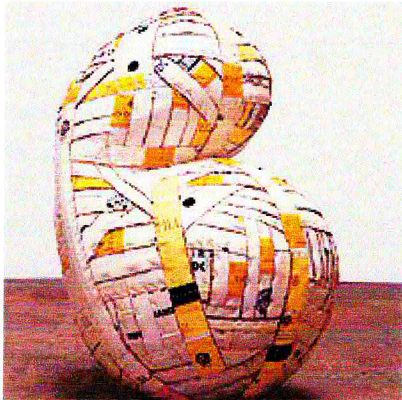


The Road to Afterlife

By [Ben Marks](#) | Nov 17, 2009



"Turvey" by Ann Weber, 2009

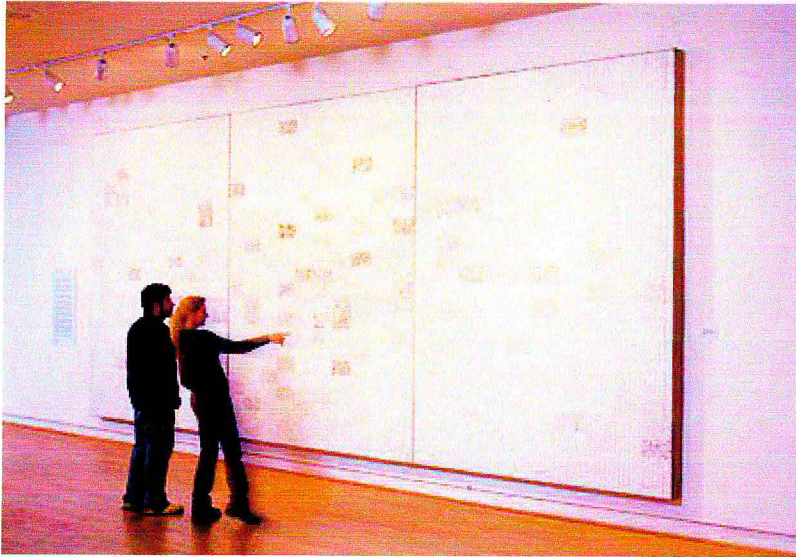
Afterlife, currently at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, is not the first exhibition to devote itself the work of artists who use nothing but recycled materials, nor will it be the last. The show opened just a few weeks after San Francisco enacted a tough new recycling and composting law, a coincidence that reminds us of the Bay Area's position at the forefront of recycling practices, in all their forms. Indeed, **Afterlife** continues an international tradition of making art out of everyday objects, including the stuff most of us routinely kick to the curb.

Early in the last century, French surrealist Marcel Duchamp shocked the art world with his "[readymades](#)," artworks made out of ordinary manufactured objects. The most famous of these were his "[Bicycle Wheel](#)," a tireless rim mounted by its fork to a painted stool, and "[Fountain](#)," a urinal turned on its side and signed by the artist. In both cases, Duchamp's refusal to take things at their face value is what transformed these common objects into art.

The impulse to elevate the everyday has gone through many mutations since, notably in [Joseph Cornell](#)'s collages and boxes, [Robert Rauschenberg's Combines](#) and the work of Southern California artists from [Ed Kienholz](#) to Simon Rodia, who produced the region's most important piece of public sculpture, [Watts Towers](#). [In the Bay Area, many of the "Funk" artists](#), from Bruce Conner to Robert Hudson, produced work using unlikely combinations of techniques and materials, including found objects.

Afterlife contains some startling pieces, regardless of where they fit, or don't, in this continuum. For the most part, the best works celebrate the repetition that can occur when working with recycled materials, particularly recycled packaging. Thus, the exhibition's centerpiece is a triptych by Robert Larson called "Twelve Titles," which consists of three 8-by-10-foot linen

panels, each papered with a grid of Surgeon General's Warnings from found packs of Marlboros. Larson has grouped the labels by their relative degrees of filthiness, as well as by the type of warning that appears on the label (the warning has varied over the years). The result is an almost hypnotic abstraction of subtle patterns, which seem to blur and shimmer as you approach or move away from the piece to admire its formal, scruffy beauty.



At first glance, Larson's orderly piece does not seem descended from San Franciscan [Bruce Conner](#)'s unkempt, late-1950s assemblages, but there are some interesting connections. Both artists allow pedestrian materials to fill their pieces with meaning, and both have keen eyes for the aesthetics of rot and decay. Conner's nylon stocking-strewn pieces evoked a creepy sense of emotional degradation and entropy. Larson takes our breath away with his unvarnished inventory of self-induced abuse.

Another inspirational Bay Area practitioner of the found-object tradition was [George Herms](#), who, in the late 1950s, lived in a shack on the Larkspur canal. Herms' funky constructions were sunnier than Conner's: The *San Francisco Chronicle*'s Thomas Albright once referred to Herms' work as "gentle and genial." That was certainly true for much of his output (in later years, the letters L, O, V, and E would grace most of his pieces), but it should be remembered that his 1961 show at the Batman Gallery (a famous Beat hangout) on Fillmore Street in San Francisco featured an installation called **The Meat Market**, which paired baby dolls and butcher-shop price tags.

The Slant Step Show of 1966, at the Berkeley Gallery in San Francisco, codified the role of the found object in art. Then a U.C. Davis art professor, [William T. Wiley](#) had found an enigmatic, linoleum-covered object in a thrift shop (it turned out to be a stool designed to be placed beneath the feet in order to help produce a bowel movement). Artists from [Bruce Nauman](#), one of Wiley's students at the time, to Jim Melchert were invited to riff on the Slant Step in a wry, "readymade" group grope.

By the 1960s and '70s, these transformative impulses had spread beyond the galleries. Down on the Emeryville mudflats, just north of the approach to the Bay Bridge, anonymous artists with no goal greater than not sinking up to their necks in the briny muck made stuff out of junk for the pure pleasure of doing it. They created impromptu public sculptures cobbled together from the waterlogged flotsam and jetsam that routinely washed up on the muddy shore. To be sure, there were a lot of dopey stick figures and childlike depictions of dogs, but there were also complex dinosaurs and giraffes, guitarists and drummers, even a lunar lander topped with an American flag. When Caltrans cleaned up the site in the 1980s, one of the last, free, messy, imperfect relics of the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1960s died.

Still, artists remained drawn to junk. To give them an outlet, and perhaps recycle a fraction of the city's trash before sending it off to the landfill, San Francisco's city dump developed an [Artist in Residence](http://www.sunsetscavenger.com/AIR/index.php?t=d) program in 1990, providing local artists with studio space, equipment and access to materials from the waste stream.

That first year, William Wareham cut and welded dozens of sculptures from busted up grocery carts, metal springs, and water heaters. Since then more than 80 artists have been given the opportunity to make art out of stuff San Franciscans throw away. Indeed, two of **Afterlife's** highlights were produced by Scott Oliver, an alum of the SF Dump's class of 2008. Oliver's "Loop" is a found fake-wood-grain Formica table that has been meticulously sliced and reassembled so that its center sags almost to the floor. A found orb-shaped fixture hangs overhead, casting a circle of light through the hole in the table.

In contrast to the unexpected elegance of "Loop," Oliver's "The Valley" is a violated green fabric easy chair, whose exposed springs, foam and padding read like some kind of furniture autopsy. However, topography is more what Oliver had in mind; a variation on the landscape painting hangs behind the chair. Scraps of green thread suggest vegetation, with layers and striations of furniture padding, presumably from the chair itself, standing in for a Yosemite-like valley.



Two other artists successfully mine the vein of repetition offered by recycled materials. Charlotte Kruk's dress made of stitched together packages of toothpaste is circled overhead by a flock of winged, stuffed hearts covered in chewing gum packaging. Ann Weber contributes a trio of odd-looking biomorphic shapes, including "Topsy," whose exterior is wrapped in ribbons of cardboard Clos du Bois boxes.

"When an object has been discharged from its original purpose it still carries some association with its past. When that association is altered it takes on new meaning," writes **Afterlife** curator Kathryn Funk. True enough, but in the end, it's always been about what artists do with their materials, not the fact that their materials have a past. The particular challenge for an artist working with recycled materials is to permanently remove those materials from the waste stream; the risk is that the art gallery may merely be a detour on the way back to the dump. When such artworks succeed, as many in **Afterlife** do, the result is a triumph of the human spirit over the endless acres of waste that are the byproducts of our lives.

Afterlife runs through January 23, 2010 at San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art. For [more information](#), visit sjica.org.