



# Terrible Beauty

A Conversation with **Pam Longobardi**

BY SALLY HANSELL



Opposite: View of installation at the Hudgens Center for the Arts with (foreground) *Bitter Pills*, 2014, found buoys and floats; and (background) *Drift Lines*, 2014, found ocean-tangled rope and net balls. Above: *Rainbow's End in Paradise (twisted entrails)*, 2014. Lighters found in albatross nests on Midway Atoll, 98 x 98 in.

In 2006, Pam Longobardi visited Hawaii's South Point and discovered her life mission. Instead of finding an idyllic paradise on the remote beach, she was walloped by an overwhelming amount of marine debris. Since then, she has worked with cast-off plastic as her primary material, creating aesthetic arrangements with detritus that she has recovered from beaches and ocean currents across the world. Her sculptural installations and public artworks draw attention to human consumption, waste, and the effects of natural forces.

An Atlanta-based artist and professor of art at Georgia State University, Longobardi won the \$50,000 Hudgens Prize in 2013, given by the Hudgens Center for the Arts in Duluth, Georgia. She has had more than 40 solo exhibitions, including shows in Greece, Italy, China, Japan, Poland, and Finland. She is the creator of the Drifters Project, an ongoing collaborative and interdisciplinary project that cleans beaches and works with communities while promoting the interconnectedness of life on earth.

**Sally Hansell:** *What is your objective or mission in turning plastic garbage into art?*

**Pam Longobardi:** I want to get plastic out of the ocean, where it doesn't belong, and put it into an exhibition context. These are really loaded objects because they have an uncanny familiarity. They're around us to the point of invisibility. We no longer see plastic as an alien subject because it has so completely invaded our lives.

**SH:** *How do you hope your work will affect the viewer?*

**PL:** If you look at these plastic objects in a reflective way, you realize that they have tremendous consequence. For example, you may use a lighter to start your gas grill. But when you look at *Rainbow's End in Paradise (twisted entrails)*, I don't think it's possible to think about a lighter in exactly the same way. All 490 lighters in this work, placed in a color spectrum, were removed from albatross nests on Midway Atoll, one of the world's most remote locations. That means the mother albatrosses had fed them to their chicks as food. I use wooden matches and paper matches because their consequences do not linger.

**SH:** *In your 2010 book, Drifters: Plastics, Pollution, and Personhood, you describe abandoned plastic objects as having a "terrible beauty" after being weathered and deformed by natural forces. When you isolate plastic trash and exhibit it as art, the results are aesthetically pleasing. Does the beauty of your installations subvert your mission?*

**PL:** No. Nature does make things beautiful, and that is my greatest weapon in working with this material. For example, the little balls of tangled fishing line called "Feral Objects" are sculptures created by the ocean. They look like an artist made them, but I find it more fascinating that the ocean made them. The ocean balls up the line like a hairball. It's nature's attempt to expel an invader.

**SH:** *What is the rationale behind your compositions?*

**PL:** I make simple arrangements with Minimalist tendencies. This showcases the complexity of each individual object. In *Feral Objects (constellation)*, I started imagining the line balls as little planets because I could see that they were full of life. Through my collaboration with the micro-imaging lab at Georgia State University, I was able to obtain scanning electron microscope images of those objects. The photographs, on view with the objects, reveal intricate life forms colonizing in the plastic.

I'm interested in two kinds of forms. One is an orientation based on horizontals and verticals, which comes from my love of Piet Mondrian. *Ghosts of Consumption (for Piet M.)* pays homage to the simplified beauty of his "Pier and Ocean" series. Mondrian distilled the relationship between humans and the natural world into an elemental abstraction, with the ocean being horizontal and the pier being vertical. My work updates that. In *Ghosts of Consumption*, the marks are 287 pieces of plastic presented as specimens with steel pins on the wall.

I also like to use ascending or descending scales. That idea came from the term "economies of scale." When I think about economy of scale in relation to my work, sometimes I'll describe the materials as heavy metals and persistent organic pollutants, including dioxins, furans, and PCBs, which are the invisible contaminants in many pieces of plastic. In a spectrum of scale, the next level would be microplastics. Another level is a single piece of Styrofoam that has broken off a larger piece. The scale goes all the way up to the massive drift nets, which can be up to 60 miles long. They're enormous killing machines.

**SH:** *How did you construct the mass of buoys and rope in your recent exhibition?*



Above: *Feral Objects (constellation)* (detail), 2014. Found ocean-tangled fishing line balls from Neptune's Vomitorium, CA, 132 x 110 x 5 in. Below: *Reflecting Web of the Anthropocene (An Apology to St. Francis)*, 2013. Plastic water bottle bottoms, glass crystals, mirrors, and satellite dish, dimensions variable.



**PL:** Net balls weigh several tons and are usually 10 to 30 feet long. They're impossible to move on the beach, so I cut out sections that are the size of my body. I basically just hung them in a clump at the Hudgens Center. Within any section, you can see the elaborate twisting, knotting, and tangling that the ocean has done in order to turn the netting into a single object that it can throw onto the beach. It's a magnificent sculpture that the ocean has made.

**SH:** *What set you on the path of becoming an activist for the ocean?*

**PL:** I have a very strong connection to the ocean through my past. My dad was an ocean lifeguard, and my mother was the Delaware state diving champion. As a child, I wanted to be a marine biologist. Creating art with marine debris brought together all of these different aspects of my personality. Being landlocked here in Atlanta, I needed to bring the ocean back into my life. I started to cast my intentions toward the sea and ended up going back to Hawaii in 2006 after a decade-long break. I was magnetically drawn to South Point and encountered vast amounts of marine debris. As soon as I saw that, it changed my work completely. I had to start dealing with it.

**SH:** *The title of your show was "What Once Was Lost Must Now Be Found: Chronicling Crimes Against Nature." What was lost?*

**PL:** The title refers to the idea of the lost object itself, the drifting and vagrant plastic traveling by aquatic means to different locations. Animal bodies ingest or transport this debris. The plastic has been intercepted and is now back in the cultural space of the exhibition for inspection, contemplation, and visual study. It simultaneously refers to the lost connection we have to the way in which our habits, our material production, and our interactions create grave consequences for ourselves, our fellow creatures, and the molecular chemistry of the natural world. What we have lost is our sense of connection and embeddedness in nature. This concept of an interwoven universe must be re-found before the world becomes uninhabitable.

**SH:** *What are the crimes?*

**PL:** When I enter a beach that's laden with plastic, I'm entering a crime scene. Right

from the beginning in 2006, I started photographically documenting the deposition as it lay on the beach. I thought there was a tremendous amount of information to be gathered from what the ocean was doing with this material. I feel like it is the ocean's attempt to communicate with us through the materials of our own making.

The crime refers to the insensibility of the engine of corporate global consumption that devours everything in its wake. We go through the day sometimes unaware of the forces acting on us. Behind every piece of plastic, there is a tremendous industry equipped with the utmost skill and design. The very material of plastic sells itself to us. It's alluring and seductive. The biggest crime in all of this is that the plastic industry makes us believe that plastic consumption can go on forever with no consequence for us or for the world. All of that is a lie. Until we change our habits and refuse the right to endless consumption and waste, we are complicit in this crime.

**SH:** *As an activist, you also engage communities in environmental efforts. Tell me about one of these projects.*

**PL:** In May, I was on the southeastern coast of Panama at the most plastic-infested beach I've ever seen. I went to Armila to pilot a project with the Oceanic Society and Guna women artisans. The Guna have an intact indigenous culture with beautiful traditions. They have no concept of plastic. They think of it as something that you just throw away, like a plantain peel. I wanted to see if they might be interested

**Right:** *Ghosts of Consumption (for Piet M.), 2012. Found plastic from Hawaii, Costa Rica, and Alaska mounted on steel pins with silicone, 110 x 75 x 8 in. Below: Endless: Economies of Scale, 2013. Found ocean microplastic and plastic from Alaska, Greece, Hawaii, Costa Rica, Italy, and the Gulf of Mexico, hydrocarbons, and steel, 13 x 213 x 15 in.*

in using plastic as an art material. I tried to help them see it as being bad for the ocean but good for making art.

The community is very involved with leatherback sea turtle preservation. The town recently got solar lighting, but it's disorienting the leatherbacks. The turtles turn toward the lights and get exhausted before they lay all of their eggs. We collected plastic buckets that had washed up on the shore and had a workshop to make light covers. We decorated the buckets with plastic so they would look good during the day while blocking the light at night. It's a conservation win that these really creative women have a new way to work with the material that's causing harm on the beach. They loved it and decided to form a co-op to continue making things out of plastic. That is pretty cool.

*Sally Hansell is a writer living in Roswell, Georgia.*

