

Discards with history at the heart of UNCC art exhibition

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They may be built quickly from castoffs, but the sculptural installations of Brazilian artist Henrique Oliveira are graceful, sensuous and substantial. They are formal works of art with an appealing manic energy.

You can see one of Oliveira's engaging installations through March 12, at [Projective Eye Gallery](#) at UNC Charlotte's Center City Building.

Starting out as a painting major at Sao Paulo University, Oliveira created work inspired by cartoons and other aspects of pop culture.

Then he became interested in what he calls "different surfaces in the world."

Attracted to weathered plywood fences, with their myriad textures and colors, he began making work that hovered between painting and sculpture. He saw that when plywood fell apart, the layers looked like brushstrokes. His work evolved into the bulbous sculptural installations he makes today.

For Oliveira, discards are rich with meaning and beauty. He treasures materials with a history – for example, old flooring that prompts thoughts about the people who have walked on it.

His work also reflects the experience of living in Sao Paulo, a city of great income disparity, filled with both favelas and imposing modern architecture. Combining a pop culture sensibility with dry, rotten wood connects his work with "the physical materiality of the world, of the streets."

For the two years leading up to this exhibition, Projective Eye Gallery Director Crista Cammaroto asked Oliveira for preliminary drawings. She provided layouts, 3-D renderings and photographs of the space, but he sent nothing.

Upon his arrival, he sat in the gallery for a day or two and produced 20 sketches. He began to envision the gallery as a specimen case. For that case, he masterminded in just 25 days what Cammaroto calls a "beautiful beast."

Oliveira came to Charlotte with Chico Togni, a colleague who helped build the work. A veritable village of College of Art + Architecture staff, faculty, students and friends assisted with gathering materials, construction and other tasks.

In Charlotte, finding discards with a history is not an easy task.

Oliveira needed thin, flexible material – a lot of it. Most of it came from construction and remodeling projects, but he also wanted materials from scrap yards and dumps.

“After calling 40-plus places for possible construction debris, traveling to see several dumpsters and steel scrap yards,” says Cammaroto, “Henrique spotted a site under the train tracks behind NODA ... an old-fashioned dump site.”

The final work looks like a strange relative of a manatee – or some weird little organism viewed under an electron microscope – or something out of “Beasts of the Southern Wild.”

Its skin is made from scraps of fiberglass sheeting that resemble birch bark, and its hindquarters are encased in speckled carpet padding. It appears to be swallowing a structure, perhaps the remains of a vine-tangled beach house on stilts. Open to interpretation, it could easily be seen as a creature made from detritus that has come alive to devour an ill-conceived building.

However grand Oliveira’s sculptures are, they are also ephemeral. In a few weeks when the exhibition is over, the work will be dismantled and its components recycled.

Art may be long, but sometimes the life of an object is brief.