Art and Environmental Sustainability

Jordan Trammell, aluminum crabs crawling over trash.

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In the summer of 2010, I had the opportunity to join a group of instructors to work on a program titled the Global Learning Initiative. The GLI, as it came to be known, covers three areas: global learning, ethnic diversity, and environmental sustainability. Our goal for the GLI was to identify how individual and seemingly dissimilar programs such as art and science could find commonalities to holistically meet the three strands. In addition, we sought to find ways that all students would have ample opportunities to be exposed to each of the three areas of focus. One of the outcomes of this initiative was the development of a new art studio course that explores recycled materials as media.

This thought-provoking course requires students to carefully plan, design, and execute three-dimensional works of art that use recycled materials to express ideas of sustainability.

Artwork for Awareness

Created by artist-educator, Debra Edgerton, this thought-provoking course requires students to carefully plan, design, and execute three-dimensional works of art using recycled materials to express ideas of sustainability. Early in the course, students visit the local recycling center where they learn about making wise choices when purchasing commercial products, as well as what can and cannot be recycled. Students then take on the task of repurposing materials to create artworks that bring awareness to environmental issues. The selected materials show meaning while guiding viewers to see how choices we make in our day-to-day lives impact the environment.

An Example

Artworks created by Jordan Trammell, an art education major, suggest interrelationships of the life cycles of sea creatures, birds, mammals, and reptiles.

Crabs, fashioned from twisted aluminum cans, crawl over bubble wrap, empty food boxes, and plastic soft drink bottles as if these items are their natural habitat. How does the use of trash bring awareness to the plight of oceans and beaches?

Upon close inspection, a zebra reveals that is it modeled from decades-old newspapers. Questions occur about why this newspaper was saved for years or where it might have been stored. Yet another question arises about the casual, relaxed pose of the zebra. What does this pose suggest about awareness of one's surroundings?

Perched on the wall in a clear plastic box sits a chameleon. Hidden among food containers and a battery carton, the chameleon (created from dried acrylic paint chips) is somewhat difficult to spot. How does the surrounding trash indicate that the chameleon adapts to its environment?

A life-size snow owl hovers above the other three creatures in the exhibition. The owl's feathers are individually cut from expired postcard advertisements. These time-sensitive promotional materials usually find their way to a landfill when their dates render them invalid. How could the homonyms of "flier" and "flyer" contribute to finding meaning in this artwork?

Join the Discussion

How do you teach sustainability in your art class? Protecting the environment is everyone's responsibility. Each of the artworks designed and created in Debra Edgerton's class emphasize the importance of recycled media in its creation. Additional artworks from this recycled art class can be found at www.green.nau.edu/recycledart/exhibit.html.

Join our round-table discussion or share your photos on the *SchoolArts* Facebook page, or follow us at schoolartsroom.blogspot.com.

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