

# THE SUB-MISSION

## Interview with Liz Ensz

### *Iron Ore Cannot Be Educated Into Gold*

**TSM** As part of your sincere hope for rethinking the valuation of resources, the environment and living things, you rely on scavenger impulses in your artistic practice. What materials are you scavenging?

**LE** All my life I have been an unapologetic trash-picker. My scavenger instinct was cultivated as a child by spending weekends with my 17-year elder metal scrapper brother. He was a resourceful man who could repair anything and saw value in everything. I find the common decision-making processes for classifying objects and materials as trash to be arbitrary at best, and to be in support of a general material culture of perpetual disposability as opposed to one of maintenance. Disposability as a philosophic attitude towards objects and matter is easily transferable to people and other living things.

Although considerations of material value and reuse are second nature to me, some specific examples of gathering discarded materials for recent artwork include the sculptural element of *Mountain's Memory*. Based on mid-19th Century United States Geological Survey topographic data I reconstructed a mountain that had been eliminated by strip mining by layering a stratigraphy of hand-cut cardboard. I plan on casting this form in aluminum as a more permanent kind of monument to that former mountain.

The installation of *Convexity / Concavity* at the Garner Art Center in May of 2015 marked a decidedly new way of working for me. After printing and sewing multiples of the sheer aerial view fabric tarps, I designed and fabricated a modular steel frame structure for them to drape over. In preparing to travel with this work across the country via public transportation, I abandoned the structure because of the physical toll of carrying the material. Instead, I brought a backpack with the printed fabric tarps, other objects, and a selective array of tools to improvise an installation based on the unwanted materials ("the best local trash") that I could scavenge

near the warehouse gallery. The expansive sculpture that emerged contains three 8 x 14-foot hand-printed sheer tarps draped over black plastic sheeting, orange surveying tape, and a massive landscape composed of scavenged cardboard stapled to wooden pallets.

Due to the availability of a massive amount of unwanted material and a massive vacant warehouse space-turned-gallery space, over several days I was able to arrange more than a dozen pallets and sculpt hundreds of pounds of cardboard into a landscape that spanned 50 by 25 feet.

This recent work pairs my prints and other hand-crafted objects with "locally sourced" materials that are invisible infrastructure in the global distribution of *things* that were once *matter* before they were identified as *resources*. When I say "local" in this instance, I mean that this material is now ubiquitous and local to almost everywhere.

**TSM** Sheer fabric with printed lateral bands is stretched across the walls of THE SUB-MISSION and is suggestive of strata, echoing the subterranean site of the installation. Is this adapted specifically for the space, and what associations are you hoping the audience formulates from the linear patterning?

**LE** I embrace the subterranean site of this gallery. With the imagery of stratified accumulations of earth, I propose a vast time scale for human actions and their effects to be considered in. The sheer fabric substrate suggests the impermanence of even that which we see as the most solid and foundational.

Our designed emblems and statuary are not our only monuments. I see all large-scale (industrial-scale) human actions that alter the Earth and environment as monuments of a culturally narrative, including landfills, fracking and mining, paved and concrete masses, deforestation, and the reversing of a river. In geologic

# THE SUB-MISSION

time, these heroic feats of engineering will be reduced to matter and compressed as strata, but still stand as the most articulated manifestations of our cultural ideals.

**TSM** Immutable metals – iron, copper, gold – have opposing material associations to fabric. Melting down and recasting found metal interrupts the un-pliable quality we associate with metals – are you consciously altering or highlighting our material associations? What social contexts are you considering in relation to media?

**LE** I use the term “material engagement” to describe my intentionally hand-made work and an experiential part of my research practice. I am dedicated to the investigation of material agency and material properties, reuse and repair, and practice of manual labor. In a culture where most of the objects in our lives are mass-produced, I embrace haptic knowledge as a valuable subversive approach to understanding matter and the complexities of the world. Although not as apparent in the work in this show, in other works I also consider “material engagement” to be a collaboration- working with and listening to a material and allowing it to have its own agency within my work- letting the material do what it naturally does, facilitating it and responding to it.

Metals are associated with permanence and monetary value. They are the material of choice for commemorative statuary, architectural elements, medals and coins onto which cultural institutions inscribe emblems of their beliefs. Monuments, both designed and implied, are public representations of power created by institutions of power to reinforce the stories and values central to maintaining that power, and are often made of metal to suggest strength and permanence.

Over the past few years I have written several proposals for melting down various metal monuments to transform the material into something new, including the skeletons of industrial infrastructure that remain erect across the Rust Belt decades after companies abandoned their communities to make

more money overseas; and several Confederate monuments in Baltimore after the 2015 Uprising that followed the death of Freddie Gray in police custody.

Different metals have their own properties- for example, copper is a good conductor and can be drawn into thin wire, iron is strong but inflexible and brittle, lead is heavy but malleable. The various metals of this exhibition each have associations with their functions and social histories. Iron was an instrumental material of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries’ industrial revolution and its economic prosperity, but has lost value along with the workers that once occupied those US factories; Aluminum was a dreamy and utopian material for modern engineers and it composes the pyramidal point of the Washington Monument; Bronze has a history of immortalizing heroic and moral figures as fine art statuary, but also the declarative bells of the church. There are many more. I have also written about the penny as a meaningful raw material, in both its pre-Reagan and post-Reagan metallic compositions. ([Click here to read the article](#))

The title of the exhibition *Iron Ore Cannot be Educated into Gold* implies material predetermination, something that I think can be useful in identifying the inherent strengths of different materials. However, read in a social context, this phrase summons a dangerous essentialism, which can perpetuate oppressive biases and hierarchies that are constructed, but seen as inherent. I present our material associations as conversations that allude to this structure and it’s opposition.

**TSM** On display in THE SUB-MISSION are plaques and ribbons cast from found iron, and pyramids cast from pre-Reagan pennies and pawnshop gold. Metals are ubiquitous in the natural landscape; their compounds are mined and repurposed by humans, and in your installation, refashioned again by you. You seem to shed light on the life cycle, or life span, of these materials.

**LE** I am interested in the cycling of matter as a framework that includes people but is non-

# THE SUB-MISSION

anthropocentric. The most essential example is probably: sunlight as energy into plant life, into food, into human and non-human bodies, human and non-human excretions into nourishment for insects and plants, ad infinitum. In contrast, our culture treats material use as linear rather than cyclical- matter is extracted, temporarily valued, and then buried. The end.

The [Visitor Center Artist Camp](#) is an artist residency that I co-founded and run in the remote Upper Peninsula of Michigan that is a place for a meditation on resources. We live outdoor for two weeks, use composting toilets, feed any food scraps to the neighbor's pigs, bear witness to any trash that we accumulate, and our sculpture workshops build on the area's interesting geological and industrial histories.

Our Local Clay workshop gathers red clay from the premises, processes it into a usable clay body and fires their work using low-technology techniques like pit-firing and raku. The Metal Casting workshop that I teach melts aluminum scrap, and we make our molds with a water-soluble resin and sand that we gather from a defunct local quartz quarry. We've even developed a ceramic shell molding system combines that sand with some of the local clay slip for highly detailed lost-wax casting.

This type of material awareness is attainable in various ways, but has been discouraged by decades of intentional deskilling based on class associations with manual labor. This has resulted in a mass-culture of dependent consumers with a focus on the *NEW* and little interest in maintenance, repair, or reuse.