

Adventures in Garbage

by Jeff Hvid

2003

The Marin Rowing Boathouse is at the end of Drake's Landing Office Park, closest to San Quentin. It appears to be a big barn for long, skinny boats, a barn that soon will get bigger if the story poles are any indication. I'm here at nine in the morning to continue my trash clean-up of the north side of Corte Madera Creek. A muscular man walks out of the boathouse carrying a 20-foot-long boat on his shoulder as if it were a bamboo pole. Minutes later two guys walk out with a boat more than 25 foot long, displaying the same nonchalance as they flip it around. It's the wonder of carbon fibers. One man takes the time to explain to me that the boats weigh less than 50 pounds. These one- and two-man boats, called sculls, are propelled with long, skinny oars. The word "propels" hardly does justice to the way the sculls skim across flat water, they appear to levitate and fly. When I see the beauty of this level of sophisticated material use—rough equivalents being the insides of an automobile engine or the copper wire wrappings of a stereo speaker, or the gears inside the motor of a washing machine—it gives me hope, because someday when we decide to focus on protecting our natural environment the intelligence to be successful is there.



An ephemeral sculpture by Jeff Hvid. Photo by Jeff Hvid

Someday. This day this man right here is going to mitigate mistakes made in the past. First found is a monster umbrella that used to shade an outdoor dining table. My inclination is to take it home to incorporate it into an interesting sculpture, but reason prevails. Our house is overflowing with pieces of junk I've salvaged. The likelihood that I'll make the stick skeleton and muddy canvas skin into anything of value is pretty low compared to the tangible value of removing the chunk of blue Styrofoam fifteen feet away from the creek's shore. Scanning the shore with binoculars reveals more chunks of colorful Styrofoam, the skeleton of a second umbrella, some black plastic pipe, lots of clear plastic bottles and enough other junk to get my legs moving. Since I'm under the highway overpass there's a huge gray concrete wall for me to use as a backdrop for the impending pile. Tennis balls, glass bottles, a pair of blue jeans, the yellow heads of plastic sunflowers, an ancient pink flamingo. This place is a mess. Across the path is a marsh area the low tide has exposed. Stuff that's blown over the path, fallen off passing cars or been pitched by boneheads waits for me and my buckets to come calling. Big white egrets stalk the water's edge. I'm arranging some junk on the pile when a woman with a dog stops to say I'm doing a good job. "What do you think should be done?" she asks. Lead by example, earn a voice people respect, don't try to do everything yourself, use less stuff, don't give up.

The wind picks up and shifts direction, threatening to send the umbrella bouncing across the path. It would be fun to watch but counterproductive. Using some rope and driftwood I've found I attach a land anchor to it. Near the end of the job, a guy not much older than me drifts by. His beard and clothes are shabby, his eyes weary, a small radio he holds to his ear is tuned to a football game. We exchange salutes, and he says, "That's sure a lot of stuff." Yes, it is.

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