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A Riot of Colorful Plastic

Artists use the versatile, ubiquitous material to create playful works of art, appealing to the eye and environment.

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Say the word "plastic," and all sorts of negative connotations come to mind—cheap, flimsy and phony. Say "plastic" to any of the artists included in the "Big Plastic" show at Pasadena's Armory Center for the Arts' new temporary exhibition space, and you're just as likely to find an entirely different response. All of them use plastic as their primary medium here.

"It's such a wonderfully adaptable material," says Anita Rafie. "We like the eye-popping colors," says Gloria Sedaghat. "It has a playful exuberance to it." The two collaborated on a curtain of extruded plastic that cascades over a 12-foot-high wall in the center of the space. Ranging in a riotous spectrum from primary colors to iridescent tones, this untitled work took months to complete while the artists patiently waited for a Compton plastics factory to go through industrial runs. They had arranged to use the leftovers of the extrusion machine, and, after formal orders—for containers, caps, tubes, and so on—were completed, they used palette knives to manipulate the leftover hot spewing plastic to create swirls and waves.

Hilary Norcliffe sensed something even more sublime in the medium—her work, "Screensaver," consists of two floor-to-ceiling tapestries woven from strips of translucent white material cut from plastic jugs. "I'm interested in light and the quality of light that plays off these objects and filters through them," she says.

Being resourceful, she also put the other parts of the jug to service—making a floppy armchair by stapling together square jug bottoms, as well as an organic tier of interwoven spouts that rears up like an indignant sea creature. "I was just experimenting," she explains. "I just wanted to see what I could do with the material."

The show, curated by Jay Belloli and Linda Centell, is the first in the Armory's temporary space in north Pasadena and was inspired by the fact that the 56,000-square-foot building is a former plastics factory. The setting is particularly apt for Carlos Mollura who has designed a giant inflatable balloon with the dimensions of his own office—made by his family's plastics company. However, many of the artists use castoffs—Norcliffe and friends collected milk and water jugs; Dianna Cohen, shopping bags; and Jaime Scholnick, garment factory spindles. The rest tend to be very inexpensive materials: Stephen Shackelford's two works, both titled "Endless Endless Summer," are constructed of plastic flowers attached to PVC pipes. Megan Geckler uses plastic tape that costs 70 cents a roll, methodically stringing it across a corner to produce a three-dimensional diagram titled "Double Sweet Sixteen."

Working in a studio in the garment district, Scholnick noticed spindles being tossed out by one manufacturer and began to collect them. In vivid colors such as deep red, lime green and canary yellow, they take the shape of cup-sized cones and stack up neatly—perfect for building her "cities." Her funhouse metropolis takes up a room in the middle of the exhibition space, but she has felt a change in her approach to the work since Sept. 11. "My original city was one with skyscrapers, but our whole concept of city has changed drastically, and I couldn't do it the same," says Scholnick. "So I wanted to bring [the work] down to eye level and paint bulls'-eyes on the floor, which are the boundary areas."

The garish, unnatural colors found in plastic are another attraction. Ashley Thorner's works dominate a corner—a dozen brightly colored balls, about 2 feet high, dot the floor, while floppy plastic "chandeliers" in purple and aqua hang from the rafters. She calls the balls "jawbreakers" and colors them with melted sugar sealed in resin. The chandeliers are made up of cutup sheets sewn together to create a globe, then connected with appropriate tubing.

Thorner truly loves plastic, once bringing back 100 pounds of it after a shopping spree in Hong Kong, and has experimented with many forms of it. Her giant blue "The Blob" wears a skin sewn together from a Frankensteinian patchwork of "liquid plastic." It has a creepily slick feel. It's the stuff they make fake worms from, she says. Then smiles and adds, "I'm influenced by B monster movies."