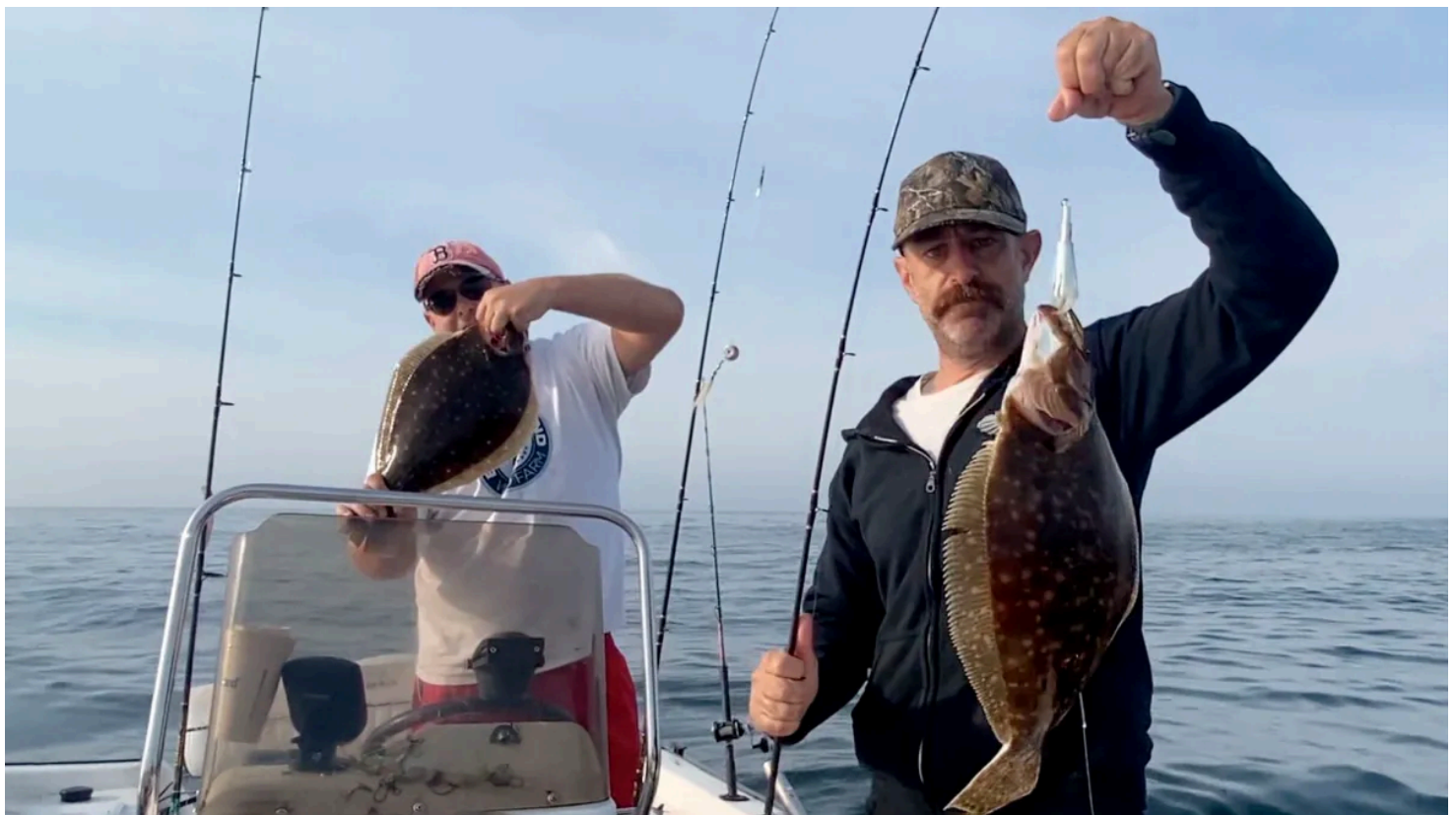


Duke Riley's Burlesque Spin on the Trappings of Museum Display and Folk Art

Riley's nautical-themed exhibition brims with antic details that constitute a feat of serious world-building.



Louis Bury July 27, 2022



Written, directed, and produced by Duke Riley, cinematography by Alexandra Egan, and edited by Brett Land and Duke Riley, video still from "Welcome Back to Wasteland Fishing, Episode Two" (2019), single-channel video, color, sound, 6 minutes, 12 seconds (image courtesy the artist)

“Remember to hit that like button and subscribe,” deadpans Duke Riley at the end of “Welcome Back to Wasteland Fishing” (2019), “It really helps.” Projected in the entry room of his Brooklyn Museum exhibition *DEATH TO THE LIVING, Long Live Trash*, the short video — a parody of a YouTube fishing tutorial — depicts Riley aboard a boat using lures he made from discarded plastic tampon applicators. Examples of the lures hang nearby in “Duke the Fisherman’s High Quality Fluke Rigs Made in the USA™” (2022), which consists of a pegboard designed to resemble a display case in a bait and tackle shop. Each applicator in the display has been sculpted

to evoke a cutesy squid and comes attached to bright cardstock packaging emblazoned with the acronym “DTF,” notionally standing for “Duke the fisherman” but also slang for “down to fuck.”

The exhibition brims with these sorts of antic details yet they accumulate into a feat of serious world-building. Over 250 nautical-themed artworks populate the show, most of them fabricated from salvaged beachfront trash. Riley reconfigures that trash into forms that are by turns utilitarian and decorative, from a functioning chandelier made with hundreds of empty mini liquor bottles (“Boozalier,” 2022) to an almost 11-foot-long table runner woven out of discarded plastic straws (“On the Backs of Eels,” 2022); from a series of colorful plastic mosaics modeled after so-called “sailor’s valentines” to psychogeographic maps of polluted New York City waterways. The artworks are installed in and around the museum’s Jan Martense Schenck and Nicholas Schenck period houses, which were originally located on the Brooklyn waterfront in the 17th and 18th centuries, respectively. This clever curatorial choice lends gravitas to Riley’s zany repurposings, casting them in an anthropological light.



Duke Riley, Nos. 50-P, 74-P, 10, 70, 112, and 106 of The Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum (2020), salvaged, painted plastic (photo by Robert Bredvad, image courtesy the artist, © Duke Riley)

The vitrines showcasing clusters of the artist’s imitation scrimshaw have a similar effect. Inspired by 19th-century sailors’ carvings onto whale teeth, and occasionally displayed alongside examples of actual scrimshaw from the museum’s collection, Riley’s pastiches are made from salvaged plastic objects, each painted bone white, with black ink hatch work decorating their

faux-antique surfaces. At a glance, the vitrines of ersatz scrimshaw radiate museological credibility. But upon closer inspection, the individual works' forms (a laundry detergent bottle, a bear-shaped honey bottle, a toilet seat) and contents (portraits of capitalist tycoons, mock-heroic US iconography; birds and fish projecting menace or calm) tend toward farce. Each fake scrimshaw object has a numerical title that purports to catalogue the work's location in the fictitious collection of the spoofily named "Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum."

Such drollery typifies the way Riley's work here inhabits pre-existing cultural forms like a mischievous hermit crab, putting a burlesque spin on the trappings of museum display, YouTube videos, folk art, and more. Even the exhibition's gorgeous accompanying book, *Tides & Transgressions* (2022), published by Rizzoli, eschews the typical parade of expert catalogue essays in favor of simple but effective quotes from the artist sprinkled among the images. This approach is in keeping with the artistic stunts for which Riley is known, such as his 2007 New York harbor reenactment of a Revolutionary-era submarine mission, "The Battle of Brooklyn," which led to his arrest by the NYPD. It also differs from more self-serious efforts at artistic salvage, exemplified by figures such as El-Anatsui and Elias Sime, in which post-consumer waste has been upcycled into novel aesthetic forms.

Yet for all its tongue-in-cheek spirit, *DEATH TO THE LIVING* also has a sincere side, manifested in its labor-intensive commitment to its own conceit. Over 100 objects are in the *Poly S. Tyrene* series alone, and each one's dense, patterned drawing has been rendered in assiduous detail. Likewise, the maps and tableaux drawn on large, sometimes multi-paneled rectangles of canary paper teem with intricate pen work and whimsical minutiae. Such techniques differ from those of scrimshaw and cartography proper but evidence a similar, almost obsessive investment in mark making. In this respect, the exhibition has affinities with Michael Rakowitz's ingenious series *The invisible enemy should not exist* (2007-ongoing), which uses Arabic newspapers and food packaging to make patchwork replicas of artifacts stolen from the National Museum of Iraq in the aftermath of the 2003 United States invasion. Though different in tone and contents, both projects attempt a nigh-impossible feat of enumerated museological world-building that feels equal parts reparative and futile.



Duke Riley, "Monument to Five Thousand Years of Temptation and Deception (I)" (2020), salvaged, painted plastic, mahogany (photo by Will Howcroft for Praise Shadows Art Gallery, courtesy the artist and Praise Shadows Art Gallery, MA, © Duke Riley)

DEATH's reparative bent is articulated most explicitly in its darkened final room, where a languorous short video, "MICHELE" (2022), portrays the Sisyphean clean up efforts of Michele Klimczak, a resident of Fishers Island whose job involves removing plastic detritus from the island's beaches. The wall text explains that approximately half of the exhibition's plastic comes from Klimczak, who singlehandedly picks up as much as 25,000 pounds of the material each year. In the face of such shoreline pollution, anything Klimczak or Riley can do as individuals feels a touch absurd, yet both roll up their sleeves and do what they can anyway. The care Riley invests into his parodic world suggests that its gallows humor and its seriousness are two sides of the same fraught coin — both ways to reckon with the impossibility, as well as the necessity, of trying to get a handle on the afterlife of our species' waste.

Duke Riley: DEATH TO THE LIVING, Long Live Trash *continues at The Brooklyn Museum (200 Eastern Parkway) through April 23, 2023. The exhibition was organized by the artist and Liz St. George, Decorative Arts assistant curator, with Shea Spiller, former Arts of the Americas and Europe curatorial assistant.*