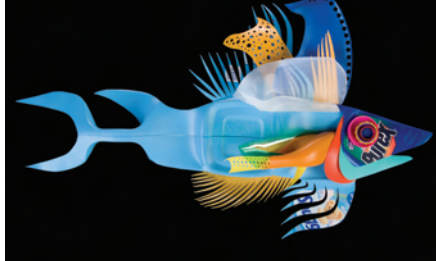


Water Arts & Craftsmen

North Carolina's Fine Artists and Artisans

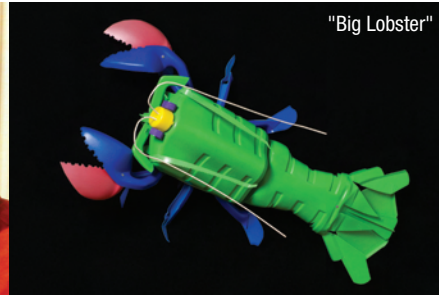
"Blue Tail Reef Cruiser"



Edgar is positioning himself to become the leading authority on art made from recycled products.



"Big Lobster"



David Edgar

Charlotte, N.C.

BY LEIGH PRESSLEY

David Edgar fancies the type of fish you won't find in *Field & Stream* – species like the Goggle-Eyed Swallowtail, Fancy-Fin Reef Feeder and Red-Tailed Cascader.

Colorful, whimsical and full of flair, Edgar's fish can be found not in lakes, streams or oceans, but on the walls of private art collectors and public museums across the country.

A former associate professor of art at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNC-C), Edgar is the mastermind behind Plastiquarium, a school of artistic fish he creates from recycled plastic bottles. His work has been featured in exhibits connected with The Smithsonian and in publications including *The Boston Globe*.

"When it's displayed, people smile," he says. "I like my work to be lighthearted, joyful and fun. But at the same time, it makes people think. They're just not being hit over the head with grisly images about how we're crapping on the environment. It's intellectually accessible to everybody."

Edgar, 55, sculpted in fabricated steel for 30 years before he became hooked on recycled plastic fish. It all started when he and his wife were invited to a neighborhood Super Bowl party and he needed something Panther blue to wear.

"I had a detergent bottle that was Carolina Panther blue, so I made a mask to show my team spirit," he says. "Everybody loved it. The next week, when my wife and I walked through the neighborhood, I started noticing all the colors of plastic detergent bottles in people's recycling bins. I found myself picking up more bottles and looking for unique colors and shapes. You never know how the muses are going to speak to you."

A native Floridian who spent much of his youth offshore fishing in the Keys, Edgar says fish sculptures came naturally. He had already made giant fishing lures and 30-foot-tall giant jellyfish out of old parachutes.



"Freddy"

There's an ironic twist to his plastic fish sculptures, too.

"The world's oceans are becoming increasingly polluted from phosphates in detergents and plastics in general," he says. "The more I worked with the fish, the more I realized this art had a lot of relevance to the broader topic of recycling and environmental concerns."

Edgar gained critical notice for his Plastiquarium fish when his work was selected for a two-year touring show organized by Lloyd Herman, the founding director of Renwick Gallery, The Smithsonian's craft museum.

Since then, Edgar has made hundreds of plastic fish. His work ranges from \$25 fish pins to fish sculptures up to five feet in length and made of several bottles that sell for \$1,500. The standard 22-inch size uses one detergent bottle and costs around \$85. No two sculptures are the same.

"They're all archetypal fish," he says. "They have teeth, gills, eyes and tails, but I don't try to replicate a specific species like a grouper or a sailfish. They're intended to be fantasy fish."

Edgar typically uses No. 1 and No. 2 recyclable plastic, from soda containers to detergent bottles. He finds most in his neighborhood, but also won a grant to scour Mecklenburg County's Metrolina Recycling Center and create art from his finds.

Edgar cleans the bottles and stores tops from sports drinks, sodas, coffee cans and other plastic containers in bins inside his home studio. As he cuts bottles, scraps are

shredded to use as colorful stuffing inside clear bubble bellies of his fish sculptures. Edgar's tools include razor-sharp scissors, tin snips, rivet guns and a heat gun that allows him to bend and reshape the plastic.


Please don't send him your empty laundry detergent bottles. "I've really got all that I need," he says. "Unless you come across a purple color that's very uncommon. Then you can throw it in my front yard as you drive by and I'll get it in the morning."

A few years after starting the Plastiquarium, Edgar has evolved to creating larger and more elaborate sculptures displayed at Levine Children's Hospital in Charlotte, the Phoenix Children's Museum, Hickory Museum of Art, Farmington Museum of Art in New Mexico and the Society for Contemporary Craft's permanent collection in Pittsburgh.

His eventual goal is to have recycled plastic sculpture be viewed as formal art rather than a quirky craft.

"The work falls broadly into a class of art called contemporary craft, which is traditionally wood, metal, glass, ceramic and fiber," he says. "I'm trying to break plastics into mainstream contemporary craft media. But traditionalists are not easily swayed."

Edgar will pursue the topic and plead his case in a book set to be published in fall 2009 by Lark Books of Asheville.

"At first, I thought I needed to copyright and protect my ideas, but you can't really keep people from knocking you off," he says. "Now I'm more interested in solidifying my role in developing the idea of creating contemporary craft from recycled products. I want to be remembered as the definitive authority. Plus the spirit of recycling is about broadening rather than restricting." 

Want to Fish?

David Edgar's Plastiquarium Fish can be seen in North Carolina at the Hickory Museum of Art and purchased at Maddi's Gallery locations in Charlotte and at Lake Norman. Edgar also takes commissions and sells completed pieces through his website, www.plastiquarium.com. You can e-mail him at dallenedgar@earthlink.net.