

Film Transcript

Exposing fast fashion with cyanotypes

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I started noticing plastic washing up on my local beach. Dresses, shoes, tights, underwear, swimming costume, fancy dress, school uniforms. I began to realise that over consumption is just such a huge and massive problem. And I think we have just lost track of what's valuable. I've been photographing marine plastic debris for the past 15 years. I realised if I made a visually beautiful aesthetic, this drew people in to see what they were looking at. Once I got their attention, I then had the platform to give them information. It's like a stab in the back, so when they read the captions and the information, I've been able to get over the message of what's going on.

The first project was called definite, and it started off with a plastic bag and I researched into how many years it took them to degrade in the ocean. So, the project started from like one year, and then ended up with indefinite, which was a piece of polystyrene. Since then, we know that all plastic exists in the ocean, unless it has been burnt, you know since it has been produced. Research from scientists has showed that now we have microplastics in our brains, in our blood and in our major organs. Science has moved on incredibly in 15 years since I first started photographing it. Once I photographed single objects, I realised there was mass accumulations around the world. So I wrote to scientists and educators and asked them to send me plastic from their local beaches that had significance. I create these mass accumulations of plastic to let people know what's happening in the ocean. It's very important to me that people to see the brands and see the names in the mix that are out there littering the shores. Because you can say, this is what we have discovered here and don't you think you ought to be doing something about this, you know get rid of the plastic yourself.

I thought it would be a really good idea if I could collaborate with scientists. If I could back up the things that they are finding out through my work then it gives it more credibility because scientists aren't subjective you know, they have to be true to the fact. But then an artist can be slightly more creative, and it can present the same facts in a different way but for them would help raise awareness of their research.

This new project I've done which is based on synthetic clothing is different to my earlier work but as I was collecting solid plastic objects. I began to realise that there was a lot of material and clothing kind of bound up in it and I found a strip of cloth that looked exactly like a piece of seaweed.

Initially I was quite enticed by it, it was kind of an attractive beautiful piece of cloth, but I haven't really been noticing that. I've been picking up brightly coloured objects and not really looking at what's entangled in the seaweed. So, I realised that there is a problem with the fast fashion industry, with synthetic clothing. You know, being discarded and found in the sea at the same time. So, this is just one of many draws full of the fibres and pieces of clothing and garments I have collected over the years. They are all quite degraded, they've all got holes, and you know they are all a bit ragged and threadbare through the time spent in the sea.

A t-shirt can have been put together and made in six different countries and then shipped half way across the world to be then sold for 3 or 4 pounds. It's just kind of lost and you just see that t-shirt or whatever it is on the hanger, there's so many implications through production and manufacture that need to be resolved.

I then came across the work of Anna Atkins, who is a Victorian Botanist from the 1800's, and what she did was collect seaweed around the coast of Britain. She pressed them and made these beautiful cyanotype prints. A lot of the images seem to look to me, like pieces of clothing, the fronds of seaweed and things like that looked like the fibres of a pair of trousers or pieces I had found. That's when I had the idea to instead of using the seaweed as she did, use the recovered pieces of clothing that I had found to raise awareness of this current issue.

The way I apply the solution to the paper is using the clothing itself because I had the idea that some of the microfibrils within the clothing would then adhere to the print. I just thought there was something unusual about the print having microfibrils in itself. I decided initially to create prints that looked exactly like Anna Atkins seaweed because I wanted to trick the viewer and make people think that perhaps a new print or a new book had been found of her work. Then when they realised they weren't and they were looking at this really serious current climate issue, they would be kind of shocked in the realisation that it isn't what they are looking at. It's actually a huge problem.

This is the original book I created using the prints on Whatman paper, the same paper that Anna Atkins used. The marbling was specially created in the style of the 1800's and everything has been replicated exactly the same as her book, you know even down to the markings on the pages. All the handwriting has been replicated by myself in the same style with the text changing appropriately. The labels originally and the algae that Atkins used. I've changed the second part of the name to make, in Latin, the name of the garments that I recovered. Each of the prints is unique because the way that you coat the paper, the exposure to the sun, all has a different impact every time you make a print. So every print is different. As I went on, I realised I wanted to put my own mark on the book and I changed some of the compositions to look like how I found the material on the shoreline.

The first quote on the first page describes a fact about the fast fashion industry. It's responsible for more greenhouse gases than all container shipping and all flights combined. Now that quote just blew me away. I couldn't believe that people try and save on flying and you know they are mindful of their carbon footprint. But if they were to buy 2 or 3 items of clothing, they are probably doing more damaged than going on a plane.

That was the quote that had to go in there in the beginning and everything follows from there, to be mindful of what people buy and discard. We don't need to make any more, we don't need to keep producing clothing. We can share and reuse and from doing this project I have had a lot of people write to me and say that they are not going to buy any clothing for a year which is the best outcome for me.

If I am saying what I am doing and people are reading it and thinking about it then I couldn't think of a better solution than having looked at my artwork and acted on it.