



LITTLE PATUXENT REVIEW

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Exploring Literature and the Arts

FEATURING

the Art of Bridget Parlato

and an Interview with Becky
Calzada, Susan Muaddi Darraj,
and Laura Shovan

Bridget Parlato: A Glorious Intricacy

Artists make their art for many reasons, conscious and unconscious. Sometimes the reason even rises to the level of purpose, and Bridget Parlato's work has some very clear and conscious purposes: to communicate the urgency of environmental devastation and the climate crisis, to give thanks and honor to environmental leaders and social justice pioneers, and to translate grief and loss. All these purposes of Parlato's art manifest in one constant: a glorious intricacy.

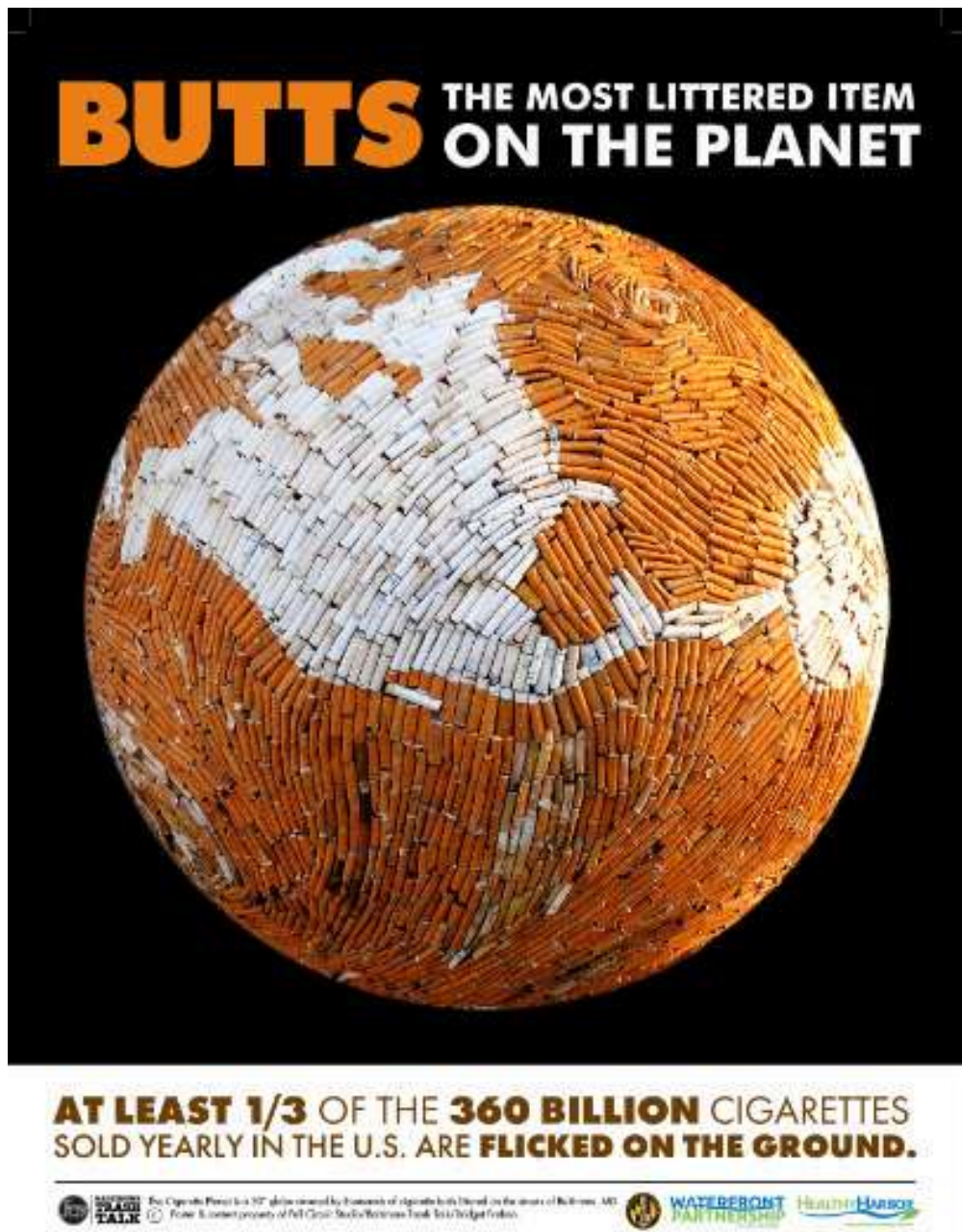
Bridget Parlato and I first met at a neighborhood festival in Baltimore, where she was displaying *Cigarette Planet*, an enormous globe rendered in a veneer of thousands of cigarette butts. I knew nothing about Parlato, her Baker Award and other accolades, or her work with Baltimore's Waterfront Partnership and many other organizations including the Baltimore Office of Sustainability, the Chesapeake Bay Trust, and the Audubon Society. I didn't even recognize, on my first pass, the greater message in *Cigarette Planet* which is to call attention to the fact that the carelessly flicked cigarette butt is the single most littered piece of trash on earth, with trillions of cigarette butts leaching toxins into our waterways. I just knew I wanted to learn more about the person who had made an entire earth, two-and-a-half feet in diameter, out of tiny pieces of trash. It was the kind of insanity of detail I cannot help but feel drawn into.

A major mode in Parlato's diverse portfolio of media is jewelry, in which she makes use of more found objects, from washed, curated and cut-up discarded plastic bags that she turns into the fluffy combs of fabulously mod earrings to the most personal belongings of her father. Parlato's work *Reliquary for Vincent Parlato #1* is one of two pieces she made in honor of her father, who died in 2017 a day before the artist's 50th birthday. The reliquary is a mixed-media object that, on the surface, evokes something like a cross between a pocket watch and medal of valor. Like the curated plastic-bag earrings, the reliquary elevates found objects. Unlike plastic bags, though, the objects featured in the reliquary are small but cherished objects associated with Parlato's father. They include items—relics—from his desk: “a segment of his suspenders, one of his many defunct watches, a frame from his home, horseshoeing nails from his farrier work, a copper plate embossed with an oak leaf and a sample of his handwriting.” The central object is a lock of hair, from the last haircut Parlato gave her father.

The theme of tiny pieces making up a remarkable whole can be found in two more of Parlato's works: her iconic tribute to late Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, *In Honor of Her Honor*, and *Earle Necklace* dedicated to marine biologist and pioneering oceanographer Dr. Sylvia Earle. Both pieces, a breastplate and a necklace, are personal adornments. It is for good reason that these works put me in a state of fascination I've experienced in museums while standing before Flemish Old Master portraits and gasping at the impossible intricacy of the lace collars worn by the subjects. Those painted lace collars are a universe within a universe, a peculiar and effective projection of the wealth and good taste of dour 17th-century patrons through the brilliance of the artists they could afford to hire to render them (and their fine accessories) in oil paint. The universe-within-universe of Parlato's neckwear pieces is this: rolled up inside the thousands of paper beads of the Earle necklace is text from Earle's book *The World Is Blue: How Our Fate and the Ocean's Are One*. Similarly, and arrestingly, the text on the tiny scroll-beads of the Ginsburg breastplate is composed of excerpts from the justice's dissenting opinions. Look closely and see the blue ink of Earle and the black ink of Ginsburg. Parlato's work is a true confluence of design and craft, giving one the feeling of looking in at the artist's private obsessive delight. There is even a further level of symbolism in these tiny maneuvers of papercraft: the incremental, tirelessly persistent movements of Ginsburg and Earle as reformers working against the enormity of the status quo.

Parlato makes deeply personal and idiosyncratic works, but she is also always occupied with art and design that reaches out with maximum accessibility and public appeal. Highlights of her interdisciplinary public art are marketing, annual reports and other materials for Baltimore's Waterfront Partnership and most recently her book, still in progress as of this printing, *Plastic Land*. This project was partially funded through the Baltimore Creative Fund, with the aim of distributing the book to teachers in Baltimore City public schools for use in the classroom. The medium of a children's book created with design software could scarcely be more different from the physicality of thousands of cigarette butts or tiny rolled-up slices of printed jurisprudence. But the glorious intricacy is right there on every page, in thousands of figures and painstaking edits of landscapes and seascapes and their creatures. And, of course, many tiny pieces of plastic.

After spending some time with those Dutch lace collars in the museum, I have sometimes wandered down the hall to visit the medieval reliquaries in their glass cases. I've marveled at the minute and precise turns of metal and settings of precious stones in a medieval goblet or brooch and felt invited into the variety and mystery of artists' motivations to make tiny beautiful things. Such fineness of detail is obvious in all of Bridget Parlato's art, but the real power of her work is in the union of that detail and its dear devotional purposes.





Bridget Parlato
Earrings, 2017–present
Found plastic bags, copper, brass, nickel, silver
Assorted sizes, 1.5–3 in.

Left, Bridget Parlato
Cigarette Planet, 2017
Cigarette butts, paper mache sphere, adhesive
30" diameter



Bridget Parlato
Earle Necklace, 2022
Paper beads cut from *The World is Blue: How Our Fate and the Ocean's Are One*
by oceanographer Dr. Sylvia Earle, glaze medium, hemp cord, beads
53"l x 14"w x .5"d





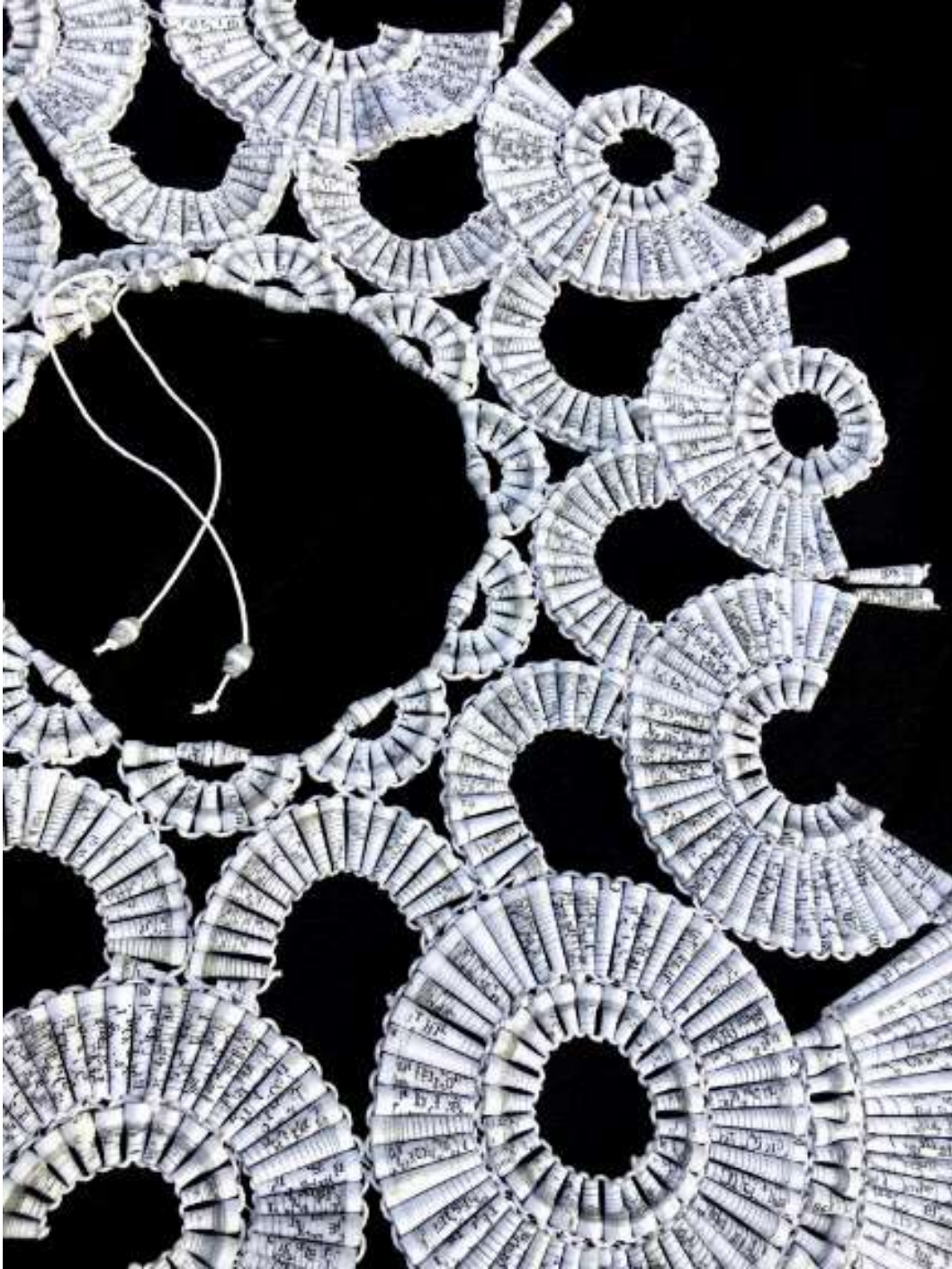
Bridget Parlato

Reliquary for Vincent Parlato #1, 2018

Frame, Horseshoeing nails, hair, glass, ruler, copper,
suspender fabric, watch face, paper, hair.

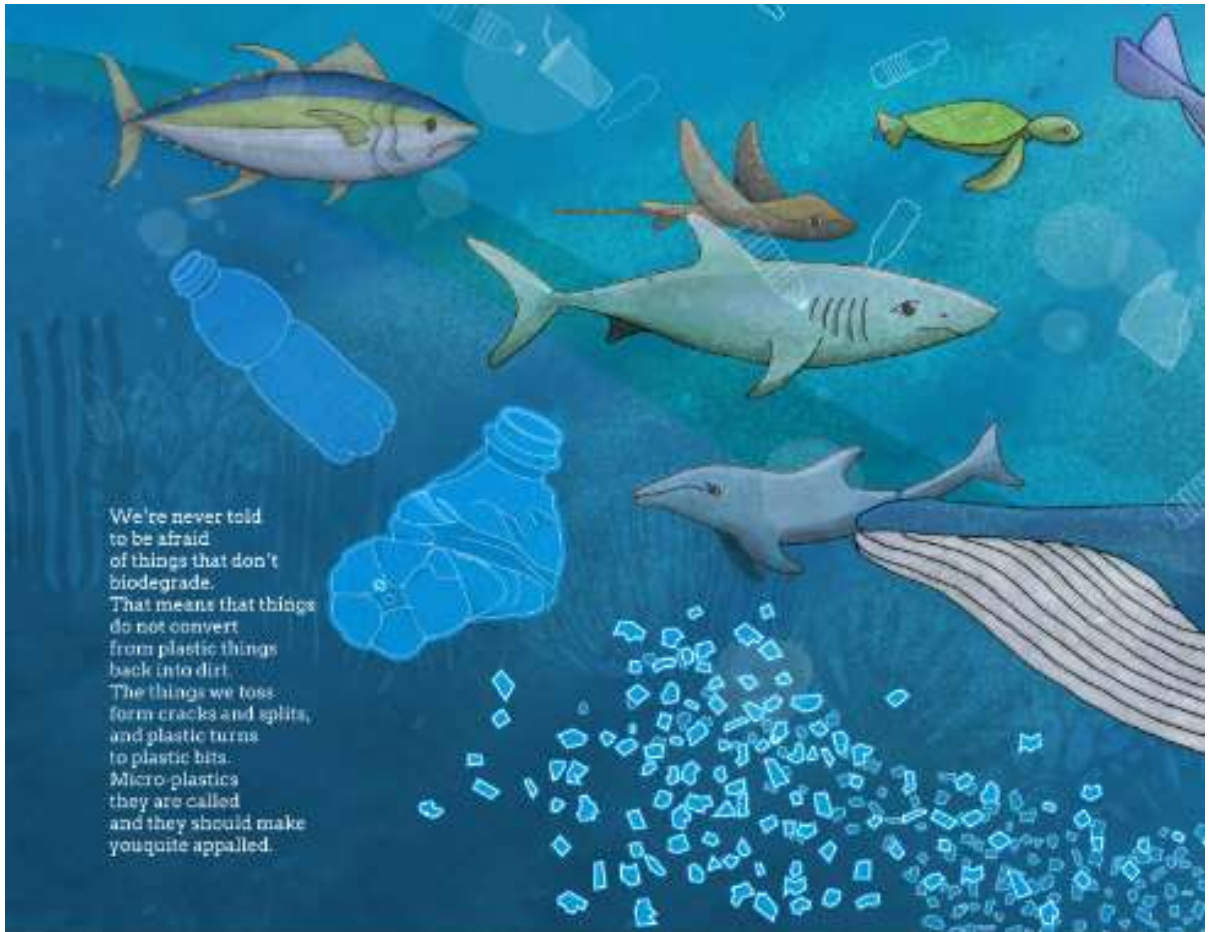
1.5 x 3 in.





Bridget Parlato
In Honor of Her Honor, Ginsburg Lace Collar Warrior Breastplate, 2021
1000 paper beads cut from the dissenting opinions of Supreme Court
Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, glaze medium, hemp cord
37"l x 17"w x .25"d





We're never told
to be afraid
of things that don't
biodegrade.
That means that things
do not convert
from plastic things
back into dirt.
The things we toss
form cracks and splits,
and plastic turns
to plastic bits.
Micro-plastics
they are called
and they should make
you quite appalled.

Bridget Parlato
Plastic Land, 2024
Digital Image
11"h x 22"w



They fill our oceans
kill our whales!
Oh, I could tell you
awful tales of furry beast
and feathered friend,
who've met
a painful tragic end,
their bellies full
of plastic scraps,
of styrofoam and bottle caps.
Even tiny one-celled beings,
the ones that you and I
aren't seeing,
though they've no eyes
or hands or feet,
they're so plugged up
that they can't eat.