

Press Release

Brooklyn Museum



Duke Riley (American, born 1972), Nos. 50-P, 74-P, 10, 70, 112, and 106 of *The Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum*, 2020. Salvaged, painted plastic. Courtesy of the artist. © Duke Riley. (Photo: Robert Bredvard)

The Brooklyn Museum Presents *DEATH TO THE LIVING, Long Live Trash*, a Solo Exhibition by Artist Duke Riley

Debuting approximately 300 new and recent works, the exhibition connects the history of American maritime art to present-day issues of environmental justice and the pollution of New York waterways.

Opening June 17, 2022, *DEATH TO THE LIVING, Long Live Trash* presents a suite of new works by Brooklyn-based artist Duke Riley that use materials collected from beaches in the northeastern United States to tell a tale of both local pollution and global marine devastation. Riley's contemporary interpretations of historical maritime crafts—such as scrimshaw, sailor's valentines, and fishing lures—made from littered plastic goods confront the catastrophic effect that the oil, food, and beverage industries have had on the environment through single-use plastics. The objects are presented in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Jan Martense Schenck and Nicholas Schenck houses in the Brooklyn Museum's renowned period rooms. Staging around 300 of his works alongside a selection of historical scrimshaw and other pieces from the Museum's collection, the artist creates his own fictional *Poly S. Tyrene Maritime Museum* as a space to directly connect the past and present of environmental injustice. As part of the exhibition's call for visitors to assess the impact of their personal consumption of plastic, the Museum is developing partnerships with the New York Aquarium, among other institutions, and grassroots organizations to promote education around green consumer habits and the restoration of New York waterways. *DEATH TO THE LIVING, Long Live Trash* is on view through April 23, 2023.

Works on view include contemporary versions of scrimshaw—ink drawings of maritime imagery etched into bone by sailors. Riley replaces the medium's historical base materials (typically whale teeth) with collected and repurposed plastic containers,

detergent bottles, toothbrushes, and other plastic waste. The pieces depict subject matter traditional to scrimshaw, like sea animals and ships, but expand it to portray international business executives that the artist identifies as responsible for the perpetuation of single-use plastics. Also on view are Riley's fishing lures and mosaics (historically known as sailor's valentines), similarly created with detritus such as cigarette butts, pencil casings, and plastics found on northeast coastal beaches. As a hopeful juxtaposition to its indictment of corporation-driven pollution, the exhibition's concluding galleries debut three new short films that highlight the impactful work New York community members are doing to remediate the damage that plastics have inflicted.

DEATH TO THE LIVING, Long Live Trash offers a critical, provocative look at the ecological repercussions of capitalism across centuries by paralleling the actions of the whaling and plastics industries. While the exhibition comments on the destruction of our oceans and waterways globally, it is primarily a New York story, drawing on local maritime history as well as the pollution of today. Riley's artworks are presented in the Museum's seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American period rooms, in the Jan Martense Schenck and Nicholas Schenck houses, which were originally located in the Indigenous marshlands of Brooklyn's present-day Canarsie and Mill Basin. Riffing on plastic's primary polymer, a substance called polystyrene, the artist reconceives these spaces as an imagined *Poly S. Tyrene Maritime Museum*. Riley's museum bridges time to anachronistically place his plastic-based scrimshaw in these period rooms—built when whaling was reaching its height—underscoring the exhibition's historical context and creating a vivid dialogue between past and present environmental devastation. The artist has also selected examples of nineteenth-century scrimshaw from the Museum's collection to draw further parallels between the whaling and plastic industries and the decimation of whale populations and New York's waterways.

"Duke Riley has consistently challenged dominant narratives around important social and political issues through his drawings, installations, and public art projects. Executed with a rollicking mischievous streak, Riley's work in this exhibition offers an exciting opportunity to explore his longtime passion for maritime history as well as contemporary environmental issues, particularly the detrimental impact of pollution and single-use plastics on New York's waterfront communities," says Liz St. George, Assistant Curator, Decorative Arts, Brooklyn Museum.

Riley's practice often tackles political and social issues and examines the relationship between the precarious nature of the waterfront and transgressive culture. The artist works across drawing, printmaking, mosaic, sculpture, performance interventions, and complex multimedia installations, intertwining obscure historical events with populist myths to shine light on social and environmental issues that remain unsolved. From presenting historical reenactments, such as his elaborate re-creation of a Revolutionary War submarine mission in *After the Battle of Brooklyn* (2007), to scouring New York and northeastern beaches for the trash that he transforms into art, Riley emphasizes what nearby communities have at stake in the devastation of their regional ecosystems.

DEATH TO THE LIVING, Long Live Trash is organized by Liz St. George, Assistant Curator, Decorative Arts, with Shea Spiller, former Curatorial Assistant, Arts of the Americas and Europe, Brooklyn Museum.

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