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Walsh, Brienne. "Hugo McCloud Uses Plastic Bags As Paint In A New Series Of Work."
Forbes. January 22, 2021.

Forbes

Single use plastics, including water bottles and plastic bags, are a major source of environmental pollution worldwide. Every year, according to the United Nations Environment Program, we produce 300 million tons of plastic, which is nearly equivalent to the weight of the entire human population. If we don't find ways to recycle plastic waste, and prevent countries from producing more of it, by 2050, there may be more plastic than fish in our oceans.

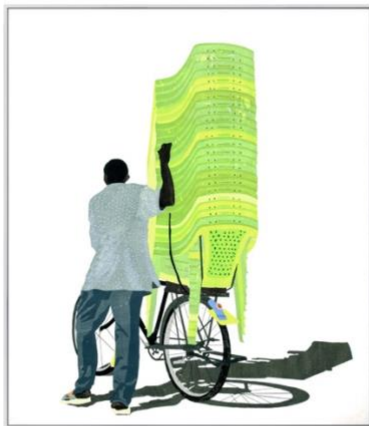


Hugo McCloud, with all your might, 2020, single use plastic mounted on panel painting, 55 x 84 inches IMAGE © THE ARTIST AND SEAN KELLY GALLERY

The artist Hugo McCloud by no means claims that he has found a solution for the problem, but in "Burdened," a new exhibition of his work that opens at Sean Kelly Gallery today, on January 22, he does use single use plastic bags to create beautiful imagery. The show, which closes on February 27, consists of three different series: one focused on workers involved in the labor of carrying goods on their backs, carts or

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bicycles; another capturing refugees on boats in the Mediterranean sea; and a final one capturing flowers McCloud photographed in his studio in Tulum during the months he was quarantined due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each work is created by melting single use plastic bags on a panel of wood, to create a sort of collage of materials. The effect of the heat is such that the bags melt together to form a single surface, almost resembling a painting. The resulting works are impressionistic, and lovely; the warm, bright colors of the composition bring to mind the French Riviera, and award-winning children's book illustrations, although the subjects they capture are often poor, and involved in hard labor.



Hugo McCloud, *take a seat*, 2020, single use plastic mounted on panel, 70 x 60 inches
IMAGE © THE ARTIST AND SEAN KELLY GALLERY

McCloud has always been inspired by the way that laborers around the world have used materials in creative ways—processes used by laborers in developing countries inspired his earlier abstract work, including “paintings” made from sheets of metal and tarpaper stamp compositions. A frequent traveler, McCloud has lived and worked in South Africa, India and Mexico, among other countries. On a trip to India in 2015, he noticed an abundance of plastic bags in the general environment, while traveling through the Dharavi slums in Mumbai. Over the next few years, he formulated a plan to travel around the world, speaking to the people who downcycle plastic bags, migrate and transport goods, in an attempt to gather their stories, which he planned to use to create artwork.

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Hugo McCloud, *together*, 2020 single use plastic mounted on panel, 55 x 84 inches
IMAGE © THE ARTIST AND SEAN KELLY GALLERY

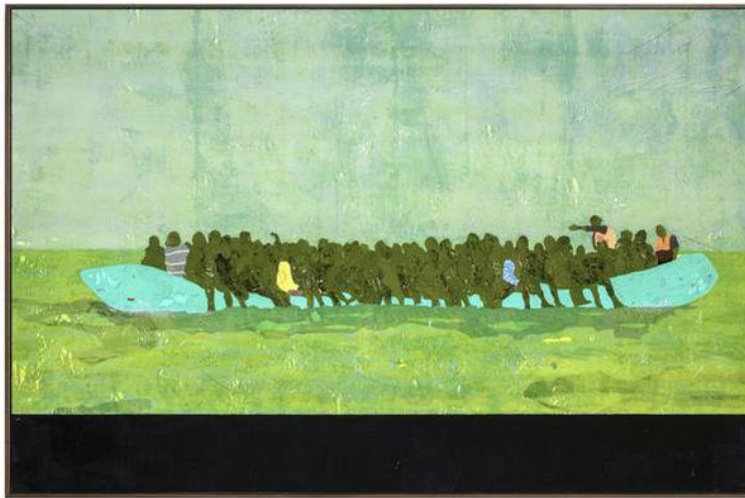
Then, just as he was set to begin the project, the pandemic struck, and McCloud was unable to travel. Instead, he sourced the photographs that inspired the canvasses from “Burdened” on the Internet, and from journalists stationed around the world. He searched for imagery that didn’t, as he puts it, “register right” in his head.



Hugo McCloud, *take a seat*, 2020, single use plastic mounted on panel; © Hugo McCloud, courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York.

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For example, an image of one woman helping another woman up after a fall, both of them carrying large white packages on their backs. The photograph was taken in Ceuta, a Spanish enclave on the Moroccan coast where there is a rule that you don't have to pay import taxes on anything you can carry over the border on your back—it inspired *together* (2020), one of the works in the exhibition.



Hugo McCloud, *the day before friday the 12th*, 2020, single use plastic mounted on panel, 55 x 84 inches IMAGE © THE ARTIST AND SEAN KELLY GALLERY

the day before friday the 12th (2020) is derived from a photograph of refugees from Libya crossing the Mediterranean in a canoe that is literally stuffed with bodies. In 2020, 979 migrants died while crossing the Mediterranean sea. McCloud's plastic "painting," which hints at the tragedy of this statistic, resembles a collage by Matisse, if Matisse had dabbled in the colors of a chemical spill.

The flower canvasses serve as sort of reprieve from the complicated — and often devastating — stories McCloud capture in the other two series. Inspired

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Hugo McCloud, *purplehaze*, 2020, single use plastic mounted on panel, 70 x 60 inches
IMAGE © THE ARTIST AND SEAN KELLY GALLERY

There are obvious ethical concerns aestheticizing tragedy. By making suffering look beautiful — and even, arguably, decorative — you allow viewers to experience the hardship of others with a sense of pleasure for themselves. This, too often, is the role

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both photography and fine art play in our contemporary media landscape. McCloud understands this, but also hopes that his canvasses inspire empathy, and a sense of humanitarian outreach. The plastic bags he melts down on his canvasses often bear the traces of logos, which serve as a point of entry even for the very wealthy. “So many people use these bags,” he says. “When they see the logos, they relate so clearly.”

Can art change behavior, and lead to positive change? It’s an age old question, and one that has yet to be answered. The only thing that can definitively be said about McCloud’s plastic compositions in “Burdened” is that they are beautiful.