

# Graceful Collisions: The Synthetic Sculptures of Lucie Noël Thune

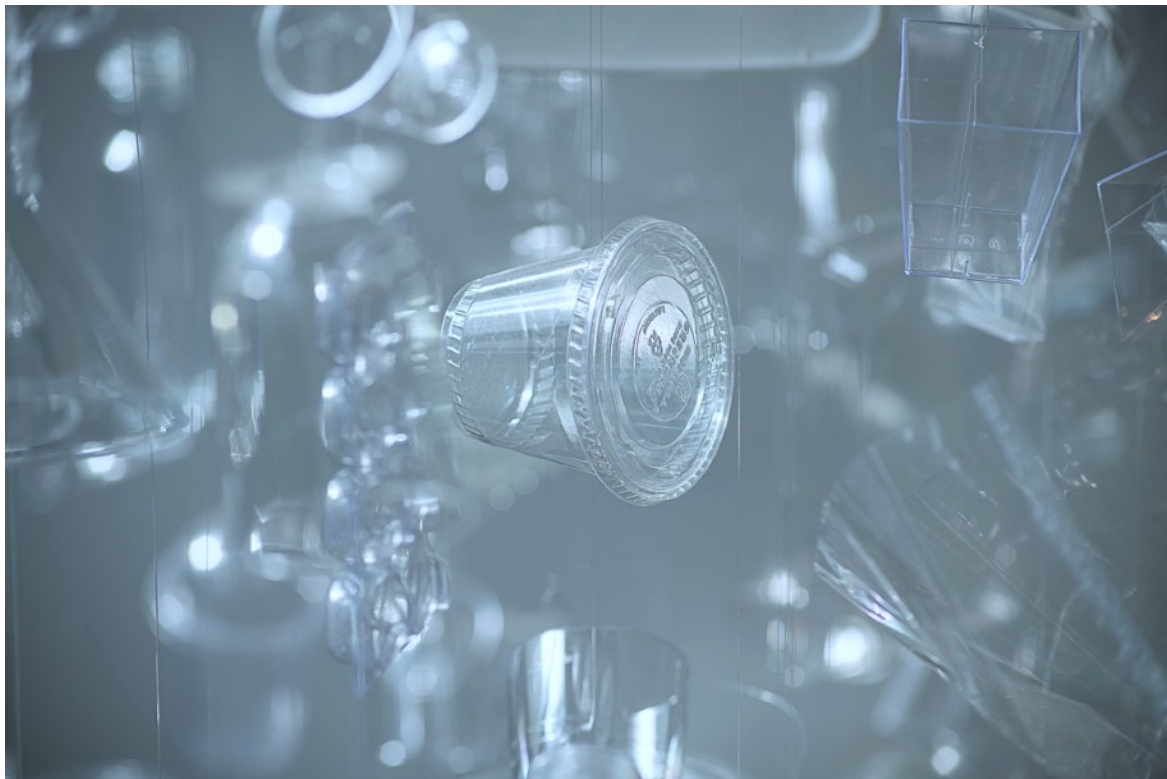
For almost two decades, Lucie Noël Thune has created challenging and poetic sculptures that highlight our relationship to the artificial. Found objects, petroleum based wax casts, plastic packaging and refuse—these have become her materials, through which Thune has developed astonishing effects, however, Thune is also an environmentally conscious artist. Her sculptures embody the problematics of early twenty-first century life. They encapsulate the creative destruction and the destructive creativity that have become part and parcel of global industrialism and consumerism. They show us how the products, byproducts and refuse that fill up our daily lives are equally manifestations of waste and beauty. There is, then, a tension between the sculpture and concept that pervades these sculptures. On one hand, each piece calls on us to recognize the often terrible role that the proliferation of synthetics has in the Anthropocene, while on the other, each sculpture finds within its own composition a unique beauty and form. Such a tension is not accidental. As a maker, Thune does not shy away from creating confrontational works, whose symbolic powers force their viewers to consider the liminal state humanity occupies between being creators and destroyers of the planet.

Thune's most recent work addresses the proliferation of plastic. Gathering the plastic packaging and refuse that come as byproducts of modern life, Thune has assembled these materials into aesthetic armatures, which are as graceful in form as they are terrifying in theme. Thune's installation piece, titled *Footprint*, is exemplary of this work. A floating cube made entirely of one-time-use plastics, *Footprint* documents the artist's consumption of plastic within a one-year period. As Thune relates about the installation, "I was interested in seeing one year's worth of volume, and I was surprised to discover what the volume was." *Footprint* is 552 cubic feet of



*Footprint.*

plastic! As Thune goes on to say, “imagine how large a lifetime’s worth of plastic would be!” The material realities of *Footprint* confront us with the material realities of consumption. The sculpture demonstrates the artist’s (and by consequence its viewers’ own) culpability in terms of the



*Footprint (detail).*

environmental crisis that is plastic’s proliferation.

However, Thune's sculptures also celebrate the inherent beauties that can be found in many of industrialism's most seemingly unartistic synthetic byproducts. One cannot look at Thune's wall-sculpture *Twentieth Century* and fail to admire how the piece exhibits the sleek sim-



licity of earlier minimalist works. Here, sixteen salad boxes are arranged into two rows on the wall. Elegant, transparent and identical, at first, the boxes appear as anything other than found-objects. Instead, one thinks of the minimalism of Donald Judd's *Untitled* wall-sculptures; however, these comparisons are quickly challenged by the sudden recognition of the materials from which the piece is made. Under closer inspection, we recognize the plastic containers for what they are, whilst equally rec-

ognizing their singular and collective beauties. We are surprised at their detail, at the ribbed patterns that structure their bases, which have now been turned toward us. Thune has given us the chance to appreciate the embossed printing on the boxes. In themselves, the texts relate little more than each box's volume and manufacturer's stamp. Still, embossed into the transparent

plastic, the raised letters proffer a gem-like quality. In this way, *Twentieth Century* allows its viewers to have an intimate look at these containers.

Other works in her series *Objet Trouvè* achieves similarly startling effects. Consisting of twenty two art works, wall and free-standing floor sculptures, *Objet Trouvè* is a tour de force of plastic products and byproducts sequestered to the world of art. Surprise dominates the series; the viewer is challenged again and again by the materials that comprise each piece. The soft is



*Flora (detail).*

These are massed to fabricate the center of the flower

revealed as the hard, the product as the byproduct, the organic as the inorganic. The floor-sculpture, *Flora* affords us a perfect example of these medial surprises. The piece takes the form of an enormous, neon green flower. Warm and enticing, *Flora* languishes before the viewer as a beanbag, oversized stuffed animal or soft chair might do. However, the sculpture defies our immediate sensory expectations when a closer inspection reveals the piece's materials to be bundles of

synthetic hollow core strings.

as well as the reedy, kelp-like fronds that make up its outer peddles. The effect on the viewer is that of sensual shock, for we are given the visual equivalence of a welcoming natural or semi-natural object—a great and seemingly generous flower lying before us in full bloom, only then to be denied these mollifying associations. The sculpture challenges us with its fibrous textures and obvious mock organic contours.

A similar illusion can be found in *Vermicular*. Here, as the sculpture's title enumerates, two voluminous wormlike shapes twist and turn, labyrinth-like, filling up approximately two-square meters of floor space. There is an undeniable, serpentine grace to the piece. Its shapes are sumptuous in their curves and satchets. At first glance, one imagines *Vermicular* to be a pair of living organisms, or—if not—one suspects then that it is sculpted from white marble. It is neither. What lies before us is no less than 13,500 transparent ice-cream containers, stacked inside of each other, and standing on their ends.



*Vermicular.*

In this way, the warm, larva-like quality of the piece is replaced by the sudden recognition of quantity and mass production, and yet our revelation cannot remain permanent, for in an act of unrelenting gestalt, *Vermicular's* aesthetic form insists on its organic nature and natural grace. Here then is a piece, along with some many of the artists other works, that declaims the socio-economic forces that have made its material reality possible while also, finally, celebrating this consumerist reality.

Such works as *Footprint*, *Twentieth Century*, *Flora* and *Vermicular* serve us as metonyms of the worlds of mass production and mass waste. Made of the containers that deliver to us such products as sandwiches, soft drinks and ice cream, these sculptures embody the volumes and shapes of what they were made to contain. The objects that comprise each sculpture have been machine-stamped into their initial physical purposes. Each box, each straw bears the touch of the machine that made it, and so bears the purpose of its design and, by extension, its original role in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century's consumerist economy. The beauty of these pieces are encrypted with this economy, and they comprise the actual plastic footprints of this world at large—a world in which the products that they were designed to contain have been used or will be used.

Thune's installation *Flora* is eclectic of this dynamic. It is multimedia. Comprised of plastic found-objects, cast acrylic artist-paint and wax; an artificial garden that utilizes familiar materials to reflect upon our lives. In this garden, we discover green flowers formed by disposable jewelry strings and synthetics polymer flower shapes. We are met by ephemeral works that awaken our senses— a cold sculpture that accrue frost and evolve like a time piece. There is petroleum wax sculptures addressing the bi-product of raw oil and the transient nature of materials. This is a garden, then, that explores themes of consumerism, waste-streams and environmental impacts, and so its flowers come to form the perennial blooms of disaster. Prophetic and terrifying, their beauties remonstrate with us about a future smothered in plastic. In this way, *flora* cultivates invention, fancy and serious investigations. It strives to engage its audience in a dialogue

about the issues of mass consumption while positing a post-synthetic Eden of sorts, a paradise in which the organic world is duplicated by the artificial.

Thune extends this sort of duplication in her *still-life* series. *Still-life* is comprised of objects the artist selected from her working environment. In the series, an espresso cup, lightbulbs and a notebook become central; however this centrality is offset by the fact that these objects are, in fact, black and white wax duplicates cast from molds of the original objects. In the process of making *still-life*, Thune embraced the technical demands of imprinting, molding and casting in order to sculpturally copy each specific object according to its shape, contours and proportion. Like *So Twentieth Century* and *Vermicular*, each piece in *Still-life* is a metonym. Bearing the volume and scale of its original subject, it represents the consumerist world from which that subject was fabricated, yet each piece also denies us its original's function. No espresso shall ever fill this wax cup; no electricity will ever light these bulbs, nor can the notebook ever be opened. These impossibilities al-



low us to appreciate the shapeliness of these fabricated things: we realize how the espresso cup is luminous, even piquant; the light bulbs are curvaceous; even the notebook exhibits a wafer-life perfection, and yet *still-life* also confronts us with the issues of waste and utility by enacting a



second reproduction of these objects. This second reproduction, like so many primary ones, mimics the realities of proliferation. Here, Thune fabricates the fabricated in precise acts of excess, casting beautiful and yet unusable things from ordinary useful ones.

Thune's sculptures become what Jacques Derrida terms "undecidable." Made of the synthetic stuff of packaging and refuse or duplicated from the objects of mass production, they oscillate between the binary states of artifacts and art. Refusing to allow their viewers to decide if what we are witnessing is one or the other, Thune's sculptures would strand us in a liminal state. In this way, these works stand as a series of confrontational artistic signifiers of the world consumerism and mass production have led us to, for as viewers of her work, we are confronted by materials our culture has created to be discarded. Such non-things as the plastic wrap used to package a sandwich one might buy at a convenience store or that is used to seal up a box of a pre-washed lettuce become in the hands of such an artist agents of artistic invention. However, while these agents can very well become the stuff of art, they cannot slip the realities of their former functions. None of these works allows itself total transformation. Instead, Thune's sculptures mandate, by virtue of their materials, that we witness each as a metaphoric collision. Two objects collide into a third, and yet the original natures of these materials never vanish be-

fore our eyes. How are we to reconcile ourselves with such collisions except through a self-awareness and acknowledgement of the roles these products and byproducts play in our lives? Thune's opus resists answering this question for us. It leaves us instead to meditate on those synthetic objects that have been made for us to use, consume and discard.