

3rd Year Arts Award Outcome Report

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Faculty Mentor: Federico Cuatlacuatl (Studio Art)

March 17th, 2024

1.8 Cents a Can



When I applied for the Miller Arts Scholars 3rd Year Arts Award, I had just spent Spring Break in New York City with the Studio Art and Art History departments, where we visited every major museum, met with artists and curators, and ultimately got an insider look at the

forefront of the fine art world. This trip inspired me to design and execute a conceptual art piece that continues the artistic research I've been exploring with recycled and found materials. As an environmental science student, I'm interested in the sustainability of our systems of consumption and waste, ranging from an individual to a national scale. My original proposal included fabricating blown-up, sculptural US coins with litter collected from Charlottesville and surrounding communities in order to draw connections between city, country, value, and waste. However, I was lucky to be accepted into a January Term class that took students to Vietnam to study Ecological Economics. During this experience, I studied the recycling and waste systems in Vietnam and learned so much about the global plastic scrap trade and its impacts and harms. I was so energized by this course and the things I learned that I decided to change the plan for my Arts Awards piece from large coins to a portrait of a Vietnamese scrap picker, while maintaining the original methods.

I drew inspiration from Luis A. Sahagún, an artist I first discovered in the *Aesthetics of Undocumentedness* exhibition with my mentor Federico Cuatlacuatl. Sahagún creates elaborate multimedia portraits, and I was curious to see how I could use the trash I collected and cleaned to create a similar effect. I also felt that my background in drawing/painting and portraiture could be used to elevate the conversation I want to start; seeing and connecting to a human face is extremely impactful!

I chose Federico Cuatlacuatl as my mentor because I first met him as the faculty leader of the Spring Break trip to New York and then went on to be in many of his classes for my New Media concentration. Not only did Federico guide my experience within the New York arts world and spark a curiosity about the potential of conceptual work in addressing global policy, but I was also able to develop my process of using trash as sculpture under him. Knowing my process and the direction of my research intimately made him the perfect mentor for me. I'm thankful for how his classes and his own work have pushed me to make my work more political and engage more with the community and the space around me.

At the awards reception, a presentation about the global scrap trade accompanies the piece so viewers can learn more about these topics. When we create waste, we often toss it in a bin somewhere or put it on the curb and feel like it has disappeared or been "taken care of," but this veil of ignorance provides a breeding ground for abuse and injustice that disproportionately impacts communities of color, specifically targeting women. In fact, 99% of scrap pickers in

Vietnam are women. I'm hoping this project can start important conversations about the urgency of sustainability and the responsibilities of both individuals and collective systems. I would consider it a success if the outcome of this work educates even a few people about the impact of their consumption, in addition to how much I've learned about the conceptual art process and, of course, removing waste from my local environments and communities.

The title of this piece and project, *1.8 Cents a Can*, is a reference to the average value of a single aluminum can sold as scrap metal in the US. This number is not fixed and varies by location and the state of the market, but it is meant to provide perspective and encourage thinking about what the value of material and waste may be. The portrait of a scrap picker, someone who collects, cleans, and sells trash and waste for a living, is juxtaposed with the elaborate frame that references oil paintings and grand, golden frames that serve as symbols of wealth, power, and luxury. The piece functions as a dynamic prompt with many directions: How many cans would one need to collect in the US to survive? What is scrap material and salvaged recycling worth in other countries? Where does our recycling here in the US actually go? Who handles it? Do I know what will happen to the soda can I drank at lunch? The presentation then tells viewers about how the US exports its scrap waste to Southeast Asian countries, despite the lack of adequate infrastructure in place to handle it, essentially dumping our trash there. We then misleadingly report these countries as the biggest marine and plastic polluters in the world when they cannot manage all this waste and claim that we have some of the most efficient and effective waste management in the world. Entire villages, families, and generations are consumed by this trash and there are microeconomies dedicated to processing the waste of the wealthy, western countries; this often includes burning, burying, or piling it, causing major health and environmental justice concerns, just not in *our* backyard.

We use and throw things away every day. We might even feel good when we sort and recycle and think we are doing our part, yet the majority of people producing mass amounts of waste have no idea where all their trash goes or what happens to it. This information, and more that will be included in the presentation, is just scratching the surface, and there is a lot to uncover and unpack in this conversation. Waste and consumption are intrinsically linked, and I hope this art piece will remove some of the mystery surrounding it. I am very thankful to the Miller Arts Scholars program and donors for helping me with this important work and granting me this amazing opportunity.

Final Budget:

Art Supplies

Acrylic Paint Packs- \$87.49

Brush Pack- \$54.65

Professional Art Spray Paint Packs & Primers- \$454.41

Spray Paint Personal Protective Equipment- \$48.98

Heavy Duty Glue- \$27.88

Base frame- \$9.00

Trash Collection (supplies for multiple people to participate in clean ups as a community effort)

Towels- \$5.60

Gloves- \$16.46

Claws- \$83.34

Industrial Trash Bags- \$14.98

Trash Cleaning/Processing

Tarp- \$10.88

Soap- \$3.97

Cleaning Brushes & Sponges- \$24.04

Storage (a range of heavy duty plastic bins)- \$75.92

Other

Leftover funds (applied to gas for car transportation & water bill compensation for roommates)- \$167.44

Total- \$1085.04

Process Photos:





Past work with recycled materials:



Scrap Picker Photo Portraits:



The methods of cleaning materials seen here (^) are extremely similar to my process.

