



Sacrifice + Bliss:
Aurora Robson

Franklin Park Conservatory
and Botanical Gardens

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Sacrifice + Bliss: *Aurora Robson*

From Waste to Wonder

By Edward M. Gomez

Colorful, playful and even exotic, Aurora Robson's art makes viewers aware of the quantity and diversity of the used-and-unwanted materials we all throw away every day, often without a second thought. In prompting us to consider just what it is that we desire, consume and discard, her unusual, often exuberant creations also encourage us to think about consuming fewer single-use plastic containers and about trying, as she puts it, "to rescue things from the waste stream"—plastics intended for one-time use, scraps of paper, cardboard, metallic foil, wood and other materials most of us might otherwise automatically toss in the garbage.

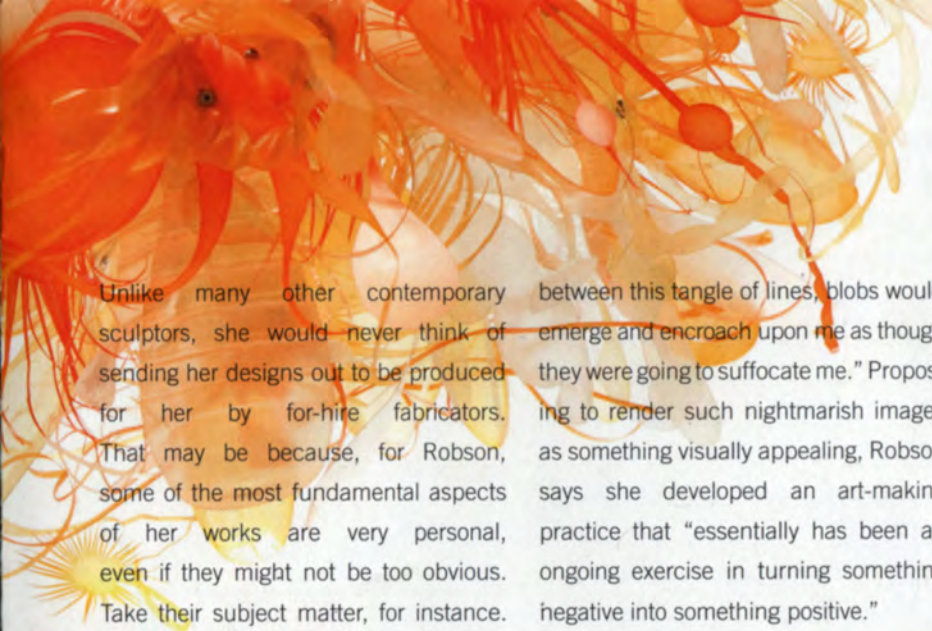
A connoisseur of the cast-off, Robson is also a poet-magician of the dustbin whose

art gives new meaning and purpose to the nondescript materials from which it is made. Before our eyes, she transforms them in ways that make it hard to believe the physical substance of her art is what it purports to be or, despite deceiving appearances, what we may know it really is—mostly humble plastic bottles that once held water, soda or shampoo.

Robson is passionately concerned about the attitudes we humans bring to our relationship with the natural environment and about how we treat the planet that is our shared home and the source and sustainer of life. Nevertheless, she is more philosophical than polemical in her thinking and use of art as a means for consciousness-raising. "I aim to be as inventive as I can," she says.

"I think of artists as inventors who must experiment in order to do their jobs." Robson's work tends to reveal its secrets slowly, rewarding each attentive viewing with more get-a-load-of-that! clues to understanding how it is made—with a clever knife cut here or a simple knot-tie there—and just how special and intriguing otherwise forgettable trash, imaginatively transformed, can be.

Robson was born in Toronto and grew up in Hawaii. She returned to Canada as a teenager. Later she moved to New York, where she made metal sculpture and became a state-certified welder before studying visual art and art history at Columbia University. Her approach to art-making is unabashedly hands-on.



Unlike many other contemporary sculptors, she would never think of sending her designs out to be produced for her by for-hire fabricators. That may be because, for Robson, some of the most fundamental aspects of her works are very personal, even if they might not be too obvious. Take their subject matter, for instance. As the artist explains, for all their sumptuousness, her abstract sculptures, paintings and collages are actually tangible, visible depictions of some rather haunting imagery—unforgettable nightmares she experienced as a child.

Robson describes the imagery of those strange childhood dreams as “a never-ending landscape comprised of knots.” She says: “From the negative spaces in-

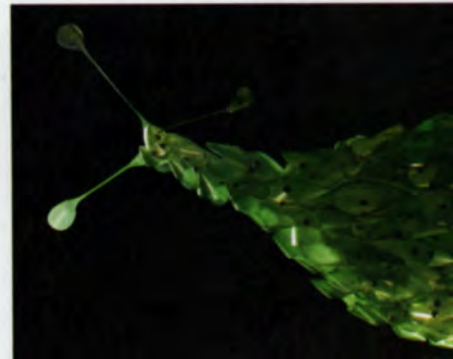
between this tangle of lines, blobs would emerge and encroach upon me as though they were going to suffocate me.” Proposing to render such nightmarish images as something visually appealing, Robson says she developed an art-making practice that “essentially has been an ongoing exercise in turning something negative into something positive.”

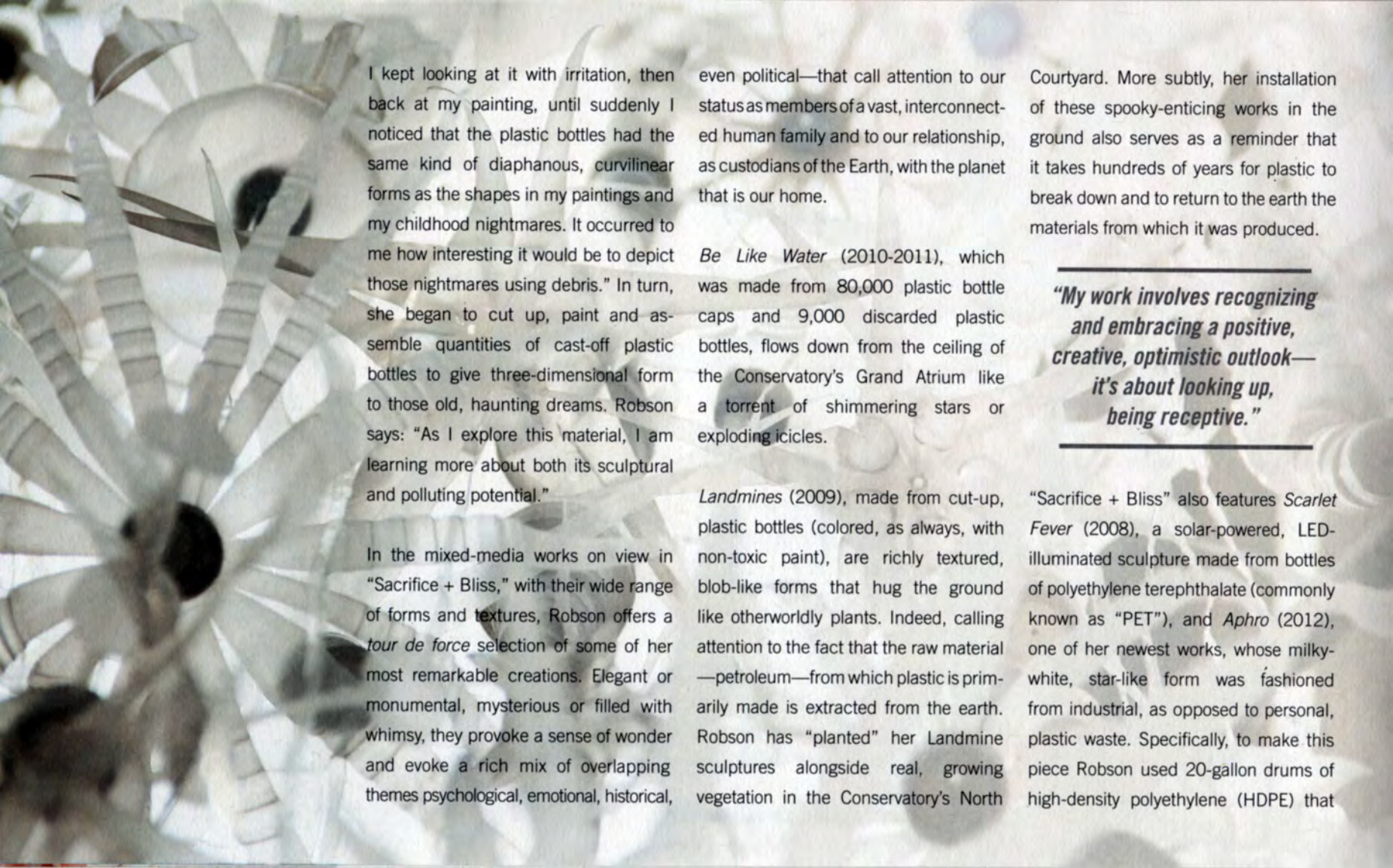
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She explains: “All of my art has been about taking unpleasant subject matter, whether physical or conceptual, and turning it into something beautiful or spiritually uplifting.”

In fact, she notes, “To view most of the sculptures in this exhibition, you literally have to look up at them. It is intentional that they require this change in posture to be seen. My work involves recognizing and embracing a positive, creative, optimistic outlook. It’s about looking up, being receptive.”

Robson’s inspiration to “rescue” and work with would-be waste material came, as inspiration often comes to artists, unexpectedly. She recalls: “One day, while I was working on a painting in my studio in Brooklyn, sunlight was reflecting off a pile of garbage (mostly plastic bottles) just outside my window.





I kept looking at it with irritation, then back at my painting, until suddenly I noticed that the plastic bottles had the same kind of diaphanous, curvilinear forms as the shapes in my paintings and my childhood nightmares. It occurred to me how interesting it would be to depict those nightmares using debris." In turn, she began to cut up, paint and assemble quantities of cast-off plastic bottles to give three-dimensional form to those old, haunting dreams. Robson says: "As I explore this material, I am learning more about both its sculptural and polluting potential."

In the mixed-media works on view in "Sacrifice + Bliss," with their wide range of forms and textures, Robson offers a *tour de force* selection of some of her most remarkable creations. Elegant or monumental, mysterious or filled with whimsy, they provoke a sense of wonder and evoke a rich mix of overlapping themes psychological, emotional, historical,

even political—that call attention to our status as members of a vast, interconnected human family and to our relationship, as custodians of the Earth, with the planet that is our home.

Be Like Water (2010-2011), which was made from 80,000 plastic bottle caps and 9,000 discarded plastic bottles, flows down from the ceiling of the Conservatory's Grand Atrium like a torrent of shimmering stars or exploding icicles.

Landmines (2009), made from cut-up, plastic bottles (colored, as always, with non-toxic paint), are richly textured, blob-like forms that hug the ground like otherworldly plants. Indeed, calling attention to the fact that the raw material—petroleum—from which plastic is primarily made is extracted from the earth. Robson has "planted" her Landmine sculptures alongside real, growing vegetation in the Conservatory's North

Courtyard. More subtly, her installation of these spooky-enticing works in the ground also serves as a reminder that it takes hundreds of years for plastic to break down and to return to the earth the materials from which it was produced.

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"Sacrifice + Bliss" also features *Scarlet Fever* (2008), a solar-powered, LED-illuminated sculpture made from bottles of polyethylene terephthalate (commonly known as "PET"), and *Aphro* (2012), one of her newest works, whose milky-white, star-like form was fashioned from industrial, as opposed to personal, plastic waste. Specifically, to make this piece Robson used 20-gallon drums of high-density polyethylene (HDPE) that

originally had held bulk quantities of such foods as olive oil and honey. Such products were transported in these containers between Europe and North America.

In late 2010, Robson created *Kamilo*, a sculpture composed of plastic debris that washed up on the beach at Kamilo Point, one of the dirtiest shorelines in the world, on the southern tip of the Big Island in Hawaii. There, crews of volunteers assembled by the Hawaii Wildlife Fund regularly clean up tons of waste that wash ashore from the vast North Pacific Gyre. Seeing the place where she had grown up being destroyed by plastic pollution—everything from toothbrushes to milk crates, borne on the ocean's waves from around the world—fueled Robson's desire to work with plastic debris on a larger scale. "It's hard to believe how far some of this material has traveled," she says. "Seeing it, I thought: Plastic pollution

is a global problem, and art is a global language; I clearly have my work cut out for me." *Kamilo* is on display in the Conservatory's Pacific Island Water Garden.

Robson's sense of engagement in and concern about some of the urgent issues of our time, along with the painstaking craftsmanship that goes into making her art, help set her work apart from that of many of her postmodernist peers who, even now, nearly a century after Marcel Duchamp first took industrially manufactured objects—a metal bottle-drying rack, a ceramic urinal—out of their original-use contexts and placed them in art-gallery settings, continue to believe it's enough to merely imitate the French modernist's appropriation-ist and "recontextualizing" gesture. By contrast, Robson appropriates her raw material—would-be trash—and presents it as art, but she makes a point of dramatically transforming it first.





Robson is not possessive about her technical discoveries or aesthetic idea. To the contrary, she willingly trains assistants in the plastic-handling techniques she has developed and encourages them to make waste-transforming creations of their own. For example, to make *The Quality of Mercy* (2012), which is on view in the Conservatory's Himalayan Biome, Robson taught her production methods to six students from the Columbus College of Art and Design. "I love the sense of community and mutual understanding that emerges from this kind of art-making," the artist says. The 16-foot-long sculpture is made up of 1000 plastic bottles that were gathered from litter-strewn riverbanks and parks in the Columbus area. Its shape resembles that of synapses in the human brain, and its title comes from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (in which Portia says, "The quality of mercy is not strain'd. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath...").

Robson regards her "responsibility as an artist"—that's a topic many headline-chasing artists do not often mention nowadays—as being "akin to that of a canary in a coal mine." She explains: "I try to be as sensitive as I can be to the world around me, and to respond to things I think are relevant to other people, bringing them to the forefront through my work." That notable sense of purpose notwithstanding, Robson's art is always fresh, provocative, multifaceted—and fun. Packed with original ideas about what art can look like and what it can say, it may forever change the way we think about the things we consume and the things we throw away.

Critic and author Edward M. Gómez has written for *Art in America*, *Art & Antiques*, *ARTnews*, *Art + Auction*, *Metropolis*, *The New York Times*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Japan Times (Japan)*, *Reforma (Mexico)* and other magazines and newspapers in the U.S. and overseas. Publications available at: www.edwardmgomez.com.

For more information about Aurora Robson:
www.aurorarobson.com



A Message from Bruce A. Harkey

Executive Director, Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanical Gardens

We often learn of our past and catch a glimpse of our future through the work of the artists of our day. There is a new generation of artists, Aurora Robson certainly among them, who are engaging their creativity to address our modern reality: meeting the escalating human need for food, water and energy while minimizing the impact on our Earth's finite resources.

As an institution inspired by horticulture, and committed to bringing people closer to the natural world, Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanical Gardens is privileged to showcase the work of Aurora Robson, in this, her first exhibition in a botanical setting and her largest to date.

Aurora creatively inspires us to think about that which we so easily discard

while she surrounds us with ethereal light, color, beauty, and hope.

The staff and board of the Conservatory believe that this experience with Aurora Robson's thoughtful and thought-provoking work will inspire the same creativity in all of us as we seek solutions to our environmental challenges.

Photography by Marshall Coles:

Cover, *The Quality of Mercy*, 2012

Decisions, Decisions, Decisions, 2012 (detail)

Pulp Fiction, 2011 (detail)

Soft Center, 2010 (detail)

Minimum Down, 2011 (detail)

Mind, Brain, Belly, 2006 (detail)

Be Like Water, 2012 (detail) Photo: Carly RG Young

Up Drop, 2010 (detail)

Kamilo, 2010 (detail)

Waste Not, 2012 (detail)

Aphro, 2012 (detail)

Back Cover, *The Quality of Mercy*, 2012





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