

“The Part and the Whole: The Multiple Perspectives of Tara Donovan’s *Untitled (Styrofoam Cups)*”

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Abstract

*From a distance, Tara Donovan’s *Untitled (Styrofoam Cups)* alludes to natural phenomena, yet nearness reveals the Styrofoam material. The artist metamorphizes manufactured cups into a rolling landscape through her own assembly-line process – mimicking the containers’ creation in factories. However, in critics’ analyses of Donovan’s sculptures, they focus on the whole of her creations’ formal beauty and advocate that the transformative effect of her assemblages removes the relationship between her mass-produced subunits and their associations with over-consumption. Her methods often produce large amounts of unrecyclable refuse, which further indicate her, like others’, complicit participation in consumer culture. Donovan uses a mundane object to create a sculpture fraught with contradictions in order to condemn the environmental damage caused by the very material she relies on. To spread awareness of the ecological criticism contained by Donovan’s sculptures, this paper argues that *Untitled (Styrofoam Cups)* offers a critique of the proliferation of disposable goods through its own dependency on mass-produced products and the process of manufacturing.*

Article

As museum visitors walk to the Birmingham Museum of Art’s Terrace Café, their attention moves upwards towards a billowing cloud of white forms clinging to the split-level ceiling. Tara Donovan’s undulating sculpture *Untitled (Styrofoam Cups)* (2004) hangs permanently from the roof of the café and casts a crisp reflection against the neighboring windows (Figure 1). Upon close inspection, the form reveals its construction of Styrofoam cups. Donovan (b. 1969, New York City) constructed the site-determined installation from 25,000 cups with help from two assistants and thirty volunteers. The work capitalizes on the light-defusing translucency of foam as well as the visual effect of thousands of cups accumulated together. The cellular-like structure and varying opacities of the amassed containers invite

comparison to organic shapes ranging from clouds to coral reefs. Donovan’s sculptures entice from afar with their ethereal beauty and then challenge viewers’ perceptual limitations by revealing their mundane subunits through proximity; her works play with the multiplicity of perception in recognizing the whole and the part simultaneously and separately.

In critics’ analyses of Donovan’s sculptures, they focus on her creations’ formal beauty and advocate that the transformative effect of her assemblages removes the relationship between her mass-produced subunits and their associations with over-consumption. The artist metamorphizes manufactured cups into a rolling landscape through her own assembly-line process – mimicking the containers’ creation in factories. Her methods often produce large amounts of unrecyclable refuse, which further indicate her, like others’, complicit participation in consumer culture. Simultaneously, *Untitled (Styrofoam Cups)* formally alludes to natural phenomena from a distance. To spread awareness of the ecological criticism contained by Donovan’s sculptures, this paper argues that *Untitled (Styrofoam Cups)* offers a critique of the proliferation of disposable goods through its own dependency on mass-produced products and the process of manufacturing.

The artist relies on the shifts in perception and recognition resulting from viewing her works from different distances and angles. When seen from afar, the individual components of Donovan’s sculptures conglomerate into a single, atmospheric mass that disguises the identity of the material.¹ For example, *Haze* (2003) first appears as a soft, undulating wall of white fluff. Intrigued viewers move closer to discern the individual subunits. At close proximity, the whole breaks down into the part; the identity of the stacked plastic drinking straws reveals itself. The point of recognition of the component depends on scale and volume of the work, but more importantly, the interaction of the viewer to move around and towards the piece. However, critics so far have interpreted Donovan’s work only from the distanced view, focusing on the visual transcendence of the work’s subunits.

Many art critics focus on the cumulative visual effect of the whole of Donovan's sculptures, merely appreciating their surface beauty. They write that she simply offers a formal appreciation of abundance and unfamiliar forms. In a review of the artist's first solo exhibition in 1998, Ferdinand Protzman set the precedent for a formalist evaluation of Donovan's works, relating her sculptures to landscapes.² Later reviewers mimic Protzman's appreciation of the ethereal beauty of the distanced view of the sculptures and even claim that the accumulations visually obliterate the subunits to eliminate the connotations of the material. In 2006, Helen Winston compares Donovan's forms to natural landscapes, such as overhanging cliffs and snow-covered hills, an effect magnified by distance from the sculptures. While Winston admits that the artist's works carry visual references to these environmental elements, the critic advocates that form and process, rather than metaphorical connotations or allusions to landscapes and household materials, drive the artist's work.³ Protzman and Winston began the focus on the visual elements of the Donovan's sculptures; their writings created a precedent for later writers to deny the symbolism within her sculptures.

In exhibition catalogues on Donovan's works, curators expand the formal analyses first proposed by critics to argue against the presence of ecological connotations in the artist's subunits. Kristina Olson, like Winston, rejects iconographic readings of the artist's materials in favor of a formalist analysis and examination of the process of assembly clearly displayed by the works. For Olson, Donovan's installations capitalize on visual clarity and order; the formal qualities of the whole of her sculptures offer a comforting moment of peaceful visual transcendence rather than a commentary on consumerism originating from the individual material.⁴ Three years later, curator Lillian Davies explored the argument put forth by Olson. Davies advocates that, even though the artist uses the systems and products of mass manufacturing, the beauty of her work glorifies rather than condemns the abundance of disposable goods.⁵ Olson and Davies both recognize the presence of references to the environment in Donovan's work, yet both argue that the whole of her sculptures negate the message carried by the artist's choice of materials. In 2013, curators Oliver Kornhoff and Poul Erik Tøjner even state, "Donovan draws the suggestive power of her art solely from the physical and aesthetic properties of the items she uses" in an

outright rejection of the symbolism of her materials.⁶

Donovan composed *Untitled (Styrofoam Cups)* from one of the most ubiquitous materials of a throw-away society obsessed with to-go drinks; even so, writings on the installation focus on process and form. Critic Christopher Miles, responding to the work's first showing in 2003, remarked on the technical feat of the sculpture's production.⁷ When the Birmingham Museum of Art (BMA) unveiled their commission, curator Susan Sipple Elliott additionally focused on the logistics and numbers of the work's creation.⁸ These readings avoid both the visual relationship of the sculpture to natural forms such as clouds or waves and the innate environmental connotations carried by Styrofoam cups. In favor of attention to the logistics of production, both Miles and Elliott avoid examining the iconography and conceptual connotations of the whole and the part of the BMA installation.

Donovan's own tight-lipped treatment of her intentions allows for numerous interpretations of her works beyond a focus on the process and visual. Yet, the range of critiques remain limited. Interviews with the artist focus on biographical events in her life as she rose to fame and her methods of making rather than her own intentions for her works.⁹ In 2007, Donovan noted that she leaves her pieces untitled in order to allow audiences to bring their own associations, and thus their own meanings, to the work.¹⁰ However, a comparison of titles found in catalogue listings and exhibition reviews reveals that she has progressively changed her works' titles to mask her artistic intent. In 1997, the artist first displayed her most well-known work, a square yard of compressed toothpicks called *Controlled Caging*.¹¹ In 2005, the title morphed to *Toothpick Cube* and was listed in 2009 as simply *Toothpicks*.¹² Since, the work has most often been identified as *Untitled (Toothpicks)* and *Untitled*.¹³ The original title, *Controlled Caging*, suggests the artist's role in shaping the cube and other iconographical implications, whereas *Toothpicks* and *Untitled (Toothpicks)* places the focus on the materiality of the medium. Her progressive redaction of information in the title prevents wall labels from leading viewers to a specific reading of the work.

Untitled (Styrofoam Cups) visually mirrors a wide array of natural phenomena. Living structures such as

cells, like Donovan's subunits, carry encoded rules for predictable growth that dictate the ways in which they interact, according to Kornhoff and Tøjner.¹⁴ The circular forms of *Untitled (Styrofoam Cups)* reference the replication of cells and clouds.¹⁵ Viewers can detect the entire form's similarity to the landscapes and biological structures, both of which are intimately affected by ecological devastation. The work relies on a product and a process that contribute to an ecologically devastating disposable culture to create an object resembling natural phenomena; as a result, the sculpture subtly presents a critique of contemporary environmental attitudes.

When viewers closely examine the installation, the identity of the Styrofoam cup reveals itself; as a result, viewers can recall the material's ecological impact and discern the work's allusions to environmental concerns. While Jonathan T. D. Neil writes that Donovan's choices of mundane materials lack cultural specificity, like branded Coca-Cola cans,¹⁶ the accessibility of her materials builds on viewers' intimacy with every-day products. Toothpicks, Styrofoam cups, and buttons are materials virtually every viewer knows. Artists originally used Styrofoam for molds and models, but within the last half-century, they have turned to the light and cheap material as a primary medium for sculptures. While the plastic product acts as an energy-saving insulator, more than one-hundred cities have banned its use due to its lack of biodegradability and expense to reclaim.¹⁷ Donovan's use of the synthetic material does not deny but rather points to her, like others', reliance on disposable goods.¹⁸

The very process that formed *Untitled (Styrofoam Cups)* recreates the original production of the cups themselves. Mimicking the assembly-line fabrication of the Styrofoam, the artist and her team re-manufacture the goods into art through the same system of the cups' creation. The allusion to natural phenomena of Donovan's work masks the environmental horror of the throwaway materials she uses. The otherworldly glow of the sculpture mirrors the way in which the sheen and glamour of disposable goods, such as automobiles, cell phones, and computers, disguise the technologies' ecological impact. Donovan's return to the process that created the cups doubles the work's connection to manufacturing and the environmental impact of mass production of disposable goods.

Donovan's methods typically result in many of her materials being discarded as trash, despite her work's critique of the very practice. *Untitled (Toothpicks)* continuously drops toothpicks on to the exhibition space's floor, causing the crisp cube to slump over time. The compression used to form the cube stresses the fibers of the toothpicks; the material can only withstand the process once.¹⁹ When light-sensitive foam of *Untitled (Styrofoam Cups)* grew brittle, the BMA installed a new configuration in 2011. The sculpture aged poorly in the fluctuating temperatures and direct sunlight of the museum café, so assistants recreated the work. The glue attaching the cups' rims becomes yellow and brittle over time. So, seven years after the first installation, assistants replaced the original with a new version in a different configuration of entirely new cups.²⁰ Donovan clearly takes no issue with recreating her works with new materials. She constructs sculptures that will require recreation in future decades, further increasing the work's entwinement with consumer culture.

When diners first approach the café space at the Birmingham Museum of Art, the white mass of *Untitled (Styrofoam Cups)* against the ceiling appears to be a rolling cloud. But, as they near the work to find their table, they discover the identity of the subunits composing the piece. Throughout their meal, they glance upward, amazed at the transformation of the material. As waiters hand to-go beverages to exiting diners, the customers look up from the cup in their hand—destined for a landfill—to the Styrofoam above them. Subtly, *Untitled (Styrofoam Cups)* reminds viewers of the damage that the mundane object in their grip brings to the abstracted landscape they appreciated just minutes ago.



Figure 1: Tara Donovan, *Untitled (Styrofoam Cups)* (2004) at the Birmingham Museum of Art. Museum purchase with funds provided by the Collectors Circle for Contemporary Art, 2005.11, image © Tara Donovan, courtesy of PaceWildenstein, New York

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- ¹Tara Donovan, interview by Kimberly Davenport, "Experts from an email correspondence between Tara Donovan and Kimberly Davenport," *Tara Donovan: Haze* (Houston: Rice University Art Gallery, 2004), 9.
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- ³Helena Winston, "Tara Donovan," review of *Tara Donovan: New York*, New York: PaceWildenstein. *Artus* no. 14 (July 2006), 55.
- ⁴Kristina Olson, "Tara Donovan," review of *Tara Donovan: New Works*, New York: PaceWildenstein, *Art Papers Magazine* 30, no. 4 (July 2006), 66.
- ⁵Lillian Davies, "Tara Donovan," in *Vitamin 3-D: New Perspectives in Sculptures and Installation*, ed. Nancy Adjanian and Anne Ellegood (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2009), 98.
- ⁶Oliver Kornhoff and Poul Eric Tøjner, "Forward," in *Tara Donovan*, ed. Jutta Mattern, Mette Marcus, and Jeanne Rank Schelde (Humblebaek, Denmark: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2013), 7.
- ⁷Christopher Miles, "Tara Donovan," review of *Tara Donovan: Survey*, Los Angeles, Ace Gallery, *Artforum* 43, no. 9 (May 2005), 253.
- ⁸Susan Sipple Elliott, "Tara Donovan," *Artus* no. 9 (July 2005), 4.

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- ⁹For interviews with Donovan, see n. 1, 9, and 11. Tara Donovan, interview by Jutta Mattern and Mette Marcus, "Interview," *Tara Donovan* (Humblebaek, Denmark: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2013), 17-20.
- ¹⁰Tara Donovan, interview by Lawrence Weschler, "Animal, Mineral, Vegetable: The Material Coming to Life," *Tara Donovan* (Hamilton, New Jersey: Isc Press, 2007), 152.
- ¹¹Michael O'Sullivan, "Parting Ways: An Artist and Her Toothpicks; Tara Donovan's Career and Works are Going Places," *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), July 24, 1997; Protzman, "Industrial-Strength Sculpture..." n.p.
- ¹²Tara Donovan, interview by Collette Chattopadhyay, "Rules for Growth: Tara Donovan," in *Conversations on Sculpture*, ed. Glenn Harper and Twylene Moyer (Hamilton, New Jersey: Isc Press, 2007), 66.
- ¹³As each installation of *Untitled* requires a different set of toothpicks, it could be argued that each iteration is a separate work meriting distinct titles. However, a full interrogation of the status of these iterations as distinct works is outside the scope of this paper. Davies, "Tara Donovan," 98; Neil, "Tara Donovan," 180.
- ¹⁴Kornhoff and Tøjner, "Forward," 6.
- ¹⁵The philosopher Karl Popper examines the visual elements of clouds as mode to understand perception; however, this metaphor is beyond the scope of this paper. For more on this, see Karl Popper, "Of Clouds and Clocks," in *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1973): 227.
- ¹⁶For more of Neil's work on Tara Donovan, see Jonathan T. D. Neil, "Legibility of Effort." *Art Review* 18 (January 2008), 74-79; Jonathan T. D. Neil, "The Screen," in *Tara Donovan: Drawings (Pins)*, n.p. New York: Pace Gallery, 2011; and Jonathan T. D. Neil, "Tara Donovan," review of *Tara Donovan*, New York: Pace Gallery. *Art Review* 66, no. 6 (September 2014), 180.
- ¹⁷The Dow Chemical Company owns the trademark on Styrofoam, a blue, extruded polystyrene foam made for building insulation. Dow clearly delineates that they do not approve of their name "Styrofoam" being applied to coffee cups and packing materials made from polystyrene beads. However, this paper will use "Styrofoam" following common usage of the term as a proprietary eponym used to describe white foam plastic. Judith Tannenbaum, "Styrofoam: From Industrial invention to Artistic Transformation," *Exhibition Notes* no. 29 (Spring 2008), 1-3.
- ¹⁸Patricia Kelly, "Tara Donovan," review of *Tara Donovan*, Boston, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, *CAA Reviews*, March 23, 2009, <http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/1231#.V9nFnZgrLIU>.
- ¹⁹Protzman, "Industrial-Strength Sculpture..." n.p.
- ²⁰While the specific details of the contract between Donovan and the Museum remain elusive, it can be assumed that the Museum dismantled and disposed of the Styrofoam cups in order to maintain the integrity of the second installation of *Untitled* (Styrofoam Cups). As noted in an email exchange with Mary Villadsen, dated September 19, 2016.