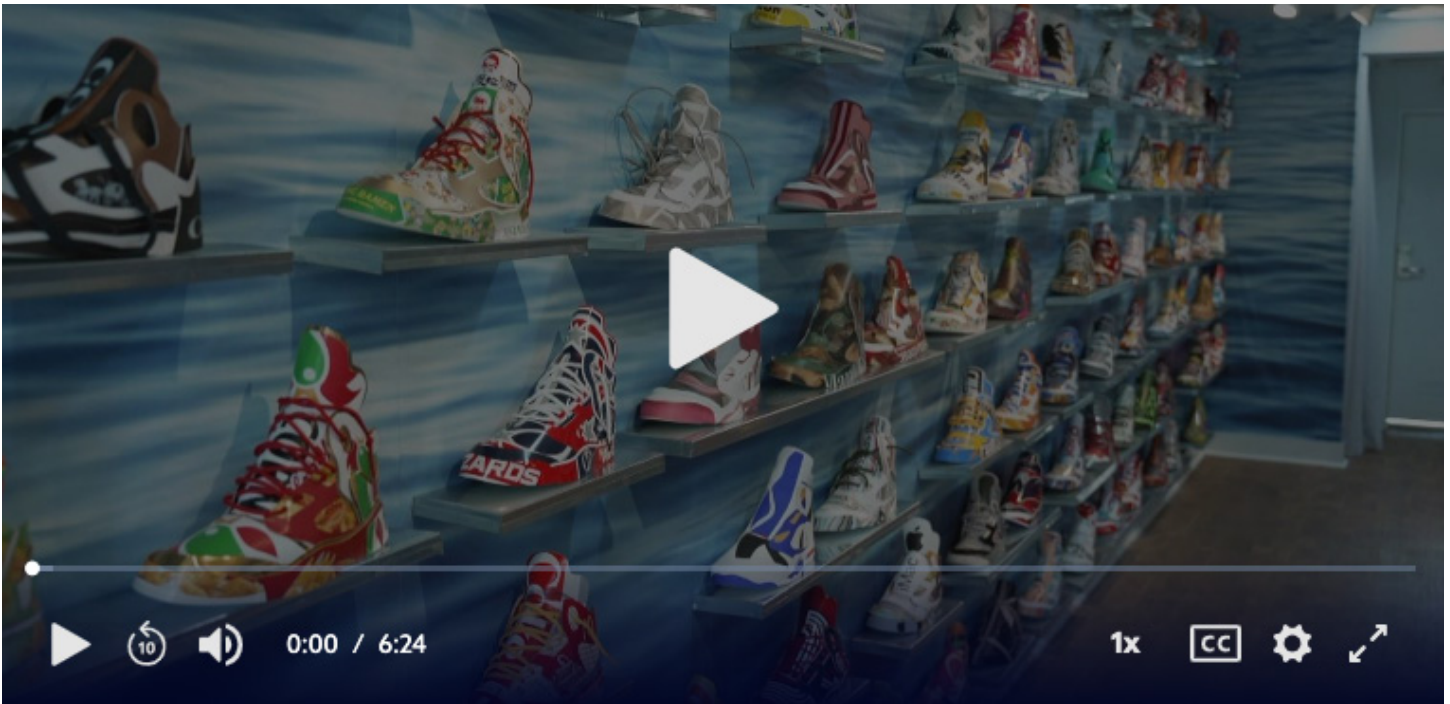


PBS NEWSHOUR

DC art exhibit makes shoes out of trash in nod to the 'Great Shoe Spill of 1990'



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Transcript:

Judy Woodruff:

It was the great shoe spill of 1990. Do you recall? Tens of thousands of Nike shoes fell into the Pacific. It led to some scientific discoveries, and now whimsical art packed with an eco-friendly message.

William Brangham plunges in to an exhibit called Overboard, part of our arts and culture series, Canvas.

William Brangham:

At first glance, it looks like a sneaker showroom, with what seem to be 200 Nike Air Jordans along the walls, a candy shop of sorts for the so-called sneakerheads who collect all manner of brands as a passion and sometimes for profit.

But look more closely. These are no ordinary shoes. They're intricately sculpted replicas, fashioned out of everyday garbage, discarded boxes, bags, and posters.

Andy Yoder:

It's really fun to sort of latch yourself onto those graphics and also the brand recognition and the nostalgia that people feel for those brands. And, again, it's drawing them in.

William Brangham:

Conceptual artist Andy Yoder crafted these objects, following his similar eye-grabbing installations, like these massive paper airplanes aloft in the Cleveland Airport, or this model of planet Earth built from 300,000 wooden matches, or these enormous shoes, seven feet long, made of licorice.

For these handmade sneakers, all size 13, Yoder says each took roughly six hours to construct. And his raw materials? They often came out of garbage cans, alleyways and dumpsters. No material was ruled out, no place off-limits.

He found the scraps for one shoe out behind his local Chinese restaurant.

Andy Yoder:

And then, in the dumpster, along with these other packages, I found this jigsaw puzzle of a tiger, and I just thought...

William Brangham:

Wow.

Andy Yoder:

... that is the great combination here.

William Brangham:

So, someone had done — assembled the puzzle, and then chucked it?

Andy Yoder:

Right. They did.

Right next to Salvatore Ferragamo, you have got Special K cereal, or Veuve Clicquot right next to Hot Wheels. So, it's that juxtaposition, that slamming together of things from high culture, low culture, all those different things kind of bumping up against each

other.

William Brangham:

But this is about more than just a chaotic collision of color.

Yoder hopes we can learn something new from the things we cast away, very much like the three-decade-old event that inspired this work. In 1990, the container ship the Hansa Carrier was traveling from Korea to North America when it hit rough water. The storm threw overboard several containers full of roughly 80,000 Nike shoes.

Adrift on the Pacific, thousands of those sneakers washed ashore months later.

Curtis Ebbesmeyer:

It turned out that every shoe has a serial number, like a message in a bottle.

William Brangham:

Is that right? So you could track each — not just the whole containers-full, but each individual shoe?

Curtis Ebbesmeyer:

Correct.

William Brangham:

Oceanographer Curt Ebbesmeyer studied that small sneaker flotilla. He's been dubbed the world's expert on flotsam, the floating debris spilled from cargo ships.

Ebbesmeyer has tracked everything from spilled rubber duckies to floating hockey gloves. The 1990 shoe spill and many others like it have helped researchers understand the behavior of what are called gyres, which are huge circular ocean currents. By tracking thousands of objects from different spills as they drift, scientists can now better predict how something like an oil spill might travel, and where it might end up.

And the original Nikes specifically taught Ebbesmeyer one odd fact, that left shoes tend to drift one way and right shoes another.

That is the striking thing about this, is that it's a fun and charming story that we hear, but these sneakers going into the ocean did lead to some real scientific understanding.

Curtis Ebbesmeyer:

Yes, I would call it serendipity science. It forces you to ask questions you may never have thought about, which is really good.

The ocean, I think, speaks to us in what I call flotsam tongue. And I'm here to read it. It's like the ancient hieroglyphs on the Pyramids. So, there's a lot to be learned. And I think these container spills have a lot to teach us.

William Brangham:

The Overboard exhibit is, not coincidentally, displayed in a 40-foot shipping container in Southeast Washington, D.C.

Artist Yoder and scientist Ebbesmeyer share the same fascination with the 1990 spill and admire each other's work, but haven't met. Yoder displays his shoes with a nod to Ebbesmeyer's findings, left shoes on one side, right shoes on the other. He swears there's no political messaging there, and he tries to keep the same out of his art.

Andy Yoder:

I think everybody knows, on some level, no matter what side of these issues you're on, that things are not in good shape. So, how do we come at that issue in a fresh way?

William Brangham:

Kristi Maiselman is the executive director of the arts organization CulturalDC. She dreamt up the idea of showcasing Yoder's art in a shipping container, which she is then able to move around the city to bring art to the public.

Maiselman says, just as cast-off trash gets a second look from this exhibit, people in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere are reemerging from the pandemic and experiencing a similar sense of rebirth.

Kristi Maiselman:

I think that we have all been cooped up in our house and we have been — houses — and we have been watching Zoom things, Zoom theater and Zoom art tours. But it's not the same.

You know, we couldn't have come out of the pandemic with a more perfect venue and a more perfect platform, because it's small, and it's a manageable space, where we know we can keep things safe, and really let people enjoy and immerse themselves in a way that they can't in other places.

William Brangham:

The exhibit continues through the end of June. And, yes, the art is for sale, \$750 a shoe.

For the "PBS NewsHour," I'm William Brangham in Washington, D.C.

Judy Woodruff:

A great thing to look forward to as we get out of the house.

Thank you, William.