

JAKOB SCHILLER PHOTO 06.15.15 5:30 AM

MEXICO'S UGLY OCEAN TRASH, TRANSFORMED INTO TREASURE



1 / 15 *Derrame (Spill)* Alejandro Durán

THE BEACHES OF Cancun are pristine, but it doesn't happen naturally. Resort workers frequently comb the shore for trash to maintain the illusion of perfection, but wander beyond the gleaming hotels and you'll find a coastline littered with debris.

[Alejandro Durán](#) collects some of that stray garbage to create color-coordinated sculptures for his series *Washed Up*. The shampoo bottles, light bulbs, and even refrigerator and boat parts are so ugly when scattered on the sand yet weirdly beautiful when grouped together.

The artist works on the beaches of Sian Ka'an, a [biosphere reserve](#) a few hours south of Cancun. Over the past five years, Durán estimates he's gathered thousands of discarded bits and bobs that is polluting the reserve. "The idea came from visiting Sian Ka'an and seeing the situation first hand," he says. "After my initial disgust, I sought out the colors and a way to make something with this mess of materials."

It takes about 10 days start to finish to collect the debris, build the piece and take the picture. Black and white plastic containers are easy to find, as are blue ones. Other colors are more rare. “Purple, being one of the least abundant colors, is like gold to me,” Durán says.

His sculptures often mimic the natural forms around them. A rainbow of bottle caps pools in nearby rocks. Dozens of toothbrushes sprout from the ground like prickly weeds. Durán likes the juxtaposition of garbage impersonating rivers, fruit and other things in nature, and hopes it draws the viewer in for a closer look. “By creating forms that mimic nature I am depicting the reality of this environmental disaster. Plastic is infiltrating our ecosystems,” he says.

When he’s done with the trash, Durán recycles what he can. Unfortunately, lots of what he comes across has been in the sea and sun so long it can’t be reused, so he keeps it for future art projects so it doesn’t land in the dump.

There are many artists who have transformed garbage in this way, from [debris animals](#) to more [abstract creations](#). All hope to raise awareness of the impact on the environment where they work. Beyond creating art, Durán’s organized his own shore cleanup around Sian Ka’an. He knows it can be hard to scour a section of beach only have the tides bring more ashore the next day, but he’s committed to doing what he can. “[The cleanup] is a Sisyphean task that requires a concerted, continual effort,” he says.