wash them, and they will last and do no harm. I love how sturdy they are, plus it's helping people see more potential in the material for art and design applications. To me, it is a material-inquiry. It's so liberating using the unique qualities of industrial plastic debris for art applications. I love that these can be self-contained units

illuminated by solar power; it is a really exciting closed loop kind of process. Plus most people I don't think realize how much of this material is accumulating in landfill. Like the orange highway safety drums – when they get cracked, they typically just go to landfill. People don't realize they can be repaired because that's not a service that's commonly offered. In fact, I was actually debating for a minute putting an ad on Craigslist offering my services to repair kayaks and trash bins! [laughs] Anyway, it is a fun way to explore thicker gauge materials for outdoor applications that I really love and see a lot of potential with. What I really want to do ultimately (and this is inspired from the work in this exhibition, actually), is create a giant playground. If you can imagine the



Gypsy Moths installed at the Schuylkill Center

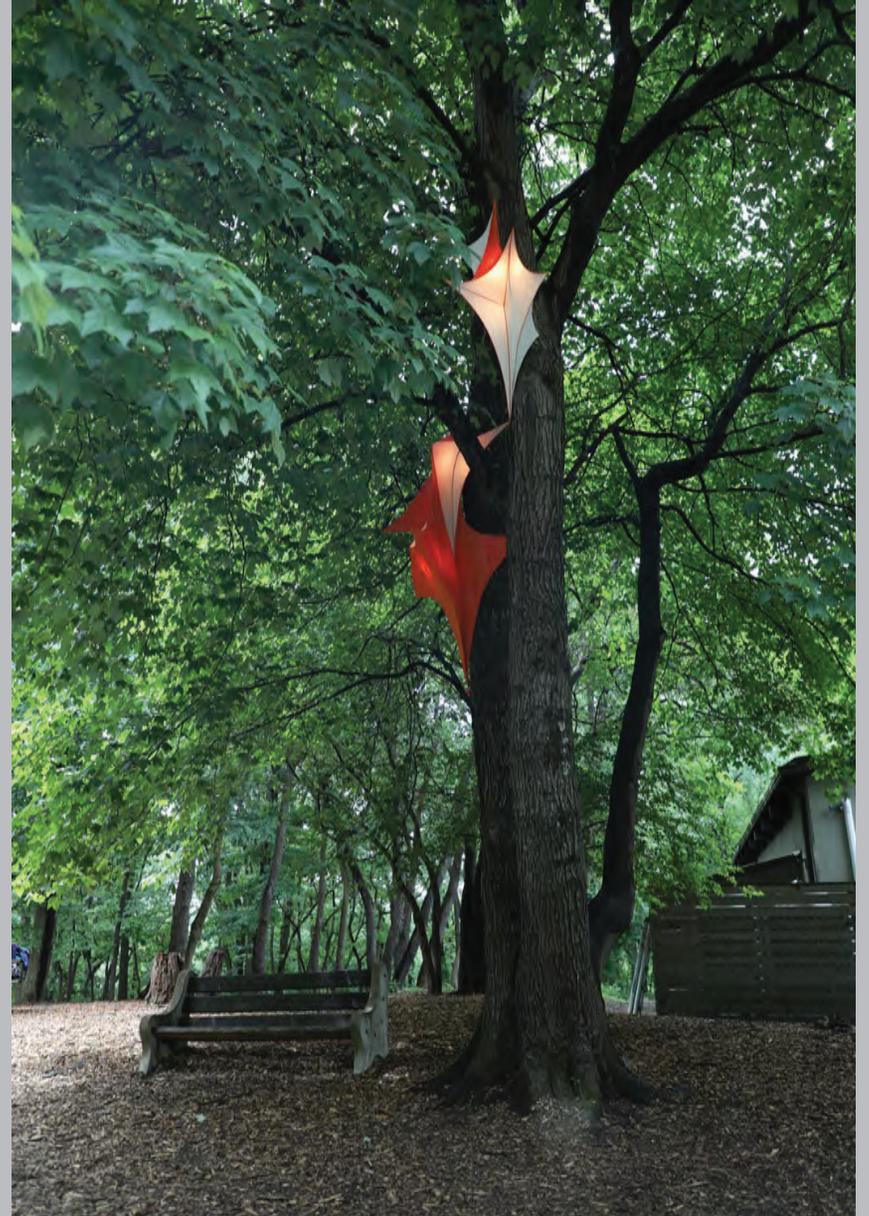
Troika on its side, the blue and white spirally guys connecting at their fattest parts to make like Medusa's head, but half submerged in the ground and fabricated out of a thicker gauge version of this plastic debris so that kids could slide on it and play. Playground equipment is already made out of high-density polyethylene much of the time, which is designed to last for decades and decades. So that's something

I've been thinking about – an illuminated plastic debris art playground. ***I like finding safe ways to work with the plastic that is already here because it's not going anywhere anyway, so we might as well figure out how to integrate what already exists into our lives without permitting it to do any harm.***

But I'm also now working in another new way with the material, using an ultrasonic plastic welder. This is a whole new process that is unlike any other welding technology because you can weld disparate chemical compositions together. The Injectiweld technique is similar in that there are no toxic fumes since you are melting but not burning the material – but with the ultrasonic welder, there is no micro plastic shavings or any residue at all.



Gypsy Moths installed at the Schuylkill Center



Gypsy Moths installed at the Schuylkill Center

CC: Oh, that's so cool!

AR: It's really exciting. I'm excited about *Aglow* because it's the first time all these works have been exhibited together. It's nice to have some pieces be indoor and outdoor, and to use art to illuminate.

CC: Now that the installation process is underway, something that I always think is fun about the Schuylkill Center is that there's really no way for us to have the installation process be private, with a big reveal when it's all done at the end. Because there's people here all the time, seeing behind the scenes as it's happening. But I think that's a really fun and exciting part of it to share, because art isn't just this final beautiful product at the end, there's so much that goes into making it happen. But as people have been observing the process, peeking their heads into the gallery to sneak a look before it opens, a question that keeps coming up is whether or not they are intended to look like fish? Or what are they "supposed to be"? [laughs] And I just wondered how you would answer that question.

AR: Oh, I love it. So I'm really dedicated to making work that is like the nightmares that I had, so I keep going back to them. I want to honor all the good fortune that I've had in terms of my practice. If I hadn't done the work prior to now, even the first pieces where I used spray paint and hot glue, it wouldn't have led to the work I did with all these giant installations. Everything leads to the next step with the work, with life, with love. When you have an art practice and you try to give it a life of its own, it sort of leads you, so I've just been following its lead wherever it



root system access, 2015. Plastic debris and hardware, Philadelphia Zoo. Photo by Marshall Coles



The Great Indoors, 2008. Plastic debris, paint, solar powered LEDs, hdwr.
Rice University, Houston Texas. Image courtesy of the artist

takes me. ***It's like a sort of cruel muse: plastic pollution, she's wicked.*** I keep going back to what the initial inspiration was for my practice because none of it would've happened without that. Like when somebody introduces you to someone and you're like, "oh my gosh, if I hadn't met you... you just changed my life!" And so you always honor that. I don't have the nightmares anymore, but they're actually a really common nightmare for kids dealing with trauma, which I had discovered in 2013 while I was doing a series of slideshow lectures at schools in Ohio. The kids were the same age as I was when I had the nightmares. It was not a very affluent area. And the kids were like, "I had that nightmare last night!" They were all freaking out, one class after another, and each class had the same response. One little girl come up to me and said, "thank you for making me not afraid to dream anymore!" and she gave me an unsolicited hug. I had no idea; I thought it was just me having these weird dreams as a traumatized child. Anyway, I keep going back to them to mine them for forms and to create hybridizations between them and forms in nature. ***Mostly because I think of my work as a love poem to nature.*** So taking those childhood nightmares and mixing them with things I see and observe in nature; this incredible, mystical experience of the life on earth that we all share. Like holy cow, have you noticed the spiral in the Milky Way? Why is that there, whatever it is? Why are babies born in a spiral formation? So yeah, the sculpture is not a fish, but it is fish-ish. It's not a star, but it is star-ish. It's all about this notion of suggestion, which leaves room for interpretation. And I think our interpretation as a culture, as a society is slightly off base. How can we slow down and listen to our own voices, notice how we respond to suggestions, when we're experiencing a piece



dyno, 2015. New Brunswick, Canada. Repurposed old broken fish boxes. Image courtesy of the artist

of art, like we do when we read a book? With a really good book, you read it at one point in your life and you have one sort of response to it, and then five years later a totally different response. It's the same words, but you've changed, and now you're hearing how you've changed. How you interpret and perceive something changes. So I'd like to give people that kind of space with the work so that they can be with their own voices. Listen to themselves reflecting. I try to give people insight into themselves, into their own state of mind and how they're perceiving and interpreting the world.

CC: Totally. I think that need to know what something is intended to be is connected to this achievement-oriented society, or a discomfort with not knowing what the right way to look at something is. To think that there's one certain way and you need to "get" it, and there's a right way to understand or experience a work. I think it's helpful to have that space for people to just bring what they bring to it and see what they see.

AR: Me too, I appreciate that when I'm looking at a piece of art. So I try to give that to others. Having room to think for yourself and not have things spelled out – to luxuriate in your response. Some descriptive texts are necessary for *Aglow* because it's really important for people to know that it's made out of plastic debris. Sometimes when I've exhibited the work before, it'll just say the chemical

composition of the plastic on placards, which could lead people to think it is made from virgin plastic that I purchased. Anything else interpretive doesn't matter to me, as it is made less for me than for everyone younger than me. As far as I am concerned, people don't even need to know that I made these works, but they do need to know that it's made out of plastic debris and that this is a thing that can be done in the world. And maybe they'll be compelled to try it.

CC: That's great. Some artists can be a little bit guarded with their work and their process, and I appreciate that you're quite generous with yours. That you want more people to be doing this kind of work and art and aren't keeping it close to the vest so that nobody's trying to recreate what you're doing.

AR: Yeah. I'm not into that. [laughs] I really want every art school to integrate plastic debris welding 101. That would be amazing! And if all the academic institutions in the world worked with a local plastic wastestream, well that would create a big shift. Life goal.



kuleana, 2018. Oahu. 100% welded plastic ocean debris.
Photo by Marshall Coles

aurora robson : artworks in *Aglow*

TITLE	DIMENSIONS
OUTDOOR	
1 <i>Troika</i>	10' x 10' x 10' (variable)
2 <i>Ding Dang</i>	9' x 9' x 9' (variable)
3 <i>Gypsy Moths</i>	9'3" x 3'10" x 4' (variable)
GALLERY	
4 <i>Covey</i>	8' x 8' x 6' (variable)
5 <i>Pick of the Litter</i>	4' 7" x 2'3" x 2'
6 <i>Spooky Action</i>	4'11" x 1'10" x 1'6"
7 <i>Boyce & Co</i>	42" x 20" x 16"
8 <i>Inkling</i>	28" x 18" x 8"
9 <i>Idea</i>	3'7" x 2'4" x 1' (43" x 28" x 12")
10 <i>Traffic</i>	4' x 7" x 8"
11 <i>Thought Bubble I</i>	1'8" x 1'9" x 5"
12 <i>Thought Bubble II</i>	1'8" x 1'9" x 5"
13 <i>Shard</i>	6'11" x 1' x 1'
14 <i>Couplet I</i>	2'4" x 11" x 1'3"
15 <i>Ding Dang Ying Yang</i>	1'11" x 1' x 6"

TITLE	DIMENSIONS
GALLERY	
16 <i>Night Blight</i>	1'11" x 1' x 6"
17 <i>Just Keep Swimming</i>	1'11" x 1' x 6"
18 <i>17M</i>	2' 3" x 1'7" x 11"
19 <i>Moby</i>	1'10" x 2'4" x 9"
20 <i>Juggernaut</i>	2' 3" x 1'4" x 9"
21 <i>Juggernaut</i>	2' 3" x 1'4" x 9"
22 <i>Minute</i>	1'9" x 6" x 9"

All of the works in *Aglow* were made in 2017 from welded plastic debris and LEDs.

About the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education

Founded in 1965, the Schuylkill Center is one of the first urban environmental education centers in the country, with 340 acres of fields, forests, ponds, and streams in northwest Philadelphia. We work through four core program areas: environmental education, environmental art, land stewardship, and wildlife rehabilitation.

The Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education inspires meaningful connections between people and nature. We use our forests and fields as a living laboratory to foster appreciation, deepen understanding, and encourage stewardship of the environment.

About the Environmental Art Program

Our environmental art program provides opportunities to investigate, innovate, and interpret the nature of place. We incite curiosity and spark awareness of the natural environment, through presentations of outdoor and indoor art. Working collaboratively, we support artistic investigations of our environments and create spaces and opportunities for artists and audiences to creatively engage in ecological issues.

About Aglow curator, Christina Catanese

As the Director of Environmental Art at the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education, Christina oversees all aspects of creating and implementing an environmental art exhibition program in the nature center's 340 acres of forests, fields, and gallery spaces. Attending University of Pennsylvania, she has a Masters in Applied Geosciences and a BA in Environmental Studies and Political Science. As an artist, Christina works across the disciplines of dance, education, environmental science, and arts administration to inspire curiosity, empathy, and connection through creative encounters with nature. She has participated in residencies at the Santa Fe Art Institute, Signal Fire, Works on Water, and SciArt Center, and has presented her work throughout Philadelphia and the region.

About Aglow Catalog Editor, Liz Jelsomine

Liz Jelsomine is Exhibitions Coordinator at the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education. She is also a professional photographer and videographer with a BFA in Photography. Liz provides commercial services and has a passion for her fine art photography. www.jelsomine.com

Photo Credits

All photos courtesy of Liz Jelsomine for the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education, 2019, unless otherwise noted.



Image courtesy of the artist



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Renowned environmental artist Aurora Robson transforms plastic debris into mesmerizing, bold sculptures that disguise and transcend their material. Through Robson's careful use of an overlooked material in *Aglow*, viewers are encouraged to consider their own relationship with waste. Along with the gallery exhibition, Robson's illuminated sculptures have been installed along our trails.



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