

RECYCLING TO HIS ART'S CONTENT

Grant to let him fish through your trash

Project promotes creativity, conservation at the same time

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David Edgar has been nosing through his neighbors' recycling bins for three years, looking for bottles to create the plastic sculptures he calls "Creatures from the Plastiquarium."

But not any more. Thanks to a 2007 Arts & Science Council grant, Edgar has won a dream come true: The right to poke around at Mecklenburg County's Metrolina Recycling Center and create art from what he finds.

"I'll be able to increase my work to life-scale figures," says an excited Edgar, whose specialty to date has been fish made from detergent bottles. "If I want 25 matching Gain or Wisk bottles to work on a grand scale, I'll finally be able to have them."

It's a service the recycling center is happy to provide, given the potential for Edgar's project to promote recycling. The \$3,600 ASC grant even calls for an exhibit of Edgar's work later this year at the center.

"We do numerous promotions for recycling and this one is definitely unique," said Bruce Gledhill, director of Mecklenburg County Solid Waste Management.

"Will it help? We believe so. This provides an interesting and visual approach to increasing awareness," Gledhill said.

"Recycling has been stagnant the past few years, despite a growth in population, and anything we can do to get it stuck in people's brain is likely to help."

The ASC panel that awarded the grant was equally impressed, describing Edgar's work as "brilliantly innovative, fun and creative."

Edgar, an associate professor of art at UNC Charlotte, says other artists have used plastic bottles in their work, but he is the first to make it a form of craft all its own.

The pieces are made entirely from used plastic bottles, which he says have earned a meaning all their own as an "indigenous part of the urban landscape."

It's a concept that came to him in 2004, when he decided on a lark to fashion a mask from a detergent bottle for use at a Super Bowl party. At the time, Edgar was a sculptor who worked primarily with fabricated steel.

"One can never predict when the muses will speak to you and what language they'll use. They happened to speak to me with recycled plastic," he says.

"At first, I didn't take it seriously. I kept making the sculptures because I enjoyed the ease, the spontaneity and the originality. I saw myself as procrastinating from doing my metal sculptures," Edgar said.

That changed when he submitted five examples for consideration in an traveling exhibit curated by crafts trailblazer Lloyd Herman, founding director of the Smithsonian Institution's Renwick Gallery in Washington.

"I got a letter saying, 'We love your work and we want all five pieces, plus two more.' I realized at that point that I must be onto something," says Edgar.

He has since made more than 650 plastic sculptures, from jellyfish lamps to lapel pins, with prices ranging from \$25 to \$1,250 for pieces over 4 feet long. (Examples at www.plastiquarium.com).

"If someone had told me my fabricated steel work was cute, I would have been offended," he says. "What I'm doing now makes people happy. When people see it, I often see a big grin and there's nothing wrong with that."