

# The Visual Arts Archive

\* \* \*

## Section 2: Mixed Media

*“Imagination is the beginning of creation. You imagine what you desire, you will what you imagine, and at last, you create what you will.” – George Bernard Shaw*

Mixed media is a genre of visual art that uses many elements, conventional and unconventional (paint, paper, glue, photographs, buttons, wood, metal, found objects, fabric, etc.), brought together in a single piece of art (collage, assemblage, book, box, etc.). It seems there is no end of things that can be incorporated into a piece of mixed media art.

Sometimes the visual artist has the piece conceived in its entirety before any of the materials are gathered. Other times the piece arises out of another activity or from the creation of another piece. I have created two mixed media pieces so far. The first one belonging to the latter category, while the second belongs to the former, and there’s a brief story behind both.

\* \* \*

One day, an unusually large piece of driftwood with an interesting shape washed up on the beach in front of our house in Branch. I hauled it up from the beach and onto the land with my quad, and I soon decided on a placement among the other four oversized pieces I had variously distributed as nautical-themed landscape decorations. I didn’t know it at the time, but this was only the beginning of my involvement with this odd piece of driftwood.

Every single day for the next two years that piece of driftwood tried hard to get my attention. It was as though it felt it had been neglected by me somehow, or disappointed with what I had decided to do with it. I didn't know what it was, but over the course of those two years its insistence became increasingly "louder". If it had had a voice, by the end of the two years it would have been screaming at me; and if it had arms it would have been flapping them frantically. Finally, I was forced to conclude it was insisting on something better than just being merely a landscape decoration. It wanted to be put to better use, and I had to figure out what that was.

Then one morning I was walking through the sunroom and I caught sight of it out of the corner of my eye. Suddenly I could see that if it were repositioned it would be able to stand on its own, as a curl in the wood on one end could serve as a natural base. I dropped what I was doing, went outside and stood it up. Now it rose like a phallus from its base on roughly a forty-five-degree angle. I thought it looked much better this way, more in keeping with its shape, and I was sure I had done what it wanted.

For a few days I looked out in admiration, satisfied I had done right by it. But I could still hear it grumbling, and it took me another few weeks to realize that it was indeed the right thing to do – I just hadn't gone far enough with it. Now I could see what its most virtuous use was, and I dragged it into my studio to start working on it.

First, it needed a little cleaning, sanding, and buffing to get out the buildup of sand and dirt that had accumulated in some of the crevices and broken-branch joints, and to take off a few bumps and rough bits – but not so much that it took away from its naturally rugged appearance as driftwood. Next, I applied generous brush-loads of pickle onto and into the wood all over, to give it a ghostly uniform look; and I applied three more coats of pickle, allowing each coat to fully dry before applying the next. Then I painted over the entire piece with iridescent pearl acrylic paint and let that dry. I took another stroll on the beach to find some straight, driftwood logs I could cut into slices/discs, and a collection of large beach rocks for some natural support around the base. I cut the discs in three sizes, then leveled and mounted them randomly all over the piece.

Finally, I went shopping for the only elements that didn't come off the beach in Branch – three different sized, stout, off-white candles, four of each size, and some decorative tape to go around the bottoms of them. It took almost three weeks to complete, and now *Driftwood Candelabra* occupies a special corner in our house.

It looks great in the daylight...



It looks better in the evening...



...and, of course, it looks best at night...



Unique as it is, it's going to be hard to let *Driftwood Candelabra* go, but when the ABOTA store opens later this year it will come out of the archives and go up for sale or auction.

\* \* \*

My second mixed media piece came shortly thereafter, but this time I had the complete idea for the piece before I started putting it together. I was walking the beach looking for beach rocks of a certain size and colour for something else I had in mind, though now I can't remember what it was because the idea I discovered completely captured my imagination and blotted that one out.

I had a half dozen rocks collected when I noticed how much garbage and odd bits of trash was mixed in with the rocks – everywhere I looked. It made me think of my second novel, which was more than half finished at the time, about the climate change crisis and the host of negative ways humanity has damaged the planet and continues to do so. Then it hit me. I immediately conceived of a comparative piece; a framed, two-chambered wall hanging, with the beach as it appeared before the presence of humanity on the left, and the beach as it is today on the right. There could only be one name for such a piece – *Anthropocene*.



*Anthropocene* was a lot harder to create than appears at first glance. As can be seen below in the closeup of the right side, once I had decided on the form of the piece, each individual element (rocks, bits of driftwood, seashells, fishing line, rusted metal wire, a pop can, different pieces of coloured plastic, etc.) had to be glued into place one at a time; and the relative composition on both sides needed to be balanced. The sheer weight of the finished piece required heavy-duty hardware for hanging.



As with *Driftwood Candelabra*, it will be hard to part with *Anthropocene*; as it will also be put up for sale or auction for tribe members when the ABOTA store opens later this summer.

\* \* \*

Jeff R. Kelland