

# LAUREN BERKOWITZ'S HIGH-WIRE ACT

## Phoebe Hoban



*In the 1967 American film classic, 'The Graduate', Ben, famously played by a young Dustin Hoffman, gets some sage advice from a family friend, 'I just want to say one word to you. Just one word. Are you listening?' 'Plastics.'*

For the last several decades, artist Lauren Berkowitz has given the term 'recycling' new meaning in her work, which since the 1990s has used as its primary medium various forms of consumer waste; stacks of newspapers and phone books, sheaves of plastic bags and, predominantly, repurposed plastic bottles and containers. Starting in 1994 with her Melbourne installation, *Bags, Bottles, Newspapers*, Berkowitz's artistic alchemy has transformed detritus—what could commonly be labeled trash—into perversely beautiful artworks.

Her most recent site-specific piece, *Plastic Topographies*, installed at Artspace, is the latest in a series of hybrid works that combine an array of plastic containers and their colorful lids with living plants. The piece began in Brooklyn, New York, where Berkowitz was a resident at the International Studio and Curatorial Program.

'I was very aware of the extremely polluted industrial environment and wanted to bring plants into my studio space for my own personal health. I also noticed that many people living in New York like to have some greenery and nature in their space,' she says. 'So I started collecting waste material from the building and the area around it. The piece grew and evolved in an organic manner. I began to incorporate plants from a fellow artist's studio and from neighborhood stores. I especially wanted plants that were indoor air purifiers. I am interested in ideas of regeneration and renewal. I am washing and transforming waste into something that is sculptural, with a strong formal presence, and combining it with living matter that purifies and cleanses.'

Berkowitz has turned the horizontal topography she created in Brooklyn into a vertical work at Artspace, where a delicate myriad of plastic packaging hangs from the ceiling, pooling in a circular area of containers on the floor. The piece is punctuated with plants potted in plastic, their verdant greenery a visual bright spot in the installation that also serves as a poignant reminder of the planet's vulnerability.

Berkowitz's work precariously balances the inanimate and animate; the inorganic and the organic; the terrifying toxicity of a major environmental pollutant, plastic, with the innate beauty of the environment itself—living plants. 'I am interested in the real contradiction in the work, on the one hand it is really dreamlike and whimsical, and at the same time it is apocalyptic' the artist says.

It is this one-two punch that makes Berkowitz's work so powerful. The dangling plastic containers, in all shapes and sizes, their lids like circular exclamations, are aesthetically compelling—like big beads or ornaments on a nylon string. At the same time, they communicate the pervasiveness of plastic—invading everything from forests to oceans—destroying marine life and animals and impacting climate change. The sprouting plants project a positive note, promising hope that there is still time to regenerate and renew. 'My work plays with the Jewish notion of Tikkun Olam, the idea of repairing the world through small gestures, which I think is a beautiful concept.'

A beautiful concept beautifully expressed. Like all Berkowitz's work, the installation, while intuitive, is far from random. "I treat the composition as a three-dimensional abstract painting," says the artist, whose exquisite sense of form, color and light can be clearly seen in the current piece, which plays with circular and rectangular shapes, contrasts color with dramatic black—and fully exploits the animated effect of ambient light on the plastic's transparency.

Despite its apparent simplicity, the piece is multilayered, merging material with metaphor. 'Empty vessels speak of absence and ephemerality and the transitory state of existence. It's an ambiguous landscape of evolution, transition and change' says Berkowitz. Then there is the palette, with its range from blues and greens to oranges and reds, signaling seasonal change, which itself echoes life, death and rebirth. There is something festive and celebratory about the piece, which has a lightness, delicacy and playfulness that belies its serious, even dire, implications.

In this new hybrid work, as in other past pieces, Berkowitz has taken on the multiple roles of creator, collector, hunter, gatherer, gardener and the traditional female task of caretaker—one who literally washes the dishes. Much of Berkowitz's work is essentially 'readymade' and the artist's oeuvre also references Pop Art, Minimalism, and Feminism. But Berkowitz's art is in a class of its own in its deft utilization of manmade materials and natural organisms—whether dried or living—to create imaginary landscapes that execute an adept high-wire act: her art visually enchants even while it intellectually portends. As with other works, when *Plastic Topographies* is dismantled, its materials will be recycled: containers will be reused and plants will find a new home: Tikkun Olam in action.

**Phoebe Hoban** is a New York-based writer who covers art and culture. She has written for *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *New York Magazine*, and *ARTnews*, among others. She is also the author of three biographies; on Jean-Michel Basquiat, Alice Neel and Lucian Freud.