

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Now at Brookgreen Gardens

Stimulates, Confronts, Provokes, Engages, Forces Us To Think

by Todd Wilkinson

Sometimes, creativity springs forth viscerally, born of outrage, feelings of helplessness, and despair. On April 20, 2010, the offshore drilling platform *Deepwater Horizon* exploded and caught fire, killing eleven workers and injuring sixteen others, and began hemorrhaging millions of gallons of raw crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico, the largest marine oil spill to date in history. The unprecedented disaster, known more colloquially as the BP oil spill, left Leo Osborne stunned and it stirred in him a troubling sense of déjà vu.

In 1989, some twenty-one years earlier, Osborne (b. 1947), a sculptor, painter, and poet who has a strong affinity for the sea, had watched from afar when the oil tanker

Exxon Valdez ran aground in Prince William Sound, Alaska, wreaking ecological destruction that rippled across the northern Pacific Ocean—permanently damaging the sound’s coastal ecosystem, which remains polluted. Osborne had responded then by carving an avian piece out of birds-eye maple burl titled *Still Not Listening* (1989). In many ways, it represents a line that Osborne crossed from interpreter to activist.

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—Leo Osborne

Still Not Listening portrays an ocean wading bird lethally drenched by a jet-black predator—oil pollution. The gutsy work attracted public notice, becoming part of different exhibitions around the world, and it commands strong resonance with both viewers and other artists.





Left photo: Leisha Taylor. Right photos: Courtesy of the artist.

“Not long after reports of the BP spill started to surface in 2010, I called David Wagner [at Brookgreen Gardens] with a suggestion,” Osborne explains. “I said he ought to develop an art show that addresses human-caused environmental destruction, much of which is being caused by our own arrogance, greed, and sloppy stewardship of the natural world.”

Wagner is well known in nature art circles for producing and curating traveling exhibitions for individuals and group shows that have ranged from the Wisconsin Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum’s “Birds in Art” to, more recently, the Society of Animal Artists’ 55th annual exhibition and tour, “Art and the Animal.” He was moved by Osborne’s passion.

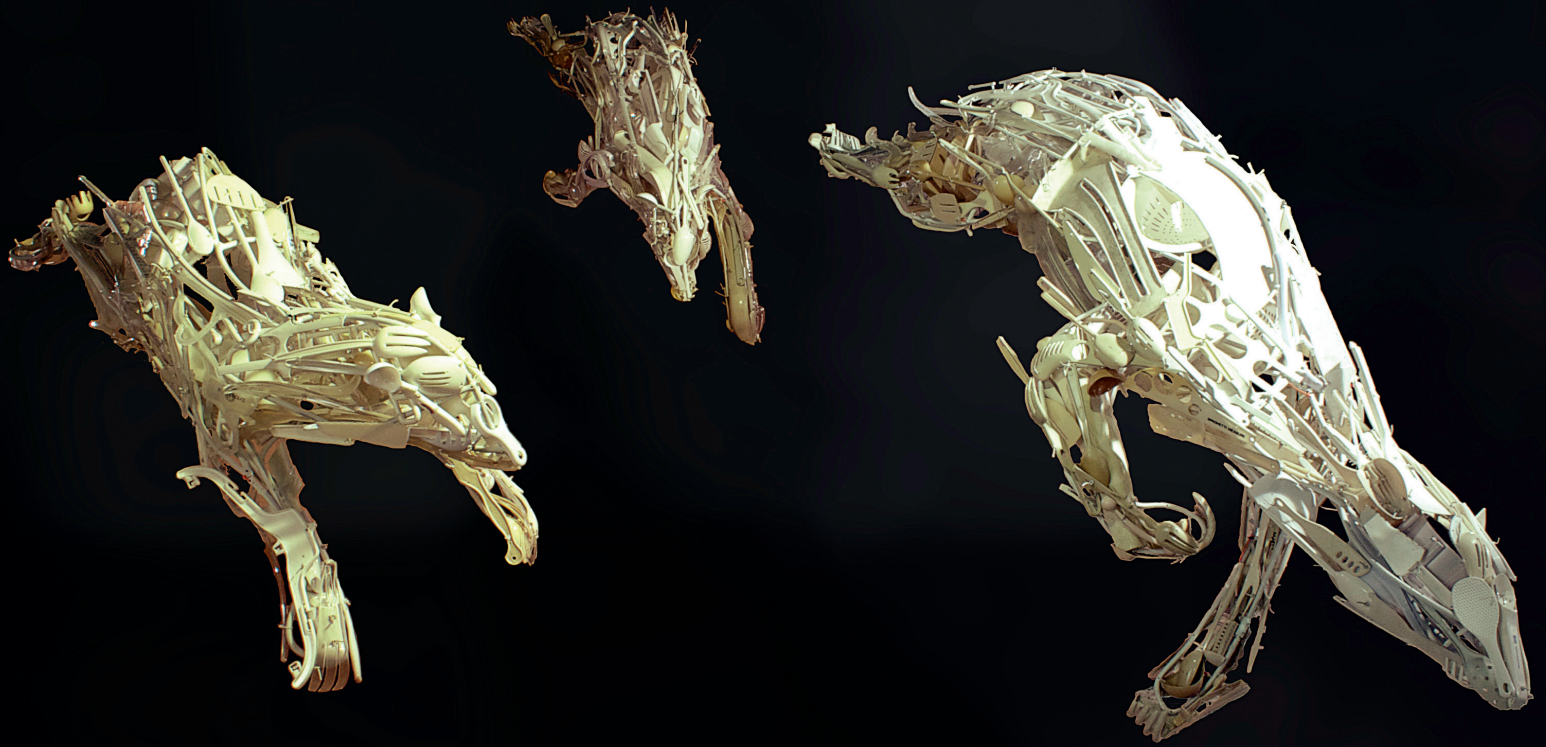
Osborne also reached out to his friend Ullberg, who, in 1989, had also produced an acclaimed work of sculpture in the aftermath of the Valdez fiasco titled *Requiem for Prince William Sound*. It portrayed an oil-stained bald eagle, its head thrust back dramatically in grief.

“When I made ‘*Requiem*’ I knew I was taking a chance of potentially alienating people. I wasn’t trying to make a political statement. I was making an ecological one,” Ullberg said. “I am descended from a long line of Swedish mariners and fishermen who sailed the North Sea and relied upon a healthy ocean for their livelihood. The Valdez spill really struck a chord.”



Opposite page: Reality by Michael Meilahn (2013), blown glass, 16 feet high, detail.

On this page, top: Still Not Listening by Leo Osborne (1989), maple burl-wood and vinyl caulking, 21 inches high; *bottom:* One World (portraying a sea turtle) by Leo Osborne (2014), maple burl-wood and vinyl caulking, 6 inches high, harvested on Guemes Island.



Then, two decades later, came the BP spill, which dwarfed the amount of oil that had leaked into *Prince William Sound*. But instead of it occurring in far-off Alaskan waters, Ullberg says, the rapidly expanding BP slick was heading toward the shore of the Gulf Coast where he lives. The sight of birds, sea turtles, otters, and other creatures coated in oil summoned in him the thoughts of the Swedish sculptor Carl Milles's statue of Poseidon (completed in 1931 in Göteborg), as keeper of the ocean. "I believe strongly that, as artists, we need to defend the things we love," he says.

Without hesitation, Ullberg made *Requiem for Prince William Sound* available to Wagner. Together with Osborne's piece, Wagner had a solid nucleus to shape an exhibition called "Environmental Impact." The exhibit was strongly complemented by a painting from Canadian artist Robert Bateman.

Bateman's intriguing and powerful work, *Carmanah Contrasts* (1989) depicts a side-by-side comparison between a once pristine Pacific Northwest rainforest with majestic thousand-year-old Sitka spruce and the blight of a massive timber clearcut in which a landscape of rich biodiversity has been reduced to stumps.

As word of the concept spread, a wide range of artists enthusiastically came forward, bringing the number of artworks in "Environmental Impact" to seventy-five. From Jan. 31, 2015–April 26, 2015, the exhibition is on display at Brookgreen Gardens, on view daily in the Rainey Sculpture Pavilion. For many observers, the showing represents a watershed moment—a point of confluence between traditional, classical, and timeless approaches to form that reside in Brookgreen's permanent collection and, next to them, edgy contemporary statements of the environmental age designed to push the envelope.

“These are examples of how works of art, when let loose from the artist and sent out into the world can and often do create their own stories. It is the act of inanimate objects becoming artifacts and living notions,” Osborne says, mentioning that he is debuting another piece at Brookgreen titled *One World*, portraying a sea turtle.

Also worth noting are the engaging pieces *Bound* and *Rising Tides* by San Francisco sculptor Chapel. The first work, a depiction of birds, conveys the interconnectedness of nature, while the latter evokes the struggles facing remarkable sea turtles who embark upon amazing journeys of survival—contending with rising oceans, overfishing, pollution, and coastal development and poaching that threaten the habitats where they lay their eggs.

“Environmental Impact” is perhaps most provocative with its conceptual sculpture and diverse array of paintings and photographs. Michael Meilahn (b. 1945) presents Pop art sculptures depicting living organisms, but they are not fauna: These are interpretations of the genetically modified corn planted in his field.

A Wisconsin farmer, former Peace Corps volunteer, and sculptor working primarily in glass, Meilahn is deeply concerned about the environment. He also has strong convictions that bioengineering of crops is safe and beneficial. His mesmerizing corn ears, made in blown glass suspended from the ceiling, are intended to stoke conversation.

“People in the show thought that I was protesting GMO corn when actually I’m touting it,” Meilahn says. Because GMO corn is more resistant to certain insects, it requires less treatment with insecticides; because it’s more drought resistant and hardier, it needs less water and fertilizer, which means fewer chemicals leaching into waterways. Critics of GMOs claim there is a mad-science aspect to manipulating genetic characteristics. For example, some evidence suggests that they might be harmful for native plants as well as pollinators, such as bees and butterflies. The jury is still out.

Sayaka Ganz, who has work in the show, viewed it in Kalamazoo, Michigan. “After hearing about the works and



Opposite page, top: *Travelers* by Sayaka Ganz (2013), reclaimed plastic and metal, approximately 50 inches high each; **bottom:** *Rising Tides* by Ron Chapel (2010), cast bronze with a limestone cap, 15 inches high.

On this page: *Bound* by Ron Chapel (2009), cast bronze, stainless steel, mirror with sand blasted images and marble, 39 inches high.



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—Kent Ullberg

the topics they addressed described to me, I was expecting to encounter something much more dark and bleak when I walked into the space,” she said. “It was so much brighter and a lot of the works were so much more playful than I expected.

Even if you are just skimming the surface, you can get through the whole show without getting depressed. If you’re willing to go deeper, you have that option and if you’re feeling overwhelmed you can step back and just enjoy the aesthetics. You can choose what path you want to take.”

Lest anyone mistakenly believe that “Environmental Impact” has not confronted adversity, consider this: “In the earliest days of the exhibition as I was trying to put a touring schedule together, I was in contact with curators at several well-known fine art and natural history museums,” Wagner says. “While they loved the material, they declined to host the show because they were fearful it might offend patrons, cause an uproar or cost them their jobs.”

Despite the risk of any political fallout, Wagner’s instincts—his ardent belief that the public is drawn to provocative imagery—have been validated. Wherever “Environmental Impact” has toured, media reviews have been overwhelmingly positive. He credits the venue hosts with having the courage to stimulate an important societal discussion.

“Of all the shows I’ve ever curated, this is one of them that makes me most proud,” Wagner says. “There’s a lot at stake for the world and the survival of our species. These artworks address it. How could [it] get any more meaningful than that?” 

Opposite page: Reality by Michael Meilahn (2013), blown glass, 16 feet high, detail.

On this page: Requiem (Maquette for Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Monument) by Kent Ullberg (1989), bronze, 26-1/2 inches high.



Left photos: Shane VanBoxtel. Right photo: Courtesy of the artist.