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All Float On

The Miss Rockaway Armada's sailing through town on a green dream built from scratch.

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PEOPLE POWERED: On a vacant Broad Street lot, the Miss Rockaway Armada crew scraps together a flotilla of found materials.

[SCULPTURAL SUSTAINABILITY]

The block that holds the Broad Street Ministry and Gamble & Huff's Sound of Philadelphia offices has witnessed a lot of diverse theatricality. Hardcore punks. Religious devotees. Billy Paul in his "Fly" heyday.

Yet the visually arresting drama that resides in the vacant lot next to the Ministry through the end of the summer is the best show in town. On a daily heat-beating, sweat-beading basis, men and women in various degrees of undress have turned the sandy, stony grounds into a cross between a carny's delight, a *Mad Max* flea market and something the gentlemen of *Storage Wars* and the Seaport Museum would salivate over.

"This whole thing is quite a doozy," Philadelphia Art Alliance (PAA) programs director Alex Styer says of the Miss Rockaway Armada, a collective whose participants have been busy building rafts and barges tall and clunky for their salvaged flotilla masterpiece.

What is this "whole thing," exactly? The crew of the Miss Rockaway Armada (MRA) is constructing a traveling art installation they're calling "Let Me Tell You About a Dream I Had," built of floating sculptures. Eventually they'll reconstruct and mount the fleet in the tony confines of PAA, off the corner of Rittenhouse Square — but not before the flotilla launches upon the Schuylkill, docks at Walnut Street for interactive performances and gets transformed into land-traveling floats that'll steamroll through University City and Kensington. Throughout the process, notions of utopia, green living, freedom and reconstruction will come into play.

"We're trying to make something like a map of our potential place in the world — a map with a lot of detours that flows from and into many tributaries, backwaters, sloughs, marshes, rapids and snags," says Vermont native Anna Ialeggio, an MRA crew member since 2007. "I see a potentially beautiful act composed of other acts, based in hope perhaps, with no result and no perpetuity, but not without a certain derelict and ferocious dignity."

Right now, though, that dignity — and the "Dream" itself — is happily in tatters on that hot lot on Broad. "We're sweating, but we're

having a pretty good time," says Pittsburgh's Ian Page, who compares the installation to a potluck dinner. "It's that phenomenon where everybody brings the right thing — a protein, a dessert, a vegetable." From the looks of this wild accumulation, ambrosia could soon follow.

Rows and piles of boxes filled with baby dolls, gears, flags, school desks, paintings, pipes, children's toys, lightbulbs and other flotsam are hanging about amid plank upon plank of wood. Everything — including a kitchen sink — is there, along with toilets and other porcelain goodies. Bureaus and dresser drawers are strewn throughout the construction site along with stacks of tin oil barrels and a few wooden ones. In the back of the lot is a storage bin containing tools and technical ephemera. Next to that sits a piano and a makeshift tented office that acts as a computer station and food-filled break room.

Some of these once-trashed elements have been gleaned from two local nonprofits, the Resource Exchange and Recycled Artist-In-Residency. "American construction practices are wasteful — they're all about time and money management," says Ialeggio. "If they nail a stud wrong, it's faster to get a new 2-by-4 than spend a minute taking nails out." The Exchange guided the MRA crew to film, video and theater companies that might be trashing scenery and props. "When you have no money, you develop a sixth sense as to where to find things."

Look beyond the junk on the Broad Street lot and you see a series of structures — hexagons and squares with all sorts of stuff crammed atop or alongside, forming actual, functional rafts. There are so many structures, it's hard to tell where one ends and another begins. "We are like ants, just doing what we do," says San Francisco's Ledia Carroll. "The longer we work together, some of our ideas do seem to align more and more."

The Armada is no *Hoarders for Hipsters*, and all projects have their own deliberate narrative. In reconfiguring junk into reusable living structures, the team touts the notion of sustainable, adventure-minded living. The original floating-membership crew, formed in 2006, made news with its two-year journey down the Mississippi River on a flotilla of rafts, stopping along the way to perform vaudevillian musical variety theater. Like a green-considerate freewheeling avant-garde *Showboat* without the racist overtones, MRA makes renewable resources into progressive, dynamic, living art projects that don't simply sit on a pedestal.

"We've done our installations at other museums and galleries," says Cleveland native Tod Seelie, one of MRA's project managers and its documentarian. But "people aren't necessarily used to collectives walking in without any clear idea of what they're doing. They're used to one artist, one vision. We are lucky that we have this crew that works visually and personally together, funds materials and creates a thesis."

They are also fortunate to have found the Art Alliance in a state of transition — interested in craft, design, community and outreach. "In the same year that I began following MRA's work, the board of directors approved a change in the mission of the organization," says PAA curator Melissa Caldwell, the woman responsible for bringing the group to Philly. Caldwell wanted to see what a group unfamiliar with Philadelphia would come up with; the Art Alliance wanted to reach out to neighborhoods beyond Center City. "Community interactions are a natural extension of their artwork and mission as a group, and are reflected in the water events and parades that will occur prior to the installation in the PAA," says Caldwell. "I found it a compelling idea in relation to the newer grass-roots approach to craft that has resurfaced within the last decade." As in past craft movements with activist ties, the goal of MRA's project calls for fundamental social change by imagining a community centered around its own self-invented processes.

"There's a huge element of utopia involved," says Ialeggio of her group dynamic. "Utopia and autonomy and hope and the functionality of your own life and the ability to follow dreams as you conceive of them."

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For more information on the *Miss Rockaway Armada*, visit rockawayatpaa.com. Read a Q&A with its members at citypaper.net/arts.