

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.



Luca Pizzaroni at the Middlesex County Landfill in New Jersey, where he photographed garbage.

Gallery Space Goes to Waste

By Pia Catton

In 12 years spent living in Chinatown, photographer Luca Pizzaroni has shot countless urban street scenes. But this year, what's on the street itself led him to travel an hour outside of the city—to a garbage dump in East Brunswick, N.J.

"I was curious to see where trash goes," he said.

Though Manhattan refuse does not actually go to the Middlesex County Landfill, Mr. Pizzaroni's curiosity led him there to create "Bianco Trash," a series of richly colorful photographs of garbage-dump trash and acrylic paintings on black garbage bags that will be shown at the art gallery Fred Torres Collaborations from Thursday through July 27.

By any stretch of the imagination, the artwork looks like an environmentalist's anti-trash statement. The piles of old tires, candy wrappers, discarded sneakers and other rubbish are heaped along with materials that are meant to be recycled—plastic bags, newspapers, cardboard boxes—but instead wind up residing in portions of a 315-acre landfill that is covered and compressed daily. The bright blue sky gleams behind the mountains of garbage, looking like picture postcards of the shoreline or rolling hills.

"I'm not really an environmentalist," Mr. Pizzaroni said. "I'm an artist-economist. Garbage is a currency. You pay one dollar for a full bottle of Coke, and then you have 5 cents in your hand when it's empty. It is garbage, but it has a price."

He pointed to Chinese entrepreneur Zhang Yin as an embodiment of how this plays out on a global scale. Ms. Zhang became one of the wealthiest women in the world by launching a company that ships American waste paper to China, where it is turned into cardboard or packaging for various goods that can be exported.

The photographer's circle-of-trash concept is referenced directly in some of his titles. "Thank You for Shopping" features a white plastic bag printed the familiar "Thank You" in bold red. In "Summer Styles," a catalog for clothing retailer OshKosh B'Gosh lies crumpled in the foreground. A newspaper buried in cardboard is at the core of "Latest From the Wall Street Journal," which he says is a "reference to the stock market. It's a connection to business."

And there's more to that connection than the ruminations of one "artist-economist." Less trash is generated when people have less cash, said the executive director of the Middlesex County Utilities Authority, Richard Fitamant: "With the stock market going down and economic pressure, we've seen a significant drop in what's coming into the landfill."

Middlesex County also has an active recycling program that has extended the life of the landfill, which is projected to be operating until 2024. And, pushing the circle-of-trash concept another step still, the landfill is equipped to capture the gas generated by bacteria in the waste. The gas is then used to generate electricity for the county's waste-water treatment plant.

"Instead of having to use electricity from the grid, we use the landfill gas and it's a lot cheaper," Mr. Fitamant said. "We can reduce the costs for our rate payers."

Such links were part and parcel of what Mr. Pizzaroni wanted to explore. "I was trying to understand the landfill, to understand how much business is going on," he said.

Fred Torres gallery director Yana Balson emphasized that the artist, who was born in Rome, is examining the concepts as an outsider with a documentarian's eye. "It's not a criticism of the culture," she said. "It's more that he's bringing it to you so you can view it for yourself. He wants you to be able to smell it."

Even with all the talk of garbage and his many years living on East Broadway, Mr. Pizzaroni says he still dreams of rural vistas. "I wish I were living in a beautiful place, with mountains and flowers," he said. "Then I would take pictures of flowers. I live in Chinatown. There are no mountains. The mountains are trash."