

In the summer of 2009, Toronto's Garbage Collection unit went out on strike as part of a much wider action by the Toronto Civic Employee Union, over new contracts that threatened job security and employment benefits. Although they were only one part of the strike, the garbage workers' action had a profound effect on the city of Toronto: piles of bulging, waste-filled plastic bags towered over corners and curbs all across the city. Trawling Google images, it struck me that some of these shots were taken only a few days after the commencement of strikes; in these images, the amount of discarded waste produced by the population of Toronto is not only an alarming sight, but one that could be any major city, given similar circumstances.

As Toben Black noted, 'from an ecological standpoint, there is an upside to these in-city dump sites: the suspension of the usual waste collection operations in Toronto has created inadvertent educational benefits, as residents have had an opportunity to learn more about the sheer volume of 'garbage' that they have been throwing away each week.'<sup>i</sup> Amusingly (but not surprisingly), the residents were furious at the striking sanitary workers for allowing their city to become unlivable, failing to consider their own culpability. While this situation is a far cry from the delicate, hand-painted plastic bags that Lizzy Sampson presents in her exhibition *Consumer Behaviour*, the show nonetheless leads us to consider our careless relationship with waste – for instance, the plastic bag that carries milk and bread home from a last-minute dash to the shops, before finding a second career as a bin-liner. Such is the life of a single-use plastic bag (yes, this is its official name): Although a rough estimation, it as been suggested the average usage of a plastic bag is as little as twelve minutes.

Silent and still, Sampson simply presents a collection of plastic bags crumpled on the gallery floor. Sampson has repainted each bag with the exact colour of the original plastic. As a painter, Sampson's method is strange to me, a strategy in which the paint itself does not obviously manipulate or change the bag. Indeed, Sampson's meticulously-painted surfaces leave no brush mark or splatter, and with the colour identical to the original material, one may ask, why did she paint them in the first place? In answer to this question, we notice the paint's weight pressing upon the plastic. A minuscule mass, yet in relation to the plastic bag it is the paint's weight that accentuates the crumpled edges and creases that already exist in the object. In the case of this work, the act of painting is one of archiving. Indeed, Sampson has even placed and painted the bags in the same position as they were found on the street. Chronicling and sealing the plastic bag in paint, Sampson work posits a belief that the object speaks for itself. There is no need to dress up the work; the single-use plastic bag is an emblem of a culture of careless waste.

Addressing the practice of Ash Keating, Amelia Barikin writes, 'How do we mourn the future?'<sup>ii</sup> It is a question that also resonates with Sampson's exhibition, which asks the viewer to contemplate the ecological fallout of mass-production without any suggestion of possible solutions. Indeed, while *Consumer Behaviour* reflects Sampson's wider investigation into the damaging effects of capitalism's call for development and growth, this modest series of works also indicate a departure in her approach. Compared to the performative and action-based tactics of previous work,<sup>iii</sup> *Consumer Behaviour* is much more somber in its presentation. Sampson replicates only the surface of waste, asking us to consider our role in its inevitable fate.

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<sup>i</sup> Toben Black, *Toronto's 'garbage strike' elicits public outrage and labour disunity*, <http://wagingnonviolence.org/2009/07/torontos-garbage-strike-public-outrage-and-labor-chaos/> [accessed 15 August 2012]

<sup>ii</sup> Amelia Barikin, 'Time Shrines: Melancholia and Mourning in the Work of Ash Keating' in *Discipline*, vol. 2, 2012, p21.

<sup>iii</sup> When visiting Sampson's studio, she excitedly detailed her plan, to take a metal detector out into the CBD in direct protest against the mining industry's absurd degree of power over the land.