

Creative Flow Three Activist Artists

by Sally Hansell

Using marine debris, painted silk, and paper, artist Pam Longobardi, Linda Gass, and Lauren Rosenthal advocate for greater consciousness of our fragile water systems.



Powerful new work by three activist artists addresses one of the nation's most critical issues—the steady degradation of our precious water supply. Pam Longobardi uses plastic trash collected on beaches to make provocative art that points to the devastating dangers of plastic in our environment. Linda Gass creates vibrant painted-silk quilt works depicting specific ecological hazards in San Francisco Bay. Lauren Rosenthal turns watershed data into cut-paper sculptures to demonstrate the interconnectedness of rivers and earthly organisms. Through their chosen media, these diverse artists advocate for a heightened global ecological consciousness.

In 2006, Pam Longobardi launched an ongoing project called *Drifters* after encountering mounds of consumer waste on the beach at South Point, the southernmost tip of the Hawaiian Islands. The project includes photography, sculpture, public art, and installations made from the debris that washes up on shores around the world.

The Atlanta artist creates “driftwebs” from abandoned drift nets, the miles-long fishing nets that wreak havoc on sea life, killing fish, mammals, turtles, and birds. She cuts and ties pieces of the nets to make installations resembling spider webs. Her intent is not only to draw attention to the dangerous plastic nets, but more importantly, to use their woven colorful forms as a dual metaphor for the predatory, destructive behavior of humankind and the interconnectedness of the web of life.

During the 2009 Venice Biennale, various *Drifters* works were on view in a solo exhibition at ARTLIFEfortheworld Gallery in Venice. In *Canal Driftweb* (2009), Longobardi draped a multicolor web across the gallery's crumbling brick exterior. Rope-like netting, radiating from a central point, was tied to grated windows, a bridge, and other architectural elements before spilling into a boat moored to a nearby dock. The theme of interconnectedness was reinforced by the title of the exhibition, *Pathalassa*, a reference to the hypothetical single ocean that surrounded the prehistoric supercontinent Pangaea on earth.

Inside the gallery, a sculpture called *Shipwreck (Unintended)*
LEFT: Pam Longobardi collecting drift net on the Big Island, Hawaii, 2008. Photo: David Rothstein



Consequences) (2009) depicted half a splintered boat constructed of black plastic tubes from Japanese oyster aquaculture pens. Behind the vessel, a skein of tangled nets, rope, and plastic objects floated across the floor like the entrails of a harvested whale. Longobardi had found the tubes and some of the nets at South Point, while the other marine debris was gathered from Italian beaches.

Through the repurposing of refuse into vibrant supersized webs and sculptural forms, Longobardi wants to project “a picture of ourselves so that we may see ourselves more clearly.” In addition to making three-dimensional art, she takes photographic “portraits” of individual objects, which are often highly personal things such as combs and toothbrushes, toys, and shoe soles found on beaches. As the Georgia State University, Atlanta, art professor explains in her new book, *Drifters: Plastics, Pollution, and Personhood* (Milan: Charta, 2009. Reviewed in our Catalogs section on page 60), “These works pose a mirror in front of the viewer in that one can recognize the self and one’s own participation in the creation of this materiality.”

ABOVE: Pam Longobardi, *Shipwreck (Unintended Consequences)* (with detail), 2009; found marine debris: drift net, toy-truck wheels, oyster aquaculture spacer bars, flyswatter, air-freshener mount, shoe sole, umbrella handle, fishing-net float, sumi-ink bottle, wire, wire mesh; dimensions variable. Installation for *Panthalassa* exhibition, ARTLIFEfortheworld Gallery, Venice, Italy. BELOW: Pam Longobardi, *Driftweb II*, 2009; found ropes, nets, marine debris. Installation for *Panthalassa* exhibition, ARTLIFEfortheworld Gallery, Venice, Italy. Photos by the artist.





Artist Linda Gass gets “local, personal and dirty” in her new trio of painted quilted works. Her small-scale silk wall hangings depict with specificity where her sewage goes, where her garbage goes, and where her gasoline gets refined. Providing aerial views of a water treatment plant, a landfill and an oil refinery, all on the shore of the San Francisco Bay, the beguiling works lure the viewer in close with rich hues, intimate forms, and exquisite craftsmanship, leading to engagement with the political subtext.

The seed for the quilts came from hearing a talk by environmental writer Gary Snyder ten years ago. Gass recalls Snyder quizzed the audience with questions like, “How local are you? Do you know where your water comes from and where it goes?,” She found the answers after joining a local Green Ribbons Citizens’ Committee, a grassroots environmental policy group that took informative trips to landfills, recycling centers, and sewage treatment plants near her Los Altos, California, home.

In art that fuses painting and stitching, Gass applies Remazol fiber-reactive dyes and water-soluble resist to silk crepe de chine. She uses machine stitching to outline her pictorial images and create details such as eddies and cracked earth. The modest-sized works have a pronounced sculptural quality achieved through stitching, thick batting and gradations of color. Questioning titles—*Treatment?*, *Sanitary?* and *Refined?* (all 2009)—create a tension between the formal beauty of the works and their political content. While the titles engage the viewer, the dialogue is carried further by accompanying text statements by the artist that identify the depicted facilities, cite their noxious impact, and conclude with a call for greater protection of our globe.

Lauren Rosenthal’s inventive sculptures of watersheds evolved out of nomadic camping trips on the banks of the Haw River in north central North Carolina, where after college she helped run an environmental educational program for children. As an MFA student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, she began making river maps, adopting cartography as her visual language. Since 2008, she has used hydrological and topographical data to create a series of paper sculptures of specific river basins on the East Coast. Like Gass and Longobardi, Rosenthal considers herself an activist, but her art takes a more subtle approach. Her all-white paper carvings have an austere, meditative beauty that evokes the fragility and ideal purity of watersheds. “The white is a negation of our own real experience of landscape,” the New Jersey resident says.

When discussing her work, Rosenthal emphasizes the often unquestioned authority of maps in manipulating our ideas.

LEFT: *Treatment?* (TOP); *Sanitary?* (MIDDLE); *Refined?* (BOTTOM). All by Linda Gass, 2009; silk crepe de chine, silk broadcloth backing and polyester batting, rayon and polyester embroidery thread; handpainted using Remazol dyes and water-soluble resist, machine-quilted; 30" x 30". Photos: Don Tuttle.



“My work employs the power of maps. By emphasizing some information—river data—and eliminating other information—roads and labels, I propose a particular ecocentric view of the world we inhabit with the hope that we might think differently about ourselves as subjects within it,” she explains.

To make her intricate relief sculptures, she uses data obtained from geographic information systems (GIS). Using an X-acto knife, she cuts the shape of each elevation layer on individual sheets of 300-pound watercolor paper, detailing even the tiniest streams. The multilevel works include up to seventeen layers of paper glued together.

Imagining a world in which water is the defining element for the sociopolitical structure, in 2006 Rosenthal created her own atlas of the contiguous United States. Watershed divides serve as territorial boundaries instead of the current state borders, allowing citizens to locate themselves within the river district on which they depend. Titled *Political/Hydrological: A Watershed Remapping of the Contiguous United States*, the work features forty-eight maps and an introduction compiled into a limited edition artist’s book.

Each of these three artists uses a different language for addressing the plight of our planet—the universally grasped lingo

ABOVE: *Lauren Rosenthal, Delaware River Anatomy (with detail), 2008; watercolor paper, wood, paint, hand-cut, painted; 60" x 36" x 18". Photos by the artist.*

of plastic, the poetry of color and thread, and the data of cartography. Through engaging our imaginations, these profound works remind us that the dialogue between humans and our earth must deepen and change. 

Pam Longobardi’s website is www.pamlongobardi.com. Longobardi will have two solo shows on view this summer: *Material Drift* at Sandler Hudson Gallery, Atlanta, May 21–July 3, www.sandlerhudson.com, and *Selections* at Tinney Contemporary, Nashville, Tennessee, June 19–July 31, www.tinneycontemporary.com. To read a review of her new book *Drifters: Plastics, Pollution and Personhood*, turn to page 60. Linda Gass’s website is www.lindagass.com. Gass’s work is included in the Women Environmental Artists Directory (WEAD) Exhibit 2010 at Art & Consciousness Gallery, John F. Kennedy University, Berkeley, California, through June 12, www.jfku.edu/gallery; and the Arts Council Silicon Valley Artist Fellowship Awards Exhibition, Triton Museum, Santa Clara, California, May 15–June 20, www.tritonmuseum.org. Lauren Rosenthal’s website is www.laurenrosenthalstudio.com. Rosenthal’s work is included in *Emerging Patterns*, through August 31, at the Arts Council of the Morris Area, Morristown, New Jersey, www.morrisarts.org.