

Convenience & Conveyance

BARRY ROSENTHAL



Kingsborough Art Museum
Kingsborough Community College, CUNY

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Kingsborough Art Museum

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Artist website: barryrosenthal.com

Cover image: Barry Rosenthal, *The Choking Point*, 2015. Photograph, 27 x 36 inches. All photographs of artworks provided courtesy of the artist.

Barry Rosenthal
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Directors' Welcome

On behalf of the Kingsborough Art Museum, I welcome you to this timely exhibition, *Barry Rosenthal: Convenience & Conveyance*. Part urban archaeology, part well-crafted design, and part global commentary, Rosenthal's photographs and installation pieces call attention to our seemingly insatiable desire for plastic. Display is integral to Rosenthal's artistic practice, and his work evokes the eighteenth- and nineteenth century predilection for cataloguing and displaying objects collected from the natural world; similarly, they may recall the masterfully-composed illustrations in reference tomes such as *The Grammar of Ornament* (Owen Jones, 1856) or botanical studies by naturalists such as Maria Sibylla Merian (Swiss, 1647-1717). Some are playful arrangements that suggest a Miro-like surrealistic sense of whimsy; others hit the viewer like indictments of our human weakness for immediate consumption and of our convenient neglect of its devastating effects on the planet.

Beneath the social and environmental commentary, however, there lies a myriad of artistic choices that Rosenthal has made to convey his ideas. From the

Duchampian gesture of the found object, to his early adherence to the ubiquitous grid that once dominated contemporary art, he incorporates the language of Modernism into an environmental message that is very much of the moment. Scale, as he notes in the following interview, has long been an issue in his work, as the actual size of the objects and their photographic representation often differ greatly. Several are of a scale that echo the enormity of the pollution problem itself; conversely, many of the small plastic objects Rosenthal photographs are enlarged, inviting us to consider these objects that many ignore or dismiss as inconsequential. By collecting and making previously unconsidered connections, visual or otherwise, between these objects, Rosenthal redefines their original utilitarian purpose.

We are also pleased to present and debut a number of Rosenthal's installations in this exhibition. As with his other works, these sculptural pieces address the issue of our plastic-permeated waterways.

We hope this exhibition provides as much for the mind as for the eyes.

Brian E. Hack, Ph.D.
Director, Kingsborough Art Museum



In Dialogue:

Barry Rosenthal + Brian Edward Hack

Above: Artist Barry Rosenthal with *American Tapestry*.

Barry Rosenthal: Let's talk. Do you have some questions, or a starting point?

Brian Hack: I do. I have some esoteric questions about your work that we could get into, but I imagine that some readers may be new to your work. So let's begin by telling us a little bit about yourself, as they say.

Barry Rosenthal: Well, I've always been a photographer in my adult life. I started in my sophomore year in college, and that was it for me. That's what I wanted to do. But, you know, along the way, I've tried a bunch of different things. Back when I started, street photography was the thing, and I wanted to be a street photographer. So that involves photographing people, and I started to realize that maybe I wasn't the greatest street photographer. I think my athletic ability or something was missing, and my sense of timing was missing. So the moment seemed to pass. I then moved on, and started doing portraits of people. And I liked that and I turned that into a commercial career. I did all types of still photography work in the commercial field, doing advertising and editorial catalog, every possible area. But in college I had done projects that were long term, and I liked the idea of staying with one thing for a long time. And so that's something that stuck with me. I did a term in Vienna; I was a liberal arts student. And we had a variety of classes, including things like Eastern European economics, which was really a sleeper. But we also had a class at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, and we had—I don't know if

she was the curator—but one of the lecturers was very well-educated, and her English was fairly good. And she instilled something in me, about European art anyway, Medieval and Renaissance painting. I wasn't going to become an art historian, but it just was some inspiration she gave me, and so that was very influential. I don't know how else to describe it, but being in that class opened my eyes. I went to Dayton Art Institute at night, when I was in Ohio.

Brian Hack: Are you from Ohio?

Barry Rosenthal: No, I'm from Massachusetts—Springfield. But the program there gave me enough variety of classes. And so that helped create interest more. Again, at that time, it was all about photographing people; I had to go through a twenty-five- or thirty-year career before realizing that I wanted to do work like I had done in college, where it was just me and a crew of people. I just wanted to simplify things. I didn't know that I wanted to do art *per se*, but I just wanted to be on my own. I can't say I quit the commercial field, but I just let it play out and didn't promote. And these just went away while I started to experiment on what I wanted to do. And then I first started doing botanical work, because I wanted to work outside and be outdoors. For whatever reason, I decided to work in the studio and learn studio lighting and color and things that I hadn't done in college. When I came to New York, I had to choose something, some path, and I chose to stay in the studio. So instead of seeing the world, I made up my own world, I guess. I wanted to see if I could do what I had done in col-

lege, which was to just go off and do a separate thing on my own that would get me outside. So there I was, for a few years shooting botanical work—this was like twenty years ago. And I was happy doing that. Then I started to notice in my travels that there was trash by the side of the road, and I liked the way it looked, the way it had been altered by the elements. I took note, but didn't act on it. When I was at the Jersey Shore, at Long Beach Island one New Year's, looking for plants, I instead came across all this plastic stuff that had washed up on the beach. That was the start of it. At that time, I was taking a small studio outside with me and shooting all the botanicals under the same conditions, with a way of diffusing the light. And I just wanted to bring the composition to the forefront and not make dazzling light discoveries, but just follow what I had seen in botanical art from the 1800s. The explorers had taken artists with them when they went to the South Seas, and so I liked that. That was an influence. I thought of it as almost scientific; it was just weeds and found things that I put together on the spot with my little outdoor studio and shot right there where I found things on a road, or in a field.

Brian Hack: Those would be the *Lost in Nature* photographs?

Barry Rosenthal: No, those are the *Photobotanicals* [the series entitled *Photoboticus*]. *Lost in Nature* was a thing to keep me busy in the winter, when I didn't want to go out much. So I would take things inside and try them out, and then work on them. The black and white series was sort of

an ode to a photographer who lived 100 years ago named [Karl] Blossfeldt—the German fellow (Fig. 1).

Brian Hack: I did have a question, actually, about *Lost in Nature* being a visual dialogue of sorts between yourself and Karl Blossfeldt. I've always been intrigued by Blossfeldt, whose work seems to me both an investigation into the details of the natural world, of the overlooked or passed by world—

Barry Rosenthal: Right.

Brian Hack: —and also an invitation to the viewer to take a closer, deeper look into those overlooked details to see the workings of nature. And your work is building on that, or making a dialogue between the two of you.

Barry Rosenthal: That's makes a lot of sense. I like that. I mean, it was a very specific look that he had created, and I tried to honor him for giving me that inspiration (Fig. 2). So I tried to stay within his genre as close as I could. I couldn't do exactly—his stuff is unbelievable.

Brian Hack: So, so how did this transition happen from studying Blossfeldt to this idea of collecting?

Barry Rosenthal: Everything was found, you know. I was working with found objects—even the plants were found. So it was logical, especially since these all these objects kind of lived in the same area, I was working on the side of the road, and looking at weeds and things that have been

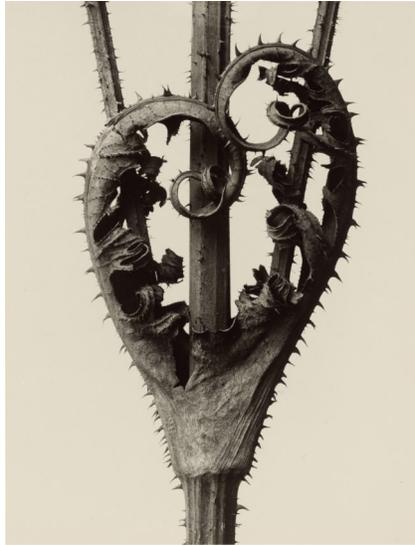


Figure 1. Karl Blossfeldt, *Dipsacus laciniatus* (1928).
Plate 44 from *Unformen der Kunst* (*Archetypes of Art*,
translated as *Art Forms in Nature*).

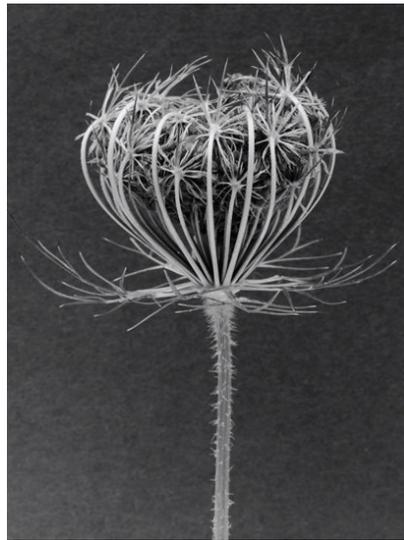


Figure 2. Barry Rosenthal, *Queen Anne's Lace 2*. Photograph.

overlooked. I found it an interesting world that kept me occupied for quite a while; these plants, they grew on the side of the road, and then finding bits of discarded stuff thrown out of cars that had lived in these marginal areas for years. It was purely accidental, but it fits between the first discovery, at the beach, of these colorful bottlecaps. I'm a collector, what can I do? I picked up things. And at first I just collected similar objects, and they were all small; they fit on the same, 18 x 24 inch pad that I had for my background, my artist paper, and some were just spilled out. And then I started arranging things. So it went kind of step-by-step. But it went from small collections that were disorganized, to things that were starting to get organized. And for some reason, I thought of rows and columns (Fig. 3). Everything was in rows and columns for quite a while for me. I just let that play out, and slowly things evolved to the point where the grid was not important any longer. I just wanted a more emotional connection. Initially, I thought the grid was like opening a drawer in a museum, where you'd have a collection of butterflies and they're all on pins, all neatly displayed. So that's what I was following with the grid, but I wasn't really satisfied. That was not going to be forever. The first one, or one of the first, pieces that broke the grid for me was the one that I called *Blue Ocean* (Fig. 4). It had all these blue objects, but it became more whimsical and a bit story-like; some of the objects told stories. I started to realize that I had something more going on, and then *display* became a much more important part of what I was doing. And I had to come up with

some unique display of all the objects.

Brian Hack: You're anticipating my questions. I think that the organization of the elements within your *Found in Nature* photos, by color, and by an aesthetic sensibility in terms of the composition, evokes a categorization that seems to stem from the Enlightenment desire for classification and presentation. But you're doing it with these other elements. Do you see your practice in terms of, say, eighteenth- or nineteenth-century natural history illustrations and museum collecting? You're talking about display, and it's as if you're presenting these elements as, in a way, *unnatural* objects?

Barry Rosenthal: Yeah, you know, okay. That's really well put, what you just said. Initially, it maybe it transferred over from the botanicals, where I was doing that grid, and it could be another drawer at the museum. Only nature has been replaced by plastic. And so the grid did make a lot of sense, in a way; I wouldn't have done a grid with natural plants. For some reason that never entered my mind. But I initially didn't realize that I had an environmental project going on. For a few years of doing the work, the early work of the plastic collections, I just was attracted to the stuff because it had been changed enough, by being exposed to the elements. And that was good enough for me. And at some point, I woke up to the idea that I had an environmental project. So I entered the whole political side backwards. Maybe people think, "Oh, I'm going to come up with a project that is about the environ-

ment.” And that’s simple—simple outline and approach to a new idea. No, that wasn’t my way. My way was just to feel my way, let it evolve. Let time take it where it’s gonna take it and—

Brian Hack: The best art comes that way rather than trying to force something to an issue. The art came first—the way it should be, I think.

Barry Rosenthal: Well I did not know. I felt like, you know, just a primitive kind of working through it: *I must do this, I have to do this*. That’s all I felt. I still feel that way. This has stayed with me for a long time. Now. It’s like fifteen years of doing *Found in Nature*. And it stills feels exciting. But the evolution now is three-dimensional work and I’m very excited about that. So I’m not done with photography by any means, but I started to see some limitations. First off, the affordability of what I can actually show on my own dime is hard—and so I can’t make huge prints. And I’d love to. I saw some of my work in Abu Dhabi. In the event I was invited to, they had printed 10 foot wide, 10 foot tall pieces. It looked great, really amazing. But on the practical side, that would take up my whole studio. So I found a way of showing the work in a size I’m comfortable with, but it wasn’t just size, it’s also the scale of the work. People would look at it and say, “Oh, are those miniatures?” Or they just didn’t get that that collection was 11 feet long when I was done with it, or that the collection was so big I had to do it in two parts, left and right, because I couldn’t fit it in the camera and in

the studio. So the idea of the three dimensional work does give me scale; that kind of answers that problem of photography having some limitations.

Brian Hack: Was this larger work the one called *American Tapestry*?

Barry Rosenthal: That’s a big one, that’s twelve feet across. But it’s not any different than some of the things I did in the studio. So a lot of the [photographs], like the work gloves (Fig. 5)...some of the bottles, the glass bottles, those were big, the *Soles* (Fig. 6) were big. There were many that were large, and it just didn’t come across. I think that aspect of doing 3D has only opened up what I can display, or how I can display those. I’m sure I wouldn’t have built these things, if I just stayed with photography. It’s been part of the process for a very long time, building a temporary sculpture and either taking it apart or recycling it and putting it back in the system, because you know, these were lost objects that that didn’t become part of that [recycling] system. Like the *Party Doll (Sea Goddess, Fig. 7)*. That’s just a found object. *Party doll* was a toe sticking out of all the reeds. I went collecting with a friend that day, and she came upon just a little toe. And she couldn’t pull the thing out. I pulled it out. And suddenly it was a five- or six-foot long body.

Brian Hack: [Laughs] Weren’t you surprised.

Barry Rosenthal: Very much so. Then finding the rope, and the



Figure 5. Barry Rosenthal, *Work Gloves*. Photograph, 27 x 36 inches.



Figure 6. Barry Rosenthal, *Soles*. Photograph, 27 x 36 inches.



Figure 7. *Sea Goddess* (2022). Plastic, rope. 5 x 6 feet.



Figure 8. Augustus Saint-Gaudens, *Replica of the Winged Figure from the Robert Gould Shaw Memorial* (1884-1897). Gilded bronze, 34 3/4 x 118 7/8 x 11 1/8 in. (88.3 x 301.9 x 28.3 cm) Brooklyn Museum, Robert B. Woodward Memorial Fund.

color of the two objects together—it's just great happenstance. That's all I can say. I've had her for about five years and I have you know, been shy of doing anything with it; finally, I came up with something that looks human enough. Because she's not a sex doll. It's strictly a party doll. There are no holes, basically. And so, you know, it's a little more innocent. And I wanted to keep it that way.

Brian Hack: I didn't realize there was some distinction between *blow-up doll* and *party doll*.

Barry Rosenthal: Oh, yeah. Once I found this, I had to look it up. And then yeah, it opened up a whole new world to me. So that's what happens with this stuff. I always do some research to see either what it's made of, or what the deal is with it. Yeah. So she's surrounded by that blue material, it's rope that's been shredded by the tides. So it's a rope I collected here. We have a waterfront area too, in the harbor at Brooklyn Army Terminal. I actually found the driftwood there, the *Cabinet of Curiosities* also came from that same area; I built that and I'm going to put small pieces that I haven't been able to show before. So maybe ten or twelve pieces will go on those shelves. Then the bulkhead. The first time I went to Floyd Bennett field was the first time I ventured into the water, in the shore at Floyd Bennett Field, and I saw this vertical kind of—what to call it? It was as if an archeological dig was there, and they had cut four feet down and there were all these reeds and trash mixed in together, smashed against a wall, and at

the top was the edge of the parking lot, basically. I tried to recreate that in a cinematic, eight-foot long piece, though this is still in the works.

Brian Hack: For an art historian in American art, my mind immediately connects that particular piece [*Sea Goddess*] to other things. Do you know the *Robert Gould Shaw Memorial* in Boston, by Augustus Saint-Gaudens?

Barry Rosenthal: Oh, I'm a Saint-Gaudens fan. But no, I don't know.

Brian Hack: Saint-Gaudens sculpted a memorial to Robert Gould Shaw, who led a group of African American soldiers [the 54th Regiment] to their certain deaths. And above them on this monument, there is a floating goddess of victory (Fig. 8). The party doll reminds me a little of that figure. And many of the *Found in Nature* photographs remind me of Ernst Haeckel's illustrations of microscopic diatoms (Fig. 9). Some of your works that are on a large scale, like *American Tapestry (frontispiece to this interview)*, seem a continuation of the nineteenth-century panorama; artists like Frederic Edwin Church and [Albert] Bierstadt made these enormous paintings that express a kind of national pride in America's wilderness as an Eden or paradise (Fig. 10). They're often enormous paintings, and some of your photographs are on that scale, but saying something quite different about America—that we've ruined that wilderness with plastic and big foam buoys. It seems a continuation of that monumental, panoramic kind of view,

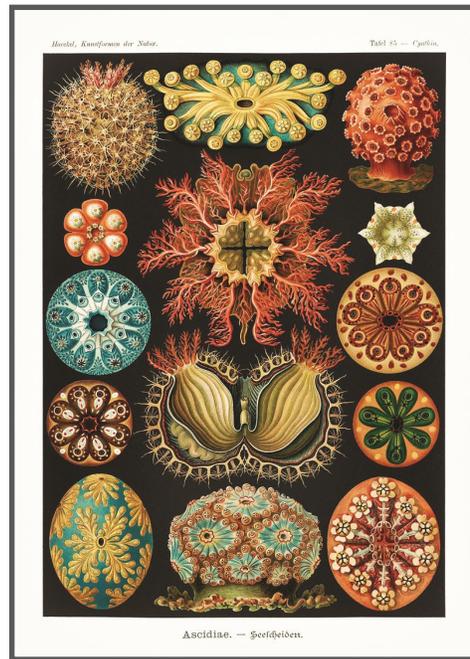


Figure 9. Ernst Haeckel, *Ascidiae (Ascidians)*, Plate 85 from *Kunst-formen der Natur (Artforms in Nature)*, 1904.



Fig. 10. Albert Bierstadt (American, born Germany, 1830-1902). *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mt. Rosalie*, 1866. Oil on canvas, frame: 98 5/8 x 158 1/8 x 7 1/4 inches. Brooklyn Museum.

but it's of all the detritus left behind.

Barry Rosenthal: Well, okay, *monumental*, you know, I'm not sure I feel that *yet*. Maybe I'm working up towards it.

Brian Hack: Well, monumental in scale, perhaps. You know, it's like the form follows the function—that it's an enormous scale for an enormous problem. The enormous issue of marine pollution and our destroying the waterways and oceans. A huge problem warrants a scale like that.

Barry Rosenthal: That's what I'm ultimately hoping for, for people to take it to heart. And for people to start taking responsibility, and start figuring things out for themselves, because the government sure is weighed down with so many other problems. Recycling has not really worked. Recycling was an industry-created propaganda pitch, and it worked. It succeeded in putting the consumer in the place of the manufacturer as the responsible party. It's been 40 years of successful PR. But whoever invented it—I'm not being cynical, I'm just telling you—this was intentionally done, to head off any problems. It succeeded beyond their wildest dreams. The research is part of what I consider this job. So the political side came from the research. But my background is this: my dad was in the plastics business. Post-World War Two, he came out of college, a new industry was starting up in Massachusetts, it was a big thing. And he became a manufacturer at a factory and a company that employed 100 people. And he

wanted me to go into the business, but that was the farthest thing from my mind. So it's just interesting how I ended up doing this. But, you know, it's not like some Oedipal thing, where I've got to wake up every morning and kill my father, you know, over and over again.

Brian Hack: Of course, you know that's where my mind went immediately.

Barry Rosenthal: I love my dad, but I know something about the business. So it's just—I don't know what to say. Is it coincidental? I'm not able to figure that one out.

Brian Hack: Around what year was that? What time was all that happening?

Barry Rosenthal: Oh, his business was big in the 50s, 60s. Early 70s.

Brian Hack: I'm remembering that scene in *The Graduate*—

Barry Rosenthal: Yes.

Brian Hack: —When he [Walter Brook, as Mr. McGuire] advises Dustin Hoffman to get into the plastics business.

Barry Rosenthal: [Quotes scene] “One word.” But I have to tell you: Who was Dustin Hoffman fooling around with? *Mrs. Robinson*. And who is my father's partner? *Jack Robinson*. It's like, too weird.

Brian Hack: [Laughs] That could have really worked out for you, had you....

Barry Rosenthal: So he has a partner named Robinson. Come on. That is my life.

Brian Hack: Life imitates art. Funny.

Barry Rosenthal: I've been doing a fair amount of talks over the years. And I finally got comfortable enough to talk about my background. So for the last few years, if it was appropriate, I would say something about what I just told you. And I think it's an interesting part of the story.

Brian Hack: It's *very* interesting. When you said it, I thought, "well, *there's* the lynchpin."

Barry Rosenthal: Yeah. Because you know, I don't want to take myself so seriously, but it's just funny, all these coincidences.

Brian Hack: Moving on. There's almost an *archeological* approach to your practice, as if you're discovering and claiming and providing context for these plastic objects, these found objects. Do you see yourself as a kind of urban archaeologist?

Barry Rosenthal: I think it's a specialty field. Maybe it's a kind of urban anthropology? Not sure where it fits exactly on the academic scale. But yeah, it's in there somewhere. That's definitely what's going on here. For me, it was pretty early on that I wanted to say, you know, *this is what we're doing*. This is what we're leaving behind, you know, in history and culture, all these great

things. There's cuneiform, early communication, written in stone. But this is what *we're* going to leave behind, a plastic world. And how does that compare with great discoveries, and with great cultural movements from the past? And this is only in a few short years. I mean, basically, the timeline is my lifetime. I was born in '52. I mean, plastics have been around since the early twentieth century. But it took off after World War Two, and so there's this huge quantity of stuff that's left behind. And I like discovering things, I like finding it. And I like showing it. And, luckily, with my photography, the limitations are such that I couldn't shoot one beautiful object and make a statement. I always had to have many objects to make a statement. So that was part of the reason for collecting. I tried the sort of Irving Penn still-life; it just never happened for me. He was able to turn something into a sculpture, just an amazing man—but for me, it was the quantity, the company that objects kept. Here's a neighborhood, or here are like objects, and you're going to get it, from sheer quantity. Even though it may be a couple of hundred objects, multiply that times whatever's out there. The strength of the photos and sculptures, I think, does come from the sheer quantity.

Brian Hack: How does the collection practice actually work? Do you do a clean-up of an area, collecting everything, and then choose [from what you've collected], or do you walk around like someone collecting seashells, picking up the best things?

Barry Rosenthal: It's been all of

those things. For the most part, early on, I took everything. And I took more than I could carry. So I took everything, then I built collections. Some had to wait until I had enough. And some had to wait years, actually, like the one of the drug paraphernalia—that took a while. And so I would just go out and generally pick everything, a wide variety of things, because I didn't know what I'd end up doing with it back at the studio; and if I left things behind, I would regret it.

Brian Hack: Later on, they might be perfect.

Barry Rosenthal: Yeah, so that's why I say I have like a library of objects here. Because I can go back. Not necessarily reuse what I've used before, I don't do that too much. But I have a lot of unused items that I like to go back and discover. So that's what's the reason for storing this stuff. You described several ways of picking and collecting; it's almost impossible to do a shopping list. You know, it's not like going to Walmart. So you take what you get, or you take what you find. I'm familiar with enough places in Brooklyn that, for instance, the wood for the bulkhead and for the shelf, I had used up whatever I could, whatever my source was, here at the Brooklyn army terminal. There was nothing much coming in. And I knew I would find more lumber washed up at Floyd Bennett field, so recently I've been there a couple of times. I needed more lumber to finish the bulkhead, and I needed something eight feet long. And sure enough, it was there. So there are specific times when I go

looking for straws, when I was finishing that piece on the plastic drinking straws, I only went out for straws. And of course I picked up other things in the process. But you know, if I went out and I got 150 straws, in a two- or three-hour period, that was good. I knew where to go for that, and I know where to go to find more foam. There's something with being familiar with the territory, but it's also the discovery every time going out... the discovery of new ideas and that's what also excites me. Before the process has even begun, just the collecting brings out new ideas. I start thinking, *well I need to go out because I don't know what else is out there*. Go find the next idea.

Brian Hack: So on a more human level: There's the implied life behind the lost or discarded objects that are in your work. By which I mean the actual human story behind these objects, or at least their trajectory through time. A small child's shovel: was it lost one day at the beach? Or was it tossed away at the end of childhood? There's a story in each one of those objects in your photographs. Do these underlying narratives interest you? Or do the colors and compositional considerations take priority?

Barry Rosenthal: I've got to say, I haven't spent a lot of time on that narrative. The only thing I come up with is that it's *local*. In the sense that, you know, most of the collecting has been either on the Jersey Shore or in Brooklyn. So what what's *local* is. In Brooklyn, a lot of balls found; so I get a photo of balls, And I keep finding *more* balls. My curiosity about the

origin of things—maybe not so much. I mean, finding the *party doll*—again, it's kind of local. I figure it got loose somehow

Brian Hack: [Laughs] Oh, there is a story behind *that one*.

Barry Rosenthal: Yeah, some party on the Rockaways and it got caught at Floyd Bennett field, and buried. You know, there's some interest there. But I think my thoughts more go to how it's local. This is what I find *locally*. And it's local culture. But it's also global at the same time, because this is happening everywhere. I haven't been to too many other places, other than Abu Dhabi to do some work, to see what what's local there. And in a way, it's not so different than what we have here, or what I collect here. So in a broader, more general sense, the things like the beach toys—I don't really spend a lot of time thinking about *Did this get left behind? Did it get buried? What happened?* No, my mind doesn't seem to go there. Maybe I'm more impersonal about it, but I want to know some of the science behind it. You know, that rope, the blue rope—I had to look up what that stuff was. And find out what and why it is. And to me, rope was a natural material, and now, it's all plastic. I think some of the back-story has to do with research, but not on the personal level.

Brian Hack: Let's get back to what you were saying about what we are leaving behind as a culture. There's a sense in which plastic is just as eternal as the pyramids or Chartres Cathedral in their longevity, before they decay—if they ever decay. There's

a strange dissonance between something that's essentially ethereal, in one sense—a one-time use plastic object that is meant to be disposable, but is at the same time utterly eternal in another because it won't decay. You know, it's like a one-time thing; it's meant to be disposable. But it's there *forever*. It's an eternal kind of object.

Barry Rosenthal: *Disposable* to me is like the new four-letter word. It really doesn't exist. Or it's a terrible misuse of language. *Disposable* is just so wrong. The whole implication of *here today and thrown out tomorrow*, it's terrible—but then that's our society.

Brian Hack: What does that say? What does that say about us as human beings, when our approach to living is that we just toss these things with no regard?

Barry Rosenthal: That's a big one. I've spent a lot of time on it, but but haven't come up with any answers. Why do we keep doing it? It's obvious, to me. To come up with some kind of rationale, I thought of this as a temporary phase in business and culture. It [plastic] is a replacement technology, that's how I looked at it for a while, and I think I still do. It replaced wood in many different uses. My father made tool cases. Tool cases before plastic were canvas. You bought a car, you got a tool case in the trunk. It was rolled up in canvas; you had a wrench and screwdriver. Canvas was good for a lot of years. Suddenly, you could see every tool and have it marked, because you could have a clear vinyl cover over your tools. And so the re-

placement was initially an improvement. I think there'll be something that will replace plastic eventually. I don't know what. I don't know how. I'm not that inventive. But that's what I think society will come up with. When that happens, plastic will just drop off. And we'll never see it again, as that new thing will have replaced it. Will that new thing be worse? I don't know. But I think it may be very short lived. I hope it will be very short lived. This is the timeframe that we're using plastic. Like I said, things were made out of wood: you had a handle of a screwdriver, it was wood. Now it's plastic. You get a handle for a hammer, the grip is plastic. So wood got replaced. I just like to say that I think it's a temporary movement. Someday, there'll be a new technology.

Brian Hack: I hope you're right.

Barry Rosenthal: So that's about as far as I've been able to think it out. I mean, we're going back to paper straws. So, some things go backwards, some things go forward.

Brian Hack: One last question—more of a comment, really. What I what I love about your photographs is that there is this duality I was talking about, you know, one-time use objects and the eternal time that they're going to be around. Combined with that idea is the overall beauty of these compositions themselves, and of the way that you photograph them. Immediately one is struck by the visual pleasure of these objects, and then you're hit by the fact that these objects are destructive to the Earth and to all its inhabitants.

A tragic sort of beauty, that's visually stunning, but the impact of its implications is overwhelming.

Barry Rosenthal: Well, there's plastic or trash [art]—I don't know what to call this kind of art. I want to just be an artist, and not be associated with trash art or whatever, all these different kinds of things. I mean, there's a million genres and sub genres of this kind of work that wants to show the public what's out there.

Brian Hack: But I think what you've done is what the *best* art does, and that is that it points out the ills of the world, but then also shows its great beauty.

Barry Rosenthal
Okay, I'll go with that.

Brian Hack: You can find the beauty even in our own detritus and decay, as odd as that sounds. I think you're able to, to visually stun the viewer but again, as I say, there are implications behind it. And that's the art of it.

Barry Rosenthal: Well, I said for quite a while that I was in the awareness business. I wanted to wake people up and make them think. But, you know, what can I say? So many people say, "Oh, this guy's a hoarder," and "he's got some kind of compulsion," and you know, I don't think I have any kind of mental illness that way. Then you get classified in a narrow area of trash art, and I just want to be called an *artist*. I'm able to express my ideas. And I'm able to deal with an issue. So I'm lucky. I really consider it lucky. I've chosen to be understated. I think I'm understated. I don't think I'm doing

it for shock. I'm just trying to stay true to my values, that's all.

Brian Hack: I think that's a good stopping place. Stay true to your values.

Barry Rosenthal: Okay. Wow, this was great.

Brian Hack: Almost an hour and a half.

Barry Rosenthal: Time Flies. Well, you took me places that—really, this was a great dialogue. Don't call it an interview. This was much more collaborative.

Brian Hack: Will do. Thank you so much.

Barry Rosenthal: Thanks, take care.

This conversation took place via telephone, on March 11, 2022.

Photographer and sculptor **Barry Rosenthal** is an internationally-recognized artist whose work has been featured in *National Geographic*, *Foreign Policy*, CBS News, the Weather Channel, and other periodicals and media outlets. His photographs are in the permanent collections of a number of arts institutions, including the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the Springfield Museum of Fine Art, and the Black Gold Museum in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Dr. Brian Edward Hack is an art historian of nineteenth-century American Art, specializing in American sculpture and public monuments. Since 2014 he has served as the Director of the Kingsborough Art Museum.

Exhibition Checklist

Photographs

The Grid, 2014
27 x 36 inches

Blue Ocean, 2012
27 x 36 inches

Plastic Puzzle, 2014
27 x 36 inches

Bags and Wrappers, 2016
36 x 48 inches

Forks Knives Spoons, 2012
48 x 48 inches

Sea Life, 2016
36 x 48 inches

Dependency #2, 2015
27 x 36 inches

Work Gloves, 2014
27 x 36 inches

Green Containers, 2012
27 x 36 inches

Black Motor Oil Bottles, 2012
27 x 36 inches

Soles, 2012
27 x 36 inches

Brown and Clear Bottles, 2012
27 x 36 inches

Oil Alcohol Drugs, 2011
27 x 36 inches

Choking Point, 2015
27 x 36 inches

Seascape, 2021
27 x 36 inches

Installations

American Tapestry, 2021
8 x 12 x 1 feet

Picking Up the Mantle, 2021
60 x 60 inches

Cabinet of Curiosities, 2022
7 x 8 x 1 feet

Corner Creatures, 2022
24 x 24 x 214 inches

Sea Goddess, 2022
6 x 5 feet

Sea Wall (Bulkhead), 2022
40 x 90 x 6 inches

Sea Yourself, 2022
36 x 48 inches

12 Mini Sculptures, 2022
Dimensions vary

Untitled, 2022
11 x 16 x 6 inches

