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Artist gathers impressions of garbage

By Jenn Watt

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Valerie Ashton thinks the earth might be telling her something as she works on her residency at Haliburton School of Art and Design. Trees keep emerging from the ink and watery coral appears on her collages as she puts together her work as the Reclaim artist in residence – a role tasked with literally

digging into the local landfill.

“I take my paper and my acrylic ... and I go into the landfill and put it on the ground and make monoprints,” says Ashton, who has created several prints that hang on the walls of the timber frame building No. 2 at HSAD in Haliburton.

It's an eight-week residency and in that time, she will create two sculptures along with other works. One sculpture will stay with the college while the other will be sold at the annual faculty auction on Aug. 11.

The prints are made on the sandy ground a few metres from the edge of the garbage pile at the Dysart landfill. While she's not making the works on the garbage itself, just under the dirt's surface is a mound of garbage from years gone by. The images that emerge from the process, however, look nothing like waste.

Most of the prints hanging in the workshop on July 21 look more like trees. Distinct branches and foliage reach to the edges of the paper, their forms outlined in the black paint.

She's also been creating collages using discarded items – most of them from the dump, but others have been given to her by people who know about the project. She specifically asked for items already destined for the garbage can.

Another piece reflects Ashton's first impression of the Dysart landfill. It is made of discarded tissue paper, layered to reflect the landscape in bright green and brown. As with the other images, black paint is layered on top.

She says the first time she observed the mound of waste she was struck by the surroundings. “You see this big pile of garbage and right behind is Haliburton's forest,” she says. “It's fascinating.” Her residency has brought Ashton closer to what this town considers rubbish and she says she's found many items that would more appropriately be given to Thrift Warehouse or the Lily Ann.

She points to two cushioned stools she found at the landfill. The fabric is a little worn and discoloured, but the wooden legs are intact and strong. A bit of paint and fabric and they could look like new, she says.

A labyrinth game she salvaged from the garbage heap is made of wood with knobs on the top and side to control the deck. The trick is to get the ball from the beginning to the end without it falling into one of the many holes throughout. One of the tiny walls has come unglued and the ball is missing, but otherwise the game is as good as new. It was also in the landfill.

Then there are the toys. One window sill of the studio is covered in tiny plastic toys. A magical castle sits across the room on the floor. Some soap and water is all that's required to bring these once-loved figurines back to life, but they were discarded instead, Ashton says.

Last year, the artist participated in HSAD's studio process advancement course, an experience she calls “absolutely fabulous” and taught her more than her two years at York University. “It's the best thing I could have done to push myself,” she says.

The master pastellist and elected member of the Ontario Society of Artists says while she was doing the course at the college last year she started working on concepts around the things we discard. She had been painting still life objects – the everyday items we don't normally think about – and then began to

incorporate the waste those objects generate. Her paintings of coffee cups were done with grounds, coffee and filters. She made a quilt with beer cans.

She asked the staff member who works in the cafeteria to save her the old tea bags and enlisted fellow students to save the bags in a container.

For her residency, she's been collecting plastic water bottles to create a sculpture. They're not just any bottles, though. She is only using the ones that were thrown in the garbage rather than recycling bin. Ashton lives in Stouffville and has been an active artist for the last 20 years – most of that time taking courses at HSAD. When she and her husband decided to buy a cottage, they thought the obvious place would be near the college. They now spend their free time on Gooderham Lake.

Ashton will be working on her residency at the college until Aug. 5. The public is welcome to come by and chat with her about her work and bring her objects intended for the landfill. She is available for visitors Monday and Wednesday between 9 and 4 p.m. as well as Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday afternoons.



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