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Abnormal Growth

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Abnormal Growth

Greg BEATTY

I just want to say one word to you. Just one word. … Plastics. … There's a great future in plastics.

– The Graduate, 1967

Upon seeing *Abnormal Growth*, an exhibition of sculptural works by Griffith Aaron Baker, Twyla Exner and Tricia Middleton curated by Amanda Cachia, I couldn't help but think of the above quote from the classic counter-culture flick about a disaffected college graduate named Benjamin (Dustin Hoffman) who, while trying to decide what he wants to do with his life, is seduced by the wife (Anne Bancroft) of his father's business partner.

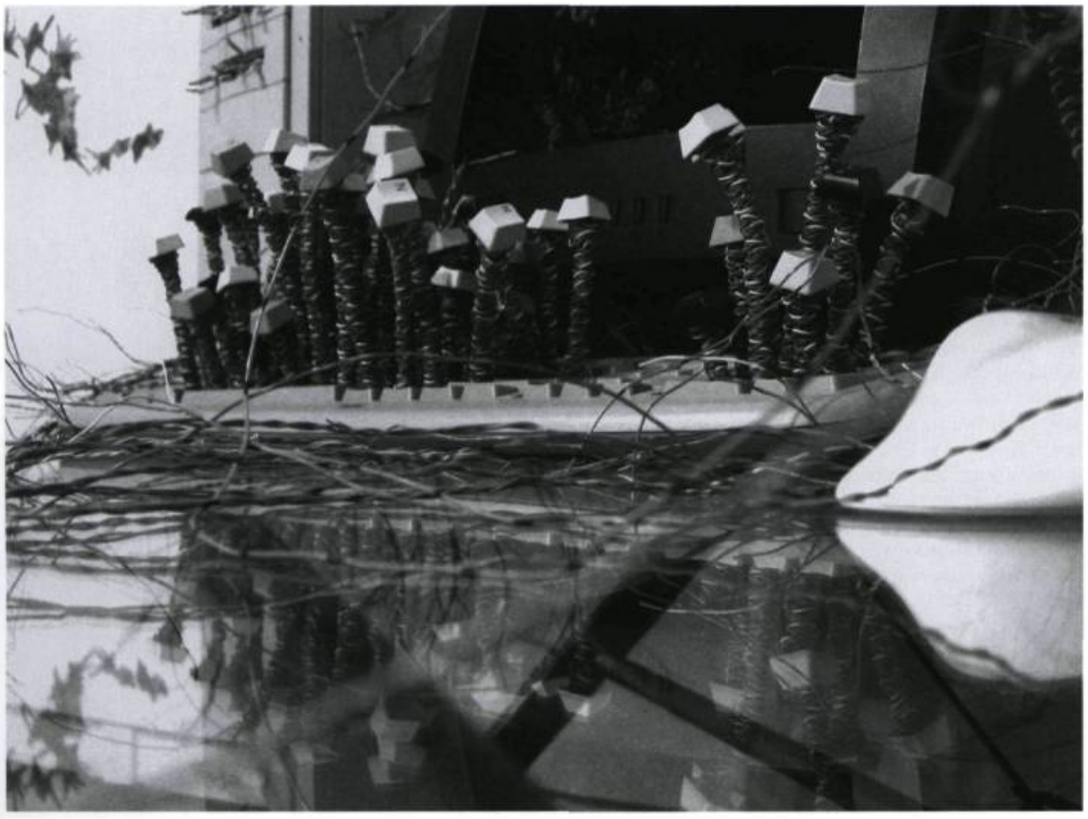
In the movie, the advice Benjamin receives from another of his father's business associates to consider a career in plastics is rife with metaphorical significance. Initially regarded as a miracle substance when it was invented in the early 20th, by 1967, it had come to be seen as a symbol of all that was wrong with America—sleek, plentiful, colourful and infinitely malleable, sure, but lacking substance, tactility and soul. And while it's true that natural materials like wood, glass and ceramics have enjoyed resurgence in popularity, our reliance on plastic continues to grow. According to a recent *Los Angeles Times* article on the problem of plastic as a pollutant in the world's oceans, the average American, in 2001, used 223 pounds of plastic a year, with that figure expected to rise to 326 pounds by 2010.

Before I go any further, I should emphasize that plastic isn't the sole subject matter of *Abnormal Growth*. Yes, there is a lot of the material on display. But it's simply one facet of a broader issue that Cachia and the three artists are intent on exploring — namely, how our growing dependence on technology is impacting on environmental sustainability. "Issues of environmental damage have always interested me as a curator," says Cachia. "All three artists are obviously very different. But there's strong links between them. They work with recycled material. They're very passionate about consumer waste, and what happens to an object after we buy it."

For Baker, who obtained his BFA at the University of Regina in 2004 and is now studying for his MFA at Concordia University in Montreal, bottled water is a particular bugaboo. For several years now, he's been collecting discarded bottle caps and using them to construct giant versions of popular brands of bottled water. Several aspects of the industry trouble him. To begin with, most North Americans already have access to a safe supply of drinking water. But through skilful marketing preying on consumer worries about the purity of tap water and extolling the virtues of their product as a status symbol, companies like Evian, Aquafina and Perrier have carved a significant niche for themselves. In *Evian Bottle*, Baker tackles the challenge this consumer trend presents to the environment. Three metres tall, and composed of over 13,000 bottle caps, the sculpture is an exact replica of an Evian water bottle save for one detail, the company name is spelled backwards, and thus reads "Naïve." In Baker's mind, consumers are naïve to pay a premium price for bottled water which scientific studies reveal is virtually indistinguishable from tap water. Indeed, concern exists among health experts about phthalates, a chemical that is added to plastic to make it supple, leeching into bottled water. In laboratory tests, phthalates have been linked to birth defects and liver cancer.

Also problematic for Baker is the amount of waste the industry generates. While the bottles themselves are made of type 1 plastic and are recyclable, the caps are made of type 5 plastic and aren't. Once discarded, these caps, as the *Times* article revealed, are often washed out to sea where, along with tons of other waste plastic they are pushed by ocean currents called gyres into massive patches of floating debris that create dead zones and poison marine animals on the periphery who mistake the plastic bits for food. Even if they're disposed of properly, the caps become another stream of non-biodegradable waste clogging our landfills. It's that reality that Baker, in collaboration with Exner, addresses in *Consumed* — a wall-mounted mural which depicts a truck dumping thousands of bottle caps in a landfill, where they morph into a model of the molecular structure of type 5 plastic. Beneath the mural is the pseudo corporate slogan: materials that last, objects that fail.

The irony of this industrial practice, in which goods that are intended to be used once and then thrown away are made of a material that, once disposed of, will endure for millennia, is explored more fully by Exner in her solo work. Like Baker, she's a U of R grad who's currently enrolled in Concordia's MFA program. Particularly vexing for her is the amount of electronic trash we produce. While not disposable per se, computer monitors,



← **Twyla EXNER**, *Invasion*, 2007. Monitor, printer, keyboard, computer and telephone wires. Photo: Carey Shaw.

→ **Griffith Aaron BAKER** and **Twyla EXNER**, *Consumed*, 2007. Bottle caps. Photo: Carey Shaw.

Griffith Aaron BAKER, *Evian Bottle*, 2007. Bottle caps. Photo: Carey Shaw.

hard drives, MP3 players and other digital devices are quickly rendered functionally obsolete by new models with enhanced capacity and sleeker styling. When Exner spots some electronic item in the garbage she grabs it and cannibalizes it for her art. Wires, for instance, are used as a weaving material in place of the grasses, roots and tree bark that weavers traditionally use. In *System*, she explores visual and logistical similarities between the nervous and circulatory systems of plants and animals and electrical systems in computers. Similarly, in *Invasion* she presents a desktop computer and printer seemingly gone to seed, with woven wire growths sprouting fungus and pod-like from various cracks and crevices.

A 2005 graduate of Concordia's MFA program, Middleton presents two installations made from recycled materials that critique the sustainability of living arrangements in North American society, where our non-communal mindset requires a heavy expenditure of resources to build, furnish and maintain the dwellings we inhabit. In *Ether Frolics*, she showcases a line of handmade garden furniture that, despite their rudimentary appearance, possess a frothy ornateness suggestive of self-indulgent excess. *Help! Final Home*, meanwhile, consists of a hand-built structure with wooden floorboards which contains a steep staircase. At the top, Middleton's placed a small LCD panel which displays a video of her in her Montreal apartment calling plaintively for help. Less visually engaging than Baker and Exner's work, Middleton's pieces nonetheless do convey an effective anti-consumerist message. ←

Abnormal Growth
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