

Out of the Ocean: A Conversation with Duke Riley

by Jan Garden Castro - Wednesday, March 22, 2023

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Installation view of "DEATH TO THE LIVING, Long Live Trash," Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY, 2022–23. Photo: Danny Perez

The junk-based sculptures and film installations in "DEATH TO THE LIVING, Long Live Trash," Duke

Riley's [current exhibition](#) at the Brooklyn Museum, take aim at the environmental villains, past and present, responsible for the destruction of the world's oceans. Walls, display cases, and Dutch period rooms are loaded with more than 200 of Riley's works—masterful scrimshaw drawings on plastic objects that combine traditional maritime imagery with portraits of the international moguls promoting single-use plastics in the political and consumer arenas. In addition to scrimshaw (engravings or carvings originally created by whalers in bone or ivory), Riley turns to historic mariner mosaics and other traditions to disguise and transform the most vulgar beach/ocean garbage into art, telling a tale of local pollution and global marine devastation.



Installation view of “DEATH TO THE LIVING, Long Live Trash,” Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY, 2022–23.

Photo: Danny Perez

Jan Garden Castro: How do you make plastic trash into art objects?

Duke Riley: Because these things have been in the ocean for so long, exposed to the sun and tumbled by the waves, they've had time to get off-gassed and sanded. Obviously, plastic is not an ideal surface to draw on, and it's certainly not the same as working on bone, so I experiment with various primers.

I've been working as a tattoo artist for 30 years and drawing on paper for all that time. My real skill is drawing on three-dimensional objects. I can do things that a lot of other people can't because I've had 30 years to think about it, but I've never employed this skill on such a grand scale. You're working all the way around an object. It's more like working on a human arm than drawing a picture.

JGC: Are there any bone pieces in this exhibition?

DR: Only one piece, on loan from the New Bedford Whaling Museum, is in the show because it inspired the title. The text on the side says, "Death to the living, long life to the killers. Success to sailors' wives and greasy luck to whalers." The whaling industry was a meritocracy, so people who were marginalized were able to work. It was a dangerous job, but people experienced less prejudice than with land-based work. People from all over the world would get on whaling ships looking for prosperity and sharing different patterns of scrimshaw, maritime folk art, ideas, and music. At the same time, this was a capitalistic endeavor, and the attitude was, "Let's kill as many of these whales as we can." They were going further and further out around the world to hunt. I was thinking about how that relates to the time we're in now and about the connection between past and present—from the whale oil industry, which almost decimated several whale species, to the petroleum and plastic industry, which is currently destroying and leading to the complete collapse of the oceans.



Attributed to Fredrick Myrick, Scrimshaw, Sperm Whale's Tooth, ca. 1829. Sperm whale's tooth and ink. Photo: Danny Perez, Courtesy the New Bedford Whaling Museum

JGC: Did you ever create scrimshaw on bone?

DR: No, but scrimshaw has appeared in almost every installation and project that I've done since the late '90s. Back then, I would get sheets of bone-colored Plexi or other materials and engrave them with tattoo machines, rubbing into them. It wasn't until 2018 or 2019 that I started using plastic found on the beach. This exhibition covers work from 2019 to present.

JGC: Do you still use your tattoo machines?

DR: I don't do it that way anymore. Some of the stuff is engraved with a heavy-duty needle, an awl-like tool, and a lot of it is drawn directly onto the surface with pen and traditional lamp black ink, which has a more realistic effect.



No. 4-P of the Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum, 2019. Salvaged, painted plastic, 13 x 11.75 x 1 in.

Photo: Courtesy Duke Riley Studio

JGC: How involved were you with the installation of the show?

DR: I'm very particular about the wall color and how things are laid out—I approach the space like an installation artist, thinking about the space as much as the work. In this case, I made the decisions about where things are in a room. Every single thing has a relationship to everything else. It's a narrative, didactic type of show, so how you walk through it is important—there's a relationship between past and present, a flow, and a beginning and an end.

JGC: The lawn flamingo in the opening gallery deftly points toward the rest of the exhibition.

DR: That flamingo probably came from Broad Channel. The bottles and objects are all from New York waterways. I usually record where the object came from.

JGC: It's ironic that you're decrying plastic waste with plastic turned into art. The opening film shows you fishing with very particular lures.

DR: The lures are made from tampon applicators that I picked up off the beach.



If It Feels Good Do It, 2020. Found plastic trash and seashells, 67 x 67 in.
Photo: Danny Perez, © Duke Riley, Courtesy the artist



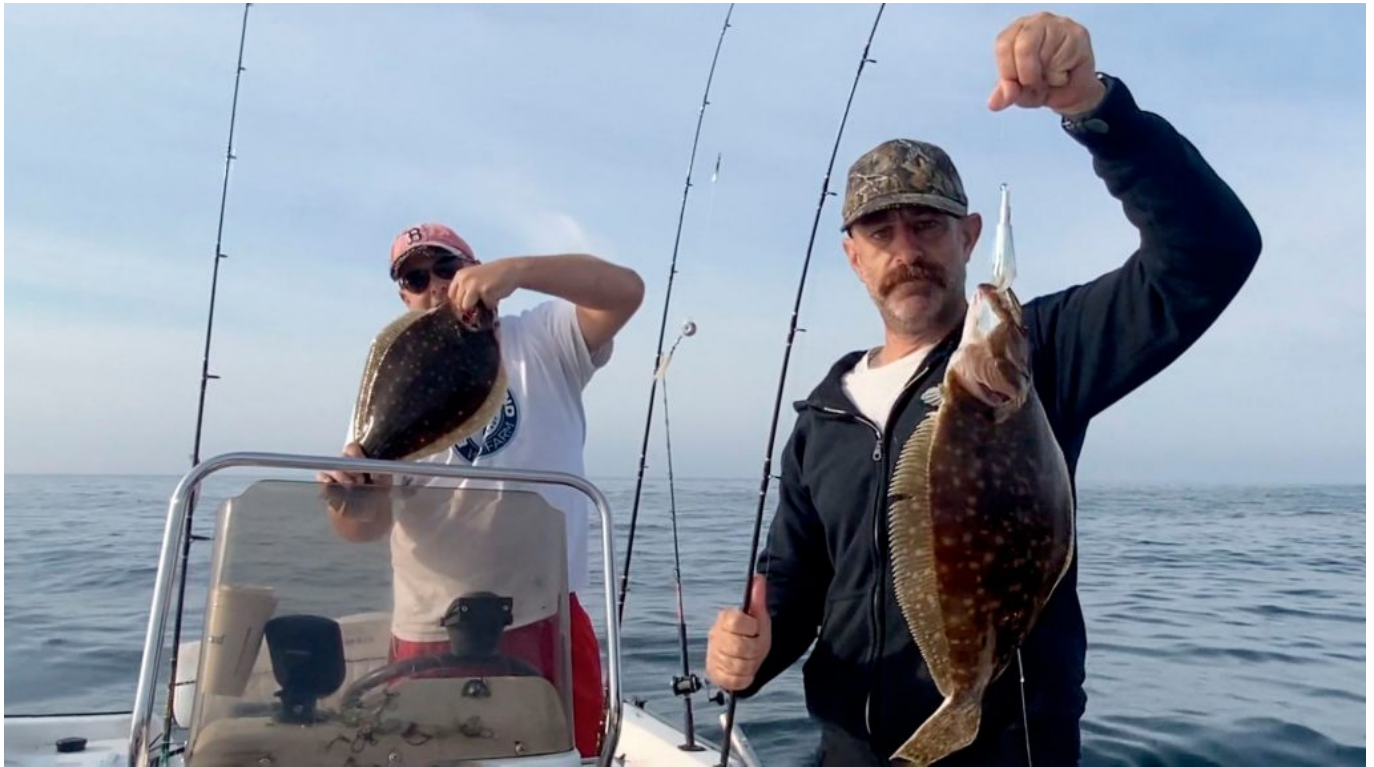
If It Feels Good Do It (detail), 2020. Found plastic trash and seashells, 67 x 67 in.
Photo: Danny Perez, © Duke Riley, Courtesy the artist

JGC: And you catch things with these lures?

DR: Depressingly, they work incredibly well. They look a lot like real microplastic lures that get into fish. Fish swallow a lot of plastic whole because they think it's another fish. Human beings, with their addiction to convenience and comfort, try to connect with nature, drag tons of plastic lures into the wilderness, and end up losing half of them in the ocean.

JGC: Do you think that people watching the film will get the point that the fish are full of plastic?

DR: When you watch the videos back to back, it's pretty obvious that the lures are made of tampons. Tampon applicators, straws, and lighters are probably the most common beach trash.



Welcome Back to Wasteland Fishing, Episode Two, 2019. Single-channel video, color, and sound, 6:12 min. Written, directed, and produced by Duke Riley, cinematography by Alexandra Egan, and edited by Brett Land and Duke Riley.

Photo: Courtesy the artist

JGC: So, each these works has more stories inside.

DR: Yeah, some day these things will be ancient artifacts. They will be here long after we're gone, and museum curators and conservators will be going through them and figuring out what to save. There's more stuff being made every day than all the artifacts in all the museums in the world. Some of the things I find are related to the ocean, like the boat toilet seat in one piece, but other stuff, you can't figure out how it got into the water.

JGC: What is your over-arching message?

DR: The thing is, we spend all this time talking about recycling, which probably isn't going to be the thing that helps. Responsibility is put on the masses, whereas a handful of people globally are responsible for all this stuff. We ought to spend more time thinking about them rather than spending resources on recycling things that will end up in a landfill anyway.

JGC: What other odd finds have you used?

DR: Shotgun shells collected from the beach on Fishers Island, where there's a shooting club. People go out there—again trying to connect with nature—and bring pheasants out to shoot at. Then they leave plastic shit all over the ground.



Monument to Five Thousand Years of Temptation and Deception (I), 2020. Salvaged, painted plastic and mahogany, 27.5 x 68.5 x 4 in.

Photo: Will Howcroft for Praise Shadows Art Gallery, © Duke Riley, Courtesy the artist and Praise Shadows Art Gallery, MA

JGC: You used the casings to frame the *Erika*, an oil tanker that sank off the coast of Brittany in 1999.

DR: It was a huge spill that washed tons and tons of oil onto the beach. So much effort goes into filling a boat up with liquid and moving it through the ocean.

JGC: You also use plastic with seashells.

DR: It's a popular folk art that I grew up with in New England, an octagonal-shaped mosaic called a sailor's valentine. It was originally thought that sailors would make them at sea during their downtime and bring them back to their wives. The reality is that most of them were purchased during stops in Barbados to resupply. It's believed that the origins of the octagonal shape go back to England. Merchants would bring different seashells from around the world to St. Catherine's dock in Greenwich, where people making crafts and naturalists would collect them; they stored them in octagonal boxes with decorated tops, and then it just became about the top itself and the box disappeared.

JGC: You’ve placed works within the Brooklyn Museum’s two Dutch colonial houses—the Jan Martense Schenck House (1676) and the Nicholas Schenck House (1770–75). The latter features a woven straw table runner with a Dutch saying that interested you.

DR: This house was right on the water in Canarsie, and the runner says, “On the Backs of Eels.” I was reading a Dutch explorer’s journal from the same time period, which chronicles the waterways around New York City. At one point, he writes that the water was so abundant with eels that you could walk on their backs from Brooklyn to Manhattan. In the entire time I’ve lived here, I’ve never seen anything approaching that phenomenon, which shows the depletion of nature. It’s also an indictment of that time period, and of European culture in general, with its idea of seeing nature as something that you’re separate from and not a part of, something to try to dominate.



Detail of “DEATH TO THE LIVING, Long Live Trash,” Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY, 2022–23.
Photo: Danny Perez

JGC: This part of the show includes materials to make fishing lures displayed on an antique wooden desk, as well as books on whaling and New England traditions. Are these yours?

DR: Yes. I felt it might help people see the context—how I gather the stuff. I make most of the scrimshaw on a boat, at a tiny chart table about the size of the museum’s table. The books are a way to interact with

the space, too. There are a limited number of things you can do in a room like this. It's important to see that a lot of stuff in my process has plastic in it; I'm not trying to say that I'm a plastic-free person. Even when you tape something to the wall, there's plastic in that. The tacks I use are plastic.

JGC: You use nail polish to paint the lures?

DR: Yes. I paint the enamel eyes. I'm as stuck in this trap as everybody else.

JGC: The first time I saw the bottle chandelier, I thought it was a period piece. You had to collect quite a few bottles.

DR: It's made of nip bottles, and I have way, way, way more of them. I could make 20 more chandeliers. Every now and then you find an unopened bottle, and you sit down on the beach and say, "Don't mind if I do!"



Installation view of "DEATH TO THE LIVING, Long Live Trash," Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY, 2022-23.

Photo: Danny Perez

JGC: The works are so beautiful that the trash component is sometimes easy to miss. Do you ever draw attention to it with labels?

DR: Let people figure it out on their own. You want to let people feel things.

JGC: I've enjoyed several of your earlier installations and performance pieces. After *Fly by Night* (2016)—an orchestrated flight of thousands of pigeons above the East River, each one carrying tiny LED lights instead of a message—you received the Village Voice Lifetime Achievement Award for Elevating the Prestige of Pigeons in the Public Consciousness. Do you still have pigeons in your life?

DR: I do. My studio is next to where *Fly by Night* happened, in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and the pigeons live on the roof of the building near the water.

JGC: What happened to the historic battleship that you rebuilt as a beautiful sculpture and pigeon condo?

DR: Somebody turned it into a burger joint. I spent a lot of time trying to make the pigeon coops, the architecture, and the design of the ship feel completely fluid so that it seemed to be built for that purpose. The coops were identical to the doors on the rest of the ship.



Fly by Night London II, 2018. Photo documentation of performance.
Photo: Courtesy Duke Riley Studio

JGC: What did you do for the London version in 2018?

DR: That was commissioned by the Imperial War Museum. We built the coops in conjunction with the anniversary of the end of World War I. We were emulating the mobile pigeon coops used in the trenches and honoring the military pigeons that served as ship-to-shore communication and saved thousands of human lives.

JGC: For *Those About to Die Salute You* (2009)—a staged sea battle between the Brooklyn and Queens Museum staffs fought with tomatoes—you built ships that people could stand in. It was like a movie set.

DR: We built five full-scale ships capable of holding 15 or 20 people each. They were functioning, seaworthy boats made the same way that Thor Heyerdahl made the boats he used to cross the Pacific. They were inspired by the papyrus reed boats sometimes used in Roman *naumachia*, which would often imitate Egyptian-made boats. A good friend of mine, the sculptor Aymar Ccopacatty, advised me on the project. He's from the Aymara people, who live on floating islands made out of reeds on Lake Titicaca. They also make papyrus boats. For *Those About to Die*, we collected phragmites, or common reed,

around Flushing Meadows, but it wasn't as buoyant, so Aymar had the idea to fill the interior of the boats with plastic garbage, which helped them to float. I've been using plastic trash for a long time. Water and trash are a continuing theme. When I was 18 years old, I was making art out of trash.



of *The Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum*, 2022. Salvaged, painted plastic, ink, and wax, detail of installation.

Photo: Courtesy the artist, © Duke Riley

JGC: How long was the process for “DEATH TO THE LIVING?”

DR: We started talking about it in 2019, and it was pushed back a year due to the pandemic. That gave me the time to take it as far as I wanted to take it. The last six months before the show, I worked seven days a week without stopping. I do all the big stuff in the winter, and the small stuff in the summer; I load it into beer cartons, row it out to the boat, and work on it as I keep a fishing rod in the water. I work all day making the scrimshaw on my boat, and if a fish comes, I bring it in and cook it.

JGC: In *Duke Riley: Tides and Transgressions*, a new book published by Rizzoli, Anne Pasternak, Shelby White and Leon Levy Director of the Brooklyn Museum, writes that you’re “an iconoclast who challenges dominant narratives around important social issues.” You might even spur legislative change in New York State. Your issues are global and local. How do you figure out what’s going to work?

DR: It’s important, especially since it’s sometimes hard to think on a global scale, to put things into perspective on a local scale—something you can process on your own terms. Local issues can be the most tangible, yet they’re the ones not as often addressed, especially when you deal with things that involve the environment. I speak to something happening locally to make it more visible and easier to process. I do this for myself, not just for the audience.

“*DEATH TO THE LIVING, Long Live Trash*” is [on view](#) at the Brooklyn Museum through April 23, 2023. To read more of Jan Garden Castro’s conversation with Duke Riley in Whitehot Magazine, click [here](#).