

# Eco-Artists At Work

## LOCAL CREATORS MAKE A STATEMENT USING REPURPOSED GOODS AND ENVIRONMENTAL THEMES

By Betsy DiJulio

Donna Iona Drozda, "Coppice"



*"I watched the forest  
leave on the back  
of a flatbed truck."*

—Donna Iona Drozda

**A**s goes the community, so go the artists.

The artist community in Coastal Virginia, as elsewhere, is a microcosm of the larger population, including its diverse attitudes toward topics like sustainability. The four artists profiled here could scarcely be more different, including the role that eco issues play in their studio practices.

Take, for instance, **Donna Iona Drozda** of Virginia Beach. Long known for her affinity for the natural world, her focus was decidedly sharpened when her partner, Brenda Davidson ("BD"), quite literally bought the farm. A tree farm. Fondly known as "The Lab," these 50 acres in Buckingham County's Appomattox Court House had just been clear cut prior to BD's purchase in December 2009.

As Drozda explains, for about a week each month—from the comfort of their cabin and her small works studio—the pair lives off the grid. From their vantage point, they have an opportunity "to watch how the land repairs itself after being brutalized." The first year, she describes, "the grasses come up because the sunlight can

get it." And with the grasses come songbirds. Hence the farm's real name, "Bluebird Gulch." Each successive year brings "tremendous amounts of life everywhere," including bear, coyotes, deer, fox, toads, lizards and much more.

Drozda's series *Roots and Wings* and *Virginia Birds* are responses to the simplicity and beauty of nature on their piece of property where "we just let happen what happens," with very little intervention. She sees this rebirth as a metaphor for how we can get "chopped down in life" but how we can "coppice" ourselves. (Coppiced timber is that which is cut back to ground level to stimulate growth.)

As the land "keeps moving in the direction of fully functioning on its own terms," Drozda records the process through paintings, media blend collages and textile arts. Rarely literal, her work is often referential, but even when it is highly abstract, the very process itself echoes this "leaving and coming back" through layering and other additive and subtractive techniques.

For his part, **Scott Roberts**, artist, graphic designer, musician, stay-at-home dad and lacrosse referee, has most recently been focusing on pyrography. Burning images into wood panels—an estimated 30 percent of which are repurposed (broken surfboards, upcycled skateboard decks and "stuff" with a history destined for the landfill)—Roberts tends to dwell artistically between his own interests, e.g. surfing and whitewater kayaking, and the environment. His frames, usually made of disassembled palettes, are 100 percent recycled.

Scott Roberts, "Right Wrong Whale"



Recruited by Virginia Wesleyan College from Denver to play lacrosse, Roberts graduated with a degree in fine art, went home for a year, but returned to Coastal Virginia about six years ago because the pull of the waves was too strong. Conscious of his carbon footprint—he and his wife own only one car, and he and his daughter bike to the library, the beach and the park—he sometimes makes personal-political statements about such issues as seismic blasting and offshore drilling through his artwork. In the end, his artistic choices are a balance of aesthetics and environmental ethics, a response in part to our disposable society.

Meanwhile, in his loft and garage in Newport News, **Wade Mickley**—when not working at NASA as a graphic designer—is kayaking or paddle boarding and scavenging for artifacts washed up on the beach at low tide.

Though Mickley studied art formally, he was always "collecting stuff on the side" and decided to do what he really loved, which was to "build things out of my sketchbook," recently earning him "Best in Show" in *VA Artists 2015*. His colorful, quirky and dynamic assemblages are crafted out of vinyl records, carved wood, found objects, old rusted vintage toys and the like.

Though he describes himself as "environmentally conscious," anything is fair game for subject matter. Still, "always looking and reading," subjects like honey bees and colony col-