

The unmasking of disease

Cheryl Gush



Commentary

Production Date: complete 1/11/2023 completion over 18 months (about 1 and a half years).

Materials

1. Surgical masks, reclaimed from the environment. They have been decontaminated chemically with bleach and mechanically washed in a machine. The masks have been deconstructed manually into elastic, metal, and woven materials. The woven materials have been pulled and torn into varying sizes, dependent on how they came apart under stress. I have used material from over 300 masks to construct this piece.
2. The back board is a large sheet of Craft plywood. It is 1.2m x 1.3m in dimension.
3. A clear glue has been used to apply the pieces to the plywood.
4. A Sharpie pen has been used to give initial outlines to the shape of the waves.

The inspiration for this piece comes from "The Great Wave off Kanagawa" by Katsushika Hokusai in 1831.

About this work: This piece of art was almost incidental until it was not. In 2020 during our rolling Covid lockdowns, I did a lot of walking. It was while out walking each day, I started noticing the masks in the environment. On that first day I decided to collect them, I bought home 17 and dropped them in the rubbish. The next day, I walked the same route, and there were more. Each day as I walked, I picked up between 10-12, and out of curiosity, I decided not to throw them away, but to see just how many I could collect. It was not that long before I had over a hundred masks in a bucket in my garage and I thought to myself, what would that number be if all the masks, all over Auckland were collected. And how many would it be if it were all over New Zealand, or the world? Suddenly the problem looked exponentially greater! My whole collection of masks has come from gutters and pavements, rivers, beaches, and even off hiking tracks near Mount Cook. It is reported that at the peak of the pandemic, 1.5 billion masks had entered waterways. We have a tsunami of microplastic particles coming our way. These environmental microparticles represent a healthcare crisis far more complicated, costlier, and harder to treat than Covid. Yet, no one is really talking about it or planning for it in earnest.

This piece of art is offered as inspiration to the urgency around the innovation and use of renewable biodegradable resources we have access to, as an alternative to plastics. I am hoping that this piece of eco art gives voice to the generations who will deal with a problem we created. I am hoping that it shifts our focus from the topline to the tipline.

My connection to the materials (masks) and the creative outcome are my background training as a nurse, leading medical device sales teams for 20 years and my now most recent career path as a leadership coach. In my practice I use art to explore leadership concepts and am currently a PhD candidate at Massey University exploring this.