

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Reuse and Replenish: The Turn Toward Environmentally Conscious Art

by [Blair Schulman](#) on May 29, 2015



Glenn Kaino, “Tank” (2014) (photo by EG Schempf, courtesy Grand Arts, Kansas City)

KANSAS CITY — Survival is civilization’s greatest inspiration. And *Tank*, Glenn Kaino’s conceptual project, is a unique and beautiful microcosm of how Earth’s species do their best in responding to the anthropocene.

Presented at [Grand Arts](#) in Kansas City through June 6, *Tank* uses materials that replicate Reef-Ex, a US government program in place since the 1990s where artificial reefs and fish habitats are created by dumping outdated military tanks into coastal waters. What Kaino creates are eleven acrylic vitrines, each housing, as the press release explains, a colony of living corals “cultivated from fragments and grown for over a year on individual resin casts from a decommissioned US M-60 military tank.” These resin replications are miniaturized versions of an undersea odyssey that are part Jacques Cousteau, part *Star Trek*, presenting us with stunningly beautiful art objects

that also offer a lesson in environmental consciousness.

It is a remarkable concept to see life created in vitro. Over time, the resin replications take on a cloudiness resembling quartz, an effect owed to a hydrothermal method, adding a second layer of life to these almost kaleidoscopic microcosms.

What will happen to all these living compounds once *Tank* completes its run? I spoke with Eric Dobbins, Grand Arts' Assistant Gallery Director, about *Tank's* life cycle. He tells me in an email exchange, "If the time comes to put the work in storage, the animals can be donated back into the coral fragging community. The aquariums can then be drained, the castings dried and stored along with the life support equipment. The research behind this project is repeatable, and with enough time and support, the project can be recreated in the future."

Kansas City has long offered a strong example of DIY "maker culture," especially among local artists who employ recycled or reused materials. I was interested in how these artists' unique appropriations of materials unveiled patterns or common concerns, particularly in regard to the environment, and how they have led to the evolution of a cultural conversation.

Painter [Justin Bergin](#) has long embraced the aesthetics of recycled materials, evidenced in his newer work, where he cuts up old drawings or canvases and then adheres them to new surfaces. These collaged works can be counted on to interrupt the passage of the eye, confusing and enlivening our gaze. "It is precisely the impact the lessons of Cubism teaches ... the introduction of the temporal to a physically still space," Bergin told me. It is also his belief that recycled materials carry some sort of nostalgia for the viewer, as people increasingly seek comfort in the past.



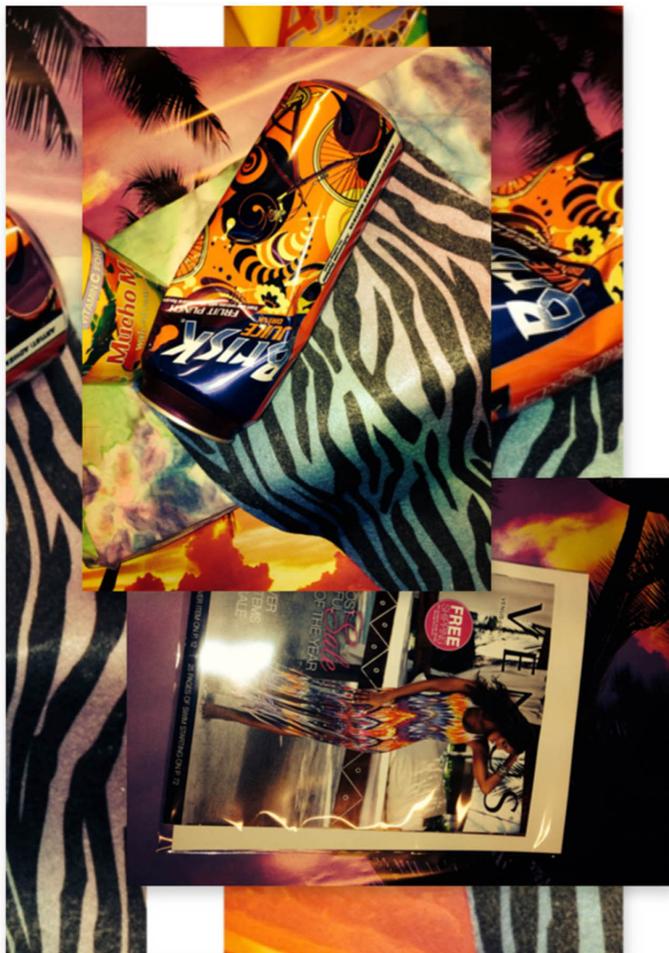
Justin Bergin, "Man, God, Ghost, Guru" (2013) (courtesy the artist)

Multi-media artist [Jillian Youngbird](#) uses recycled materials to evaluate the past, drawing on source materials to pay homage to her Native American heritage. "Finding or hunting materials is just as important to the process as the making," she told me. Her work often consists of installations that provide a closer look at Manifest Destiny. Her dirt patterns describe American flags on Indian soil and the encroaching destruction of Native American lands. Youngbird also creates massive headpieces that resemble native bird or eagles, documenting their movements while she wears them. Most recently, she constructed a teepee made out of found forest wood for her show *Living Arrangements* at the [Vulpes Bastille](#) gallery. Because she uses delicate or easily damaged materials, Youngbird has decided to document them with photos and videos to resist any "expiration date."



Jillian Youngbird, "Drunk Bear" (2015) (courtesy the artist)

For digital artist [Justin Beachler](#), the internet is all about recycling: whole subcultures on the internet are built upon the idea of sharing found/scavenged images and repurposing them — in what he essentially calls “digital trash” — in ways that offer entirely new meanings. Beachler does just this, rearranging digital images from popular culture, using software to create new images, and throwing them back onto the web.



Justin Beachler "simchoinstashitprintB17" (2015)
(courtesy the artist) (click to enlarge)

In light of the ongoing argument over [Richard Prince's Instagram paintings](#), it proves the cached universe of the internet is forever one big dumpster dive where nothing disintegrates. It is inevitable that people like Beachler sees this vast repository of imagery *sans* watermarks as a Gold Rush of ideas waiting to be scooped up, manipulated, and reconfigured.

Tank's innovative approach to replenishing our sea life reminded me of [Lynn Benson's](#) 2012 show *Acid Wash: Playing With Consequences* at the [Leedy-Voukos Art Center](#), for which Benson used old vintage denim garments found off eBay. In our email exchange, Benson said, "The denim project was born out of my concern for increasing ocean acidification, as excess carbon is absorbed by our oceans." This chemical transformation alarmed and inspired her to make this series, where she reconfigured the denim's original structure by cutting the material to replicate coral's growth patterns as well as to simulate watery effects.

The idea of reusing and recycling is borne of many factors and dynamics, including economics; however, I think the desire for ingenuity outweighs all else — not necessarily in a Dada-esque way, but rather as a response to the ongoing changes in our culture and environment. Some, like Benson, Kaino, and Youngbird are directly addressing these concerns, like pollution and desecration, whereas someone like Bergin is primarily interested in the aesthetic power of these changes. And Beachler, I feel, is more accepting of the shifts that have already occurred. He isn't

looking to the past so much as he's using it as a device to discuss the future.



Benson, "Aquifer Do-si-do" (2012), fabric, acrylic on board, 18 x 24 in (courtesy the artist)

Perhaps, as Bergin noted, recognizing older materials or appropriating familiar structures helps us ease into the new realities we now face. Whatever their motives are, by giving a second life to existing materials, these artists are helping us to connect with the winds of change.

Glenn Kaino's [Tank](#) continues at Grand Arts (1819 Grand Blvd, Kansas City, MO) through June 6.



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