Plastic Gothic: Frankenstein, Art and the Microplastic Monster

Robyn Glade-Wright and Barbara Dover

Robyn Glade-Wright *A Hand in the Plasticene* 2018
Found plastic debris washed up on a far
north Queensland beach.
50 x 50 x 10 cm

Barbara Dover *Cape Specimen 2018*
Glass dome, squid hooks washed up on far north Queensland beaches
55 x 30 x 55 cm

When Mary Shelley's character, Dr. Frankenstein, sparked life into an assemblage of cadaver parts, he created a monster reminiscent of a human. The monster, possessed with phenomenal physical powers could not be contained and was free to roam. However, the monster was deeply unhappy as he desired empathy, companionship and the love of a mate. Frankenstein denied the monster a partner. In revenge, the monster murdered Frankenstein's loved ones. Frankenstein was haunted by his monstrous creation for the rest of his life.

Frankenstein and plastic share several similarities. Both are human creations and uncontrollable. They produce disastrous impacts and have come to haunt us. Plastics do not biodegrade. In a process that can take 500 to 1000 years, UV radiation can cause fragmentation into pieces known as microplastics.[1] Microplastics are increasingly found in animals, including humans, creating plastic hybrids and a grotesque expression of Gothic horror.

In the exhibition *Disquiet: Ecological Anxieties and Transformations,* artists Barbara Dover and Robyn Glade-Wright address the Microplastic Monster. *Cape Specimen,* for example, makes reference to the specimens displayed in museums that show the species of a particular era and place. It questions the type of specimens which might inhabit the natural world in the present era.

In 1863, a shortage of ivory impacted the production of billiard balls, prompting a New York billiard board manufacturer to advertise for a useful alternative. Two bothers living in New York acquired an English patent for a synthetic material that could be heat-moulded. It was a suitable substitute for ivory; cheap to manufacture, light weight, water resistant, and was a versatile and strong material. Plastics are now found in products ranging from clothing to building materials along with the keys touched as this text was typed.

Both plastic and *Frankenstein* commenced life in service of the entertainment industry. While plastic was used for billiard balls, Mary Shelley was inspired to write Frankenstein as a form of entertainment while Shelley was holidaying in Switzerland with a group of friends during the summer of 1815. One evening, as amusement, Lord Byron proposed a competition for each person to write the best ghost or horror story possible — and Dr Frankenstein's monster was created.[3]

Shelley's tale of terror reflects her life experiences. Shelley's mother died soon after she was born. Prior to writing *Frankenstein*, Shelley's half-sister had committed suicide. Shelley was a teenager, outcast by her family, homeless and in love with a married man, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. A further tragedy beset Shelley when she lost two babies who both died soon after birth. One of the babies, Clara, survived eight days and Shelley notes in her journal a dream where the infant came back to life.[4]

Barbara Dover *Decoy* 2018
Found squid hooks found on far north Queensland beaches, metal, glue.
30 x 30 x 25 cm

Barbara Dover *Plasticky Sea Urchin 2018*
Found plastic packaging tags washed up on various far north Queensland beaches, metal frame, glue.
55 x 30 x 55 cm

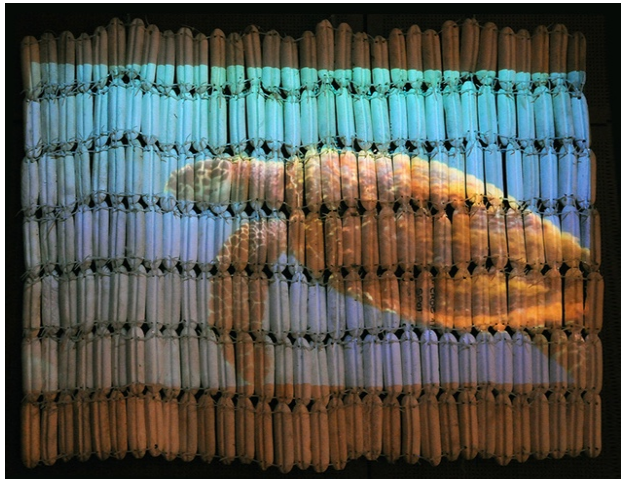
Robyn Glade-Wright
Catch of the Day 2017
Plastic waste found on far north Queensland beaches, wire, solar lights. 175 x 60 x 30 cm

These significant and troubling life experiences may have enabled Shelley to convincingly portray the horror of desecrating the act of creating new life that is apparent in her novel. *Frankenstein* has generated caution and fear because it represents this fundamental rule, 'don't mess with Mother Nature'.[5] Over the past two hundred years, *Frankenstein* has been mentioned in 251 scientific papers warning of a hubris that has haunted science ever since.[6]

The problem of plastic pollution has concerned scientists since the 1970s when they predicted the current pollution crisis and wrote, "It is unlikely that any marine birds remain uncontaminated by the synthetic pollutants".[7] Today, 90% of marine bird species have ingested plastic and 95% of the individuals within these species have been affected. Sea animals and birds, when seeking out food, cannot distinguish plastic from other food sources. Plastic pollution has been found in around 600 species of marine organisms, including 100% of turtles, 59% of whales, and 36% of seals.[8]

Catch of the Day was made after the death of a whale in Queensland. An autopsy found the whale had six metres of plastic in her stomach which was the cause of her death.

Robyn Glade-Wright
Catch of the Day Detail 2017
Plastic waste found on far north Queensland beaches, wire, solar lights. 175 x 60 x 30 cm



Barbara Dover *Undercurrent* 2019
Video, found plastic floats collected from far north Queensland beaches. 150 x 180 x 5 cm

Robyn Glade-Wright *Inflated* 2017
Found plastic floats collected from far north Queensland beaches, wire, solar lights.
125 x 100 x 50 cm

By the year 2050, the weight of plastic in the ocean will be greater than the weight of all sea creatures. Almost all of the 8.3 billion tonnes of plastic ever created still exists and three-quarters of this is waste. Only 9% has been recycled, 12% incinerated and 79% is deposited in landfill or the environment.[9] Plastic discarded on land can be blown into drains where it is washed into rivers and carried to the sea. A whopping 70% of the plastic in the sea is deposited via rivers.

In the video, *Undercurrent,* turtles appear to swim in a plastic world. The video was projected onto a screen made with discarded plastic floats which were once used in fishing nets that had washed up on beaches in far north Queensland. The title of the video *Undercurrent* has a menacing tone suggesting the human altered world turtles now inhabit.

Inflated shows a turtle with an abdomen full of the same discarded plastic fishing floats. The label for this work stated: When turtles eat plastic, they produce gas in an effort to digest the plastic. The gas makes the turtles float to the surface of the sea. The gas also means the turtles cannot dive down into the water to find food, so they starve to death and bake in the sun as they die. Plastic in the ocean is an unfolding tale of horror.

Robyn Glade-Wright *Micoplastics Found in Human Embryo* 2018
1000 recycled plastic bottles, cable ties, spray paint.
350 x 540 x 10 cm.

In gothic horror stories, humans regard “the monsters that they encounter as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order”.[10] Celebrated author Stephen King asserts, “we love the concept of monstrosity”[11] as it provides a demarcation between a healthy life and an anti-life, or between a wholesome or unwholesome life. The unhealthy life and the threat of impurity that underpins the gothic monster has surfaced in the form of a Microplastic Monster.

Plastic pollution is harmful for all creatures because tiny particles can cross the placenta and the blood brain barrier, altering genes, causing cell death, reducing fertility and lowering rates of survival. Microplastics amass in the “brain, liver and other tissues”[12] where they can “potentially affect the central nervous system and the reproductive system”.[13]

This was the impetus for *Microplastics Found in Human Embryo* made from 1000 used plastic bottles collected from accommodation venues in Cairns. It combines the elation associated with conception and promise of new life with the threat of harm from microplastic contamination. This desecration of new life evokes the tale of *Frankenstein*. In *Microplastics Found in Human Embryo* a plasticised embryo floats in a blue/green umbilical pool.

As some microplastics are less than half a millimetre in diameter, they cannot be seen without magnification. The Microplastic Monster has contaminated 83% of drinking water worldwide with 9 to 12 microplastic particles per litre.[14] The contamination rate in water in plastic bottles is higher than in tap water. Globally people buy one million plastic bottles each minute, of which 91% are used once before being discarded.

The presence of small pieces of plastic waste are found throughout the oceans and are incorporated in sea-ice in polar regions. This is evident in the work of art *Arctic Chill* where ice cubes appear to be made with polluted water.

Barbara Dover *Arctic Chill* (detail) 2018
Found plastic debris (underwater smog) washed up on far north Queensland beaches, resin, drinking glasses. 7 x 20 x variable cm

Robyn Glade-Wright *Sea Smog* 2018
Found plastic debris washed up on far north Queensland beaches, nylon, glue.
400 x 300 x 90 cm

Robyn Glade-Wright *Sea Smog* (detail) 2018
Found plastic debris washed up on far north Queensland beaches, nylon, glue.
400 x 300 x 90 cm

Unwittingly, humans consume the equivalent weight of a credit card each week in the form of microplastics. In the sea, microplastics attract toxic chemical hitchhikers.[15] When this toxic cocktail is consumed by plankton and other marine creatures it can progress through the food chain, arriving in food sold for human consumption. *Lampton's Soup* resembles Andy Warhol's famous *Campbell's Soup Cans* 1962, however, the labels on these soup cans list the microplastic content.

Small pieces of plastic float in the ocean, forming an underwater sea smog that is similar to a fog on land. *Sea Smog* (shown left) makes this unseen plastic underwater smog visible. In the coral-like work, *Predacious Blue,* the variety and hues of blues of our throw-away plastic bottle tops and other plastic debris are replacing the vibrant living colours of the corals and animals of the reef.

Robyn Glade-Wright *Lampton's Soup* (detail) 2019 12 Digital images.
Each 20 x 25 cm

Barbara Dover *Predacious Blue* 2018
Found plastic washed up on various far north Queensland beaches, metal, glue.
30 x 30 x 25 cm

Robyn Glade-Wright *Plastic Time* 2018
Glass vases, found plastic debris washed up on far north Queensland beaches, nylon, glue.
54 x 13 x 13 cm

Around 70% of plastic in the sea settles forming a plastic layer on the seabed. A new form of sedimentary material has appeared, reminiscent of a sedimentary rock, however, it is composed of compressed plastic. As a result, the term 'the Plasticene' has been coined to describe this time period.[16] A sample of plastic sediment is used in the work of art *Choke*: *Plasticene Sediment.*

Plastic is made from crude oil, an element that takes millions of years to form in the ground. In forty days oil can be pumped from the ground, shipped or piped to refineries and transported to factories to make items such as plastic knives and forks. When we use plastic items such as bags and cutlery once and throw them away without recycling, 79% of the plastic will disintegrate and pollute the environment for over 500 to 1000 years. *Plastic Time* suggests that we can measure time in terms of a deluge of plastic.

Robyn Glade-Wright *Choke: Plasticene Sediment* 2018
Found plastic debris & rope washed up on far north Queensland beaches.
90 x 90 x 12 cm

Robyn Glade-Wright *Over - Consumption* 2019
Cardboard, bamboo, vegetation, paint, glue.
270 x 80 x 100 cm

In *Over-consumption,* a large container ship appears to be cruising above a dead coral reef. Plastic harbours germs that can kill reef corals. The warming planet, along with cyclones and infestations by crown-of-thorns starfish has resulted in coral death and coral bleaching in 30% of the Great Barrier Reef. Global manufacturing, the use of fossil fuels and human consumption are implicated in urgent problems of climate change and environmental pollution.

Shelley's creation of the monster is "a de-formation of such magnitude that neither the process nor its product can be grasped"[17] and this can be said of the Microplastic Monster. The clock is ticking to find ways to replace plastic with materials that decompose, to develop systems to remove and recycle plastic from the sea, air and land. The gothic horror apparent in *Frankenstein* and the Microplastic Monster may help shake us from complacency and convince us to form a sustainable relationship with our planet.

Barbara Dover & **Robyn Glade-Wright** are exhibiting in the following venues:

Artspace Mackay: 24 January – 5 April 2020.
Call 4961 9779 or email: artspace@mackay.qld.gov.au to arrange a school visit.

Hervey Bay Regional Gallery: 1 May – 7 June 2020.
Call 4197 4206 or email: regionalgallery@frasercoast.qld.gov.au to arrange a school visit.

KickArts Contemporary Art Cairns: 6 August – 26 September 2020.
Call 4050 9494 or email: administration@kickarts.org.au to arrange a school visit.

Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts Townsville:13 October – 15 November 2020.
Call 4772 7109 or email: office@umbrella.org.au to arrange a school visit.

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Barbara Dover

Practicing artist: Barbara's work investigates our relationship with animals and, more broadly, the natural world, at the intersection of aesthetics and ethics. Her multidisciplinary contemporary art practice examines the familiarities and intricacies of human-animal relations within the understanding of animals as sentient individuals whose moral status, interests and lives matter.

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Associate Professor Robyn Glade-Wright

Practicing artist and arts educator: Robyn Glade-Wright seeks to create a sense of disquiet in her works of art to engender reflection about the kind of life (and death) we impose on sentient creatures. Glade-Wright's works of art respond to the ecological crisis of the Anthropocene in a form that conflates beauty and dread, and allure and anxiety to provoke contemplation of these terms in an effort to foster a sustainable future for life on this small planet.

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