

Something in the Water

Crocheters recycle plastic bags into a reef of awareness.

Sharon Zientara



At first glance, artist Wendy Osher's piece might be mistaken for a coral reef formation. Inspect it more closely, and the abstract but familiar outlines of breasts morph into view. Wendy's inspiration began with her awareness of water supplies polluted by plastic bags and containers. Mothers who consume contaminated water pass on the toxins to their children through breast milk.

Using crochet—the perfect medium to form the shapes she desired—Wendy spent nearly a year on the initial breast for an exhibition she called *Something in the Water*. She was invited to include the piece in *Too Shallow for Diving: The 21st Century Is Treading Water*, a project highlighting the effects of the environment and water on human health at the American Jewish Museum in Pittsburgh showing May 16–July 28, 2011. With a deadline approaching, Wendy sent out an open call to crocheters to contribute to the eco-art project by crocheting a breast from used plastic bags.

For the first year, a small group of crocheters from the Pittsburgh area met and worked on the shapes. Then four months before the opening, a flood of submissions started pouring in from all over the world. “There were four or five weeks when every day I would hear from new people as far away as Australia, Brazil, and the Philippines that were excited about participating,” Wendy said. “Nearly seventy crocheted breast shapes in all sizes, shapes, and colors arrived at my door. . . . One participant crocheted eleven breasts. Emails flew back and forth exclaiming things like, ‘Your breasts arrived today. They are spectacular!’ We all got a big kick out of that dynamic.”

Initially, Wendy was overwhelmed by the breasts' varied shapes and sizes. Wrangling them into one piece seemed daunting. “After my initial surprise, I started to love how much more interesting and varied the final piece would be with so many different hands at work,” she said.

She amassed a passel of blue plastic bags from her community grocery store. With help from a group of local participants, she filled in spaces between breasts to create a strong and consistent shape. The initial concept was to suspend the piece from the ceiling, so that observers could gaze up as if standing on the ocean floor. The feat proved to be arduous, so “the curator decided that I really ought to reconceive the whole way it was installed,” Wendy said. She shaped the piece so that it floated just above the floor on a platform and stuffed the breasts to give them more depth. Accompanying the exhibit was a world map denoting the locations of all the contributors.

The final result elicited an incredible response, both to the subject matter and to the shapes themselves. Observers turned it into a hands-on experience, squishing the exhibit, which required several “re-stuffing” operations.

Wendy seeks to continue the momentum and build awareness about the environmental and health implications of plastic bags and containers. If you would like to discuss creating a reef of your own, contact her at wendy.osher@verizon.net. ❁

SHARON ZIENTARA, the assistant editor of *Interweave Crochet*, is a prolific crocheter and knitter. In her spare time she can be found negotiating an ever-expanding yarn stash and grappling with her two cats, Squid and Mrs. Robinson.