

# Washed up

**THE FIRST** thing people ask me about my project Found in Nature is whether I set out to try to communicate an environmental message. That wasn't my intention at all. In fact, the whole thing started quite unintentionally. It had its genesis in another body of work entirely, one dealing specifically with botany called Lost in Nature.

I was keen to engage in a project that took me outside of my old studio and I was particularly interested to test out my new camera, a Hasselblad Phase One P25 with a digital back. I work on a lot of commercial assignments and, as a result, I was looking for a project that took me outside of that. The plants that interested me particularly were weeds, the kind of botany you'll find growing at the sides of roads and in marginal areas.

While I was visiting these places I would see a lot of rubbish that had been aged by the elements. It's as if these objects had become abstracted by the weathering process. So many of them had lost their labels and become weather-worn. While there was something attractive about the items I was discovering – the colours in particular – it wasn't until a trip to Jersey Shore that I began my collection of discarded items. As there were no appealing plants to photograph, I started to pick up a



American photographer **Barry Rosenthal** discusses his project Found in Nature and his tireless efforts to document the waste found washed up on New York's coastal shores

**'Toy Soldiers, Brooklyn, New York'. Many of the items Barry collects present him with a challenge to gather as many as he can to make a shot**



lot of small, colourful objects such as bottle caps. They were strewn all over the beach like washed-up seashells. It was then that I began to shoot these objects in the spaces where I discovered them.

## ON LOCATION

At that time I had a car in which I carried a small studio kit wherever I went. The main component of that was an 18x24in pad of white paper that I'd use as a small portable studio backdrop. I'd shoot everything on that. It made sense to me, because that's what I was shooting my botanical images on. It was a restriction that I liked working with.

When I was shooting outdoors, I had a piece of diffusing material, light stands and tripods – a whole studio set-up in miniature. The diffusing material was important because I wanted the pictures to remain shadowless. They had to be distinctly uncommercial in that sense, and of course it was important for each image to be consistent in its lighting aesthetic. It didn't matter what the weather was like, because the light was the same.

Eventually, my collection of objects began to expand beyond my expectations. That was when I had to make the decision to move my project into a real studio setting. I could then begin making expansive collages of objects. Shooting on my small white pad became a restriction that no longer appealed to me. I needed the larger community of objects and the interplay between them.

## PLASTIC POISON

The funny thing is that when I started this project I thought I'd just find very old things such as rusty beer cans. What surprised me was that all the objects I happened upon were relatively new. The turnaround of consumerism is breathtaking.

Plastic is the material I find more than any other in these images. The reason is that plastic floats and it ends up getting stuck in the salt marshes and on the beach. There's so much waste that's either been dumped in the ocean, fallen off a barge or somehow travelled through the

city's sewer system and storm drains. Everything gets washed off the street and into the harbour. The land, of course, is unable to absorb these items. Even if it could, plastic is still a rampant poison within the environment. It's at an industrial scale now. I used to go beachcombing as a kid and there was nowhere near this amount of plastic out there then.

I think we kid ourselves into imagining that all things break down in the environment eventually. Of course, that doesn't happen, particularly with plastic. The only answer is

to find a way to take these things out of the environment entirely.

## NEW SPACES

For now, I'm very much involved in looking for places that I haven't visited before. There's a string of places around New York that I need to investigate. I tend to visit places that are not exactly attractive to people looking to sun themselves. Therefore, they're neglected for years and don't get cleaned. I'll also visit places that are out of the way, underneath the highway and landfills. I never

seem to come across other people in these locations. Funnily enough, no one wants to spend time there except me.

It seems strange to me that waterfront properties are now considered so desirable. It wasn't always that way. The city had no idea what to do with places like salt marshes, so their solution was to fill them with waste. Since then, they've discontinued those landfills and built high-rise apartments on top of them. Landfills are now a part of cultural history and are sought-after spaces for those who can afford to live there.



**'The funny thing is that when I started this project I thought I'd just find very old things such as rusty beer cans'**



**Above: 'Blue Ocean'. Sometimes Barry groups random and unrelated items together when they share a similar colour hue**

**Left: 'Oil, Alcohol and Drugs'. Plastic items are a recurring theme in Barry's images – an unfortunate side effect of consumerism**

## THE COLLECTION

I have kept around half the items I've accumulated. I don't have a big studio, so I only have enough space for some things. The oil bottles had to go because they leak and stink. I sorted them all and sent them off to be recycled. Hopefully, they won't end up back in the ocean.

I have kept green bottles, blue containers and medical paraphernalia. I also have around 20 other collections that are works in progress, but I don't have enough items to complete the images yet. For example, I'm working on something about cigarette packets and lighters. I'll often get 90% of the way with an idea and then have to stop for a while until I find enough items to carry on creating the kind of image I'd like to show.

I don't know when and if I'll complete Found in Nature. It's fun for me to unearth new objects and new ideas. Some of the objects I find are very unusual and it's a great challenge looking for new angles.

At some point I'll get tired of the project, but right now I'm about halfway to what I'd like to show, at least in this part of the world. I think the project is an interesting archaeological survey of what our current society manufactures and the speed at which it moves into our environmental system. **AP**

To see more of Barry's work, visit [www.barryrosenthal.com](http://www.barryrosenthal.com)