



(Images left to right: Party Hat; Resurgence; Undaunted.)

These photos are rubbish: Manya McMahon

Manya McMahon has recently discovered, with delight and some amazement, that she is an artist, she lives in Exmouth, Devon.

When I was 17 and commuting to London, I always read the Evening Standard. There was a cartoon strip in it, called Clive, about a young man who had a naughty little sister called Augusta. The edition I still remember (about 35 years later) was one where Augusta squatted down in the garden, picked something up and said: "Mummy, what's this pretty thing?" The answer was "a worm". So Augusta said: "Ugh!" and threw it away.

I think my fascination with rubbish stems from that childish desire to investigate and collect anything that looks 'pretty'. It's only knowing that it's rubbish – putting an adult perspective on it - that makes it ugly.

Since visiting Gaudi's stunning Parc Guell, with its striking broken-china mosaic decoration, I have also been fascinated by the artists who work with found objects and discarded materials. In the right hands, rubbish can produce a profusion of colour and pattern. A favourite is Tom Deininger (www.tomdeiningerart.com), whose astonishing constructions use everything from cigarette butts to broken dolls, creating works, often on a massive scale, which have a beauty and depth that, to me, have far more layers of meaning and impact than paintings. There is an element of 'trompe l'oeil' in his work – nothing is quite what it seems, and there is enormous theatricality to it too – the view from the front is very different from the one 'in the wings'.

I'm pleased to say that I've met Cleo Mussi (<http://www.mussimosaiics.co.uk>), a mosaic artist who recycles china, crockery and tiles in her humorous figures and sculptures, combining a sense of history and place with the unreality of dreams. I have experimented myself with mosaics and collages of found objects – from

beach glass, pebbles and broken china to soft drink cans and sweet wrappers – and I continue to explore these ways of finding the beauty in rubbish.

I take very opportunistic photos. My compact, idiot-proof Olympus FE-210 camera (and occasionally my mobile phone!) allows me to do this, focusing and exposing automatically while I concentrate on recording exactly what it is that has attracted my childish delight. I don't spend a lot of time on composition, preferring to take large numbers of shots and 'pruning' the collection afterwards – especially since my camera's LCD screen (there is no viewfinder) is difficult to see in bright sunlight, and I have to use a certain amount of guesswork in composing some shots. I rarely crop my photos, but try to frame them as I want them at the time.

It's amazing what can be found in gutters, between paving stones, in the cracks of a wall or amongst the rocks on a beach. Bright colours, seductive shapes, bizarre and compelling juxtapositions - the deep pink of a burst balloon has a jewel-like depth and vibrancy; the curves of lost laces and ribbons so often appear deliberately placed in their pretty rain-soaked spirals; a leaf-shaped crisp packet sits snugly in a leafy shrub like a variegated aberration.

But I can't deny that when I look at this rubbish from the perspective of an informed, responsible and sensitive adult, I feel a certain guilt in finding beauty in things that are, indisputably, environmentally toxic.

This is a paradox that reflects many of the issues that affect my day-to-day life; there is a constant tension between the childish "I want" and the adult "I should". Looking at things from two different perspectives at the same time can be stressful, but also creatively informative.

Broken china and glass, junk mail and packaging are things that attract children – who are inevitably warned off them by adults, because they're dirty, dangerous or inappropriate toys. By viewing this rubbish from a different perspective, and making something which has beauty and meaning for me, I am going some way to addressing the always-present paradoxes in my life.

It has been pointed out to me that the final verse of Leonard Cohen's song Democracy expresses much of what I feel about my images:

*I'm sentimental, if you know what I mean
I love the country but I can't stand the scene.
And I'm neither left or right
I'm just staying home tonight,
getting lost in that hopeless little screen.
But I'm stubborn as those garbage bags
that Time cannot decay,
I'm junk but I'm still holding up*

*this little wild bouquet:
Democracy is coming to the USA*

My images imply stories of loss, disappointment and, occasionally, hope.
But perhaps you will interpret them differently.

1. The party's over.



The party's over: 1



The party's over: 2



The party's over: 3

I live in a town, so detritus from nights out and celebrations is a common discovery when I'm out with the camera. These three images tell stories of fun, dancing, singing, drinking and laughing – and the inevitable morning after. They express my constant awareness, as a lifelong pessimist, that 'in the midst of life is death'.

2. Not what it seems.



Overblown



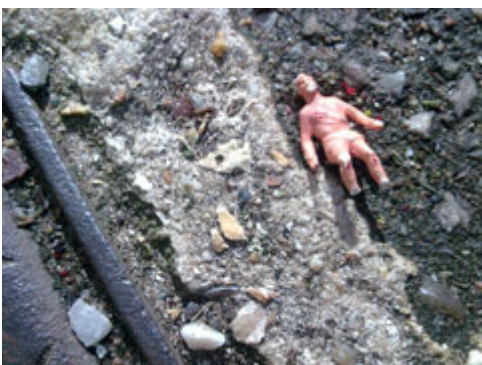
Variegated ivy



Urban mollusc

With a trick of the light, or just the right angle, bits of rubbish can mimic all sorts of things. I love the moment when I do a 'double-take' and realise that the flower, leaf or shell I'm walking past is actually not at all what it seems. One step further, and the illusion vanishes.

3. Sad tales.



Toy boy



Feeling flat



A small tragedy

A piece of litter can trigger an entire short story, as I imagine the turn of events that led to its accidental and possibly tragic loss. The ice cream cone, for example, might have been dropped by a small child startled by a squirrel in the park. Or it could have been flung by a furious teenager whose 'friends' were taunting her about her weight. Or perhaps it was a rejected peace offering after a bitter argument.

4. Serendipity.



Dove of peace



No more junk food



Knotted net

Serendipity is “the faculty of making happy and unexpected discoveries by accident” (OED.) So often, while looking for images like those I’ve described above, I find something that suggests an idea, a concept or a design. I think of these images as possible illustrations for magazine articles about the damage we are wreaking on this planet and ourselves: war in the middle east and Afghanistan, famine in Africa, global overfishing and so much more.

Manya McMahon 2009