

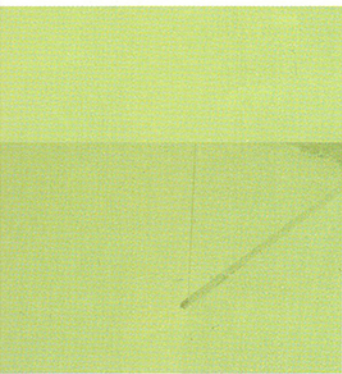
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Wraith,
2021.
48 used plastic
bodega bags, marker,
steel, stainless
steel cable, and
hardware, each panel:
90 x 72 in.

Abandoned Utility: A Conversation with Sean Donovan

BY RAINA MEHLER

Sean Donovan, an emerging artist living in Brooklyn, uses sculpture, video, and printmaking to call attention to environmental degradation. His works, which repurpose—and sometimes replicate—abandoned objects, including chemical

containers and plastic bags, expose the myopic thinking and avaricious behavior that result in unchecked consumer and industrial waste, pollution, and a poisoned planet. Another group of works created from found snapping turtle shells pays

homage to one of the world's most threatened animals, besieged by habitat loss, the illegal pet trade, and overhunting. Skillfully combining materials, post-Minimalist arrangements of forms, and thoughtful installation

methods, Donovan alludes to the magnitude and acceleration of climate change while revealing the ugly consequences of human domination.

Raina Mehler: *The first work that viewers encountered when entering your second solo exhibition at M 2 3 in New York (2020) was Wasteland. What was your inspiration?*

Sean Donovan: *Wasteland* was influenced by a residency in Portugal, where I saw firsthand the long-term, irreversible consequences of environmental abuse. I explored the remains of an abandoned petrochemical campus littered with the tools of production. Teardrop-shaped chemical containers were scattered throughout the industrial park. They were bright yellow and embossed with the word “PLENTY.” I arranged them in a way that I thought they would best interact as one unit given the chaotic “wasteland” of where they were found. When I returned to Brooklyn, I cast the shapes in resin at about one-third scale, abstracted the text, and suspended them from the ceiling. The addition of a motor, which rotates the entire structure at 1.5 RPM, brings themes related to the history of piecework-like factory production and machinery to the forefront.

RM: *Wasteland's* translucent, almost organic shapes form a contrast to *No title*, a formida-

ble, sharp-edged, geometric work. Battered, oxidized, and abraded, the structure recalls a neglected industrial receptacle. Where did you find it, and how did you make it?

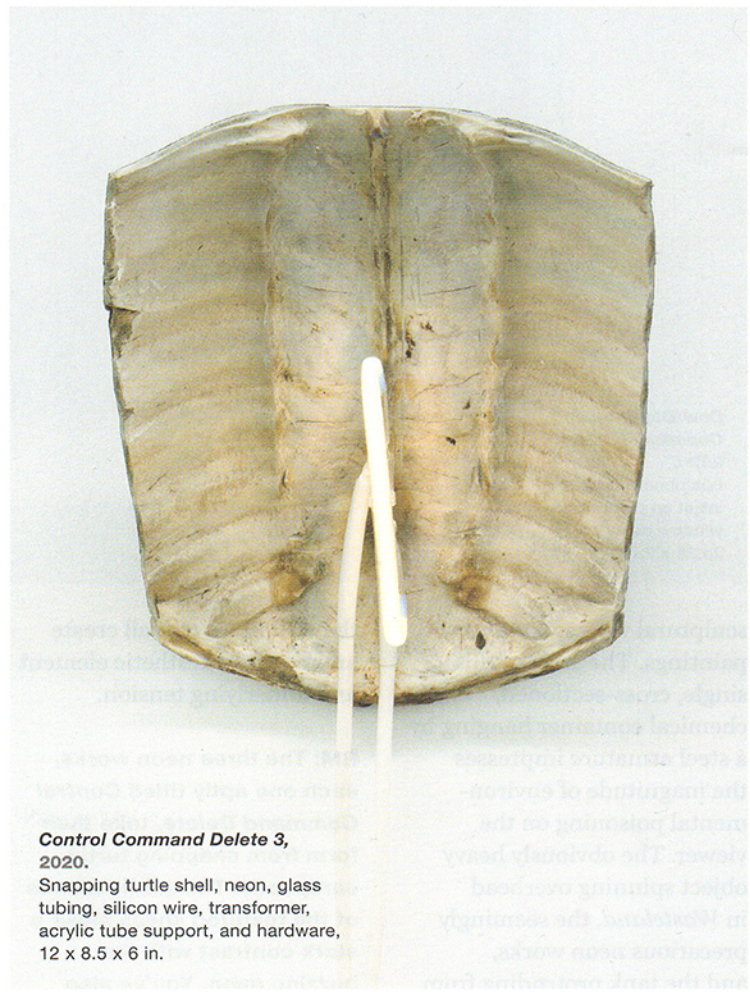
SD: I found the discarded tank near Newtown Creek in Ridgewood, Queens—one of the most polluted industrial sites in the United States. For decades, it has been the center of discarded toxins and raw sewage. Mireya Navarro in the *New York Times* article “Between Queens and Brooklyn, an Oil Spill’s Legacy” (2010) reported that an estimated 17 to 30 million gallons of spilled oil in this area have destroyed wildlife and created unsafe health conditions for people. The tank was cross-sectioned lengthwise, revealing the history of its use. A fabricated steel armature maintains its shape and creates a hanging mechanism.

RM: *In No title*, as in many of your works, you use a hanging method that appears unstable. There is a sense of precariousness, as if it is about to fall off the wall—a sense of approaching disaster that inevitably calls to mind climate anxiety. Many scientists say we are on the brink of irreversible devastation or have already passed it.

SD: All of the works are presented in a manner that appears to defy gravity and imply imminent danger. Scale can also dramatically affect the viewer’s perception of a particular piece—not just with



No title,
2020.
Plastic water tank, steel
armature, and
hardware, each element:
50 x 54 x 18.5 in.



Control Command Delete 3,
2020.
Snapping turtle shell, neon, glass
tubing, silicon wire, transformer,
acrylic tube support, and hardware,
12 x 8.5 x 6 in.



Dow/Dupont Chemical, 2020. Foamboard and inkjet on perforated window decal, 28.25 x 23 x 1 in.

sculptural works, but also with paintings. The scale of this single, cross-sectioned, chemical container hanging by a steel armature impresses the magnitude of environmental poisoning on the viewer. The obviously heavy object spinning overhead in *Wasteland*, the seemingly precarious neon works, and the tank protruding from

the wall in *No title* all create an impactful aesthetic element and underlying tension.

RM: The three neon works, each one aptly titled *Control Command Delete*, take their form from snapping turtle carapaces. The subtle curves of the textured shells make a stark contrast with the buzzing neon. You've also

used armadillo shells in previous works. Why do you use these shells?

SD: Tortoise shells were historically used as decoration—obtained by dissecting the living animal from its carapace. The shells used in the fabrication of these neon works are vintage. The underside of the shell is visible, exposing the spine and support system,

highlighted by a gesture of neon. Although this species is not yet endangered, it is at risk for extinction.

RM: To me, your work is reminiscent of the post-minimal aesthetic of 1970s Greene Street artists like Richard Serra and Jackie Winsor, who challenged conventions, emphasized materiality, and used manufacturing materials. What artists or movements have been most influential for you? How do your sociopolitical concerns affect your aesthetic choices?

SD: Pierre Huyghe's complex systems and research are a continual influence, and, of course, his aesthetic, which resists definition. I'm always interested in the work and enigmatic legacy of Cady Noland. These works often focus on the political, social, environmental, and economic themes that recur in my practice.

Materiality plays a significant role in my work, as does my general perception of contemporary culture as it pertains to issues related to global human dominance. My particular aesthetic is most likely the result of many factors, including art history—but not necessarily a particular movement, moment, or single artist. My use of materials is in part a reaction to the ecosystem that is consumerism, and systems of disposal and upcycling. The environmental catastrophe that we currently face goes beyond any one

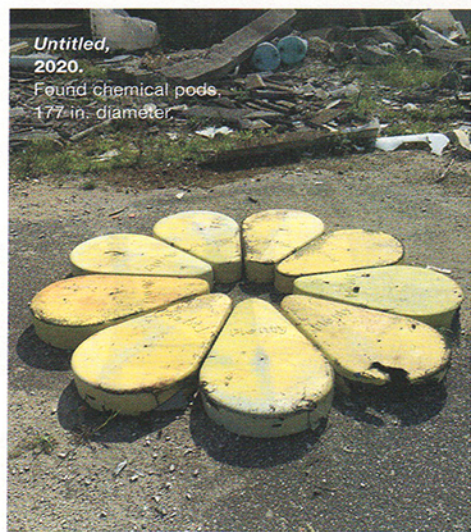
discipline—it is engrained in every aspect of our culture. The production and distribution of food, clothing, technology—everything—needs to be re-examined and recalibrated to provide worldwide sustainability.

RM: All of your recent sculptures possess an inherent tension, uncertainty, and

imbalance. The dichotomies you set up invoke unease, creating a foreboding atmosphere with elements of irony and despair. Yet *Wasteland* levitates and has a diaphanous quality, evoking the skies or heavens—perhaps signaling a sense of hope, resilience, or reprieve. What is your overarching outlook?

SD: The outlook is always

hopeful. Art is the purest form of human expression, created with a visual narrative conveying emotions, feelings, and messages that go beyond words. The ideal is that viewers bring their own experiences and history to the work; to manifest a feeling, action, or message that effects change and advances contemporary culture. ■



Untitled,
2020.
Found chemical pods,
177 in. diameter.



Wasteland (detail),
2020.
Resin, motor, metal
hardware, wood,
and stainless steel cable,
59 in. diameter.