**Pam Ferris-Olson** (00:00): Today on the Women Mind the Water Artivist Series, I'm speaking with Kim Bernard. Kim is a full-time artist based in Maine who creates installations using upcycled trash. She works with artists and communities to share the joy of making things using recycled materials. The Women Mind the Water podcast series engages artists in conversation about their work and explores a connection with the ocean. Through their stories, Women Mind the Water hopes to inspire and encourage action to protect the ocean and her creatures.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (00:35): I am pleased to have Kim Bernard on the Artivist Series Podcast. It is a pleasure to talk to another Maine-based artist, and one who is finding creative ways to upcycle materials and make others think about the impact of plastic waste. Kim has over 30 years of experience as a professional artist. She creates works of art from recycled materials. She uses a range of materials from debris that washes ashore, bicycle inner tubes, plastic bags, even bowling balls. Kim has built a mobile recycling device. She uses her PopUp Cycler to encourage communities to collect plastic trash. Together, they shred the plastic and transform it into pieces that are assembled into a unique and meaningful installation for everyone to enjoy.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (01:28): Welcome, Kim. I am looking forward to hearing more about your work and your PopUp Cycler. I'd like to begin by learning something about you. Where did you grow up, and was there a particular person or activity that encouraged your creativity?

**Kim Bernard** (01:45): I grew up in Rochester, New Hampshire, which is Southern New Hampshire. I was an only child, and both of my parents were very creative. Not fine artists. They didn't paint and sculpt, but they were both very handy, very hands-on. My mother liked to do a lot of work with fabric and knitting. I learned to sew from her. And my dad could weld and build with wood. And we did a lot of making, and I learned a lot from both of them. My dad taught me how to work with wood and gave me a really good foundation of how to build three-dimensionally. I would say that they were both champions of my creativity from an early age.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (02:37): Very nice. So has there been a change in the world of art during the past 30 years that influenced your decision to upcycle trash into artwork?

**Kim Bernard** (02:49): Heck, yeah. Yeah, there's been lots of changes in the art world. There's trends just like with everything else. But... Let's see. The biggest changes I would say are that artists make their own opportunities now in that there were gatekeepers in the past. That's a big change that I see. So with the internet and with artists being able to sell directly to a collector, buyer, there's a lot more out-of-the-box thinking, selling, showing, exhibiting, and even installations. I don't even think that I knew what an installation was when I was 20, a sculptural installation.

**Kim Bernard** (03:41): So I would say one of the big changes is that artists are more inclined to make their own way, in their own unique way, make their own opportunities, carve out their own path. And that viewers are interested in experiences and it's not all about collecting a piece of art that you hang on your wall, that sometimes it's about just having an experience of an activity or being involved or a community participation. So I see that that's different than what I remember from my early days of art school.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (04:18): Not too long ago I interviewed Mariah Reading. She also has a Mainer. Mariah said living in Maine has given her a deep appreciation for nature. In art school, Mariah noticed the amount of waste that is created in the students making art. It's part of what inspired her to create her recycled landscapes. It's an ongoing art project in which she upcycles found objects. She paints landscapes on the objects which place the objects in the landscape where they are found, and it also promotes the landscape. At what point in your career did you take notice of the impact that creating art can have?

**Kim Bernard** (05:03): So I think the change happened gradually in my process where I've always been concerned about our environment and was, even as a child, remembering Hooty the Owl, give a hoot, don't pollute, and the ad with the Native American. Well, an actor playing a Native American with a tear in his eye, looking at the landscape littered. So I remember that whole campaign from my childhood, which turned to celebrating Earth Day, being aware of our environment, the early conversations about climate change and sustainability.

**Kim Bernard** (05:58): So as this has become more of an issue, the issue of sustainability and climate and waste and pollution has become more of a conversation publicly, I have thought more about how I want to change behavior and habits, and eventually that spilled into my work. So what initially that might look like, trying to reduce my own waste by not buying new clothes, by buying at thrift shops instead, by not buying new cars, by buying used instead, so reducing my own consumption.

**Kim Bernard** (06:38): But then when it came to my studio practice and I was buying new materials or raw materials, I felt like there was a real inconsistency with that, so I started to incorporate recycled materials, sometimes just out of like, "Wow, this is a great object. How can I work this in?" And then that eventually expanded into a rule of not using any raw virgin materials and using 100% recycled materials.

**Kim Bernard** (07:08): So that's been the effort for the last... I'd say trying to go exclusively with upcycled materials, reclaimed materials, for the last five years. And before that, it was more of a gradual transition into incorporating those materials into my work, until I finally said, "I've just got to 100% use all recycled materials in my work." It's limiting, but limits are good, right? When we have too many choices, it's too broad, it's too much, the menu's too expansive, when we limit our choices down, then it's really an opportunity to figure out like, "What can I do with what I've got? What can I do with what I've got here today with this?"

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (08:00): Well, I don't know how limiting it is, because I was working on a project recently, and I didn't exactly know what I was going to use for the basin. I'm driving along one of the roads nearby and I brake and I say, "I got to pick that up." And I had to make two trips with my car. It's like the whole landscape is full of materials. So can you define for listers what you mean by upcycling?

**Kim Bernard** (08:29): Yeah, so let me contrast that to recycling. So when you have a plastic bottle and you drink your water out of it and you put it in your recycling bin and you take it to your transfer station or your dump, and you put it in the recycling bin, you send it off for someone else to deal with, that's recycling. So you've done your part by sending it off in the right direction, as opposed to putting it into the trash and having to go to the landfill. Unfortunately, only about 10% of the plastic that we put in the recycle bin actually gets recycled. 90% ends up in the landfill anyway, unfortunately. We could do a whole talk on just that, Pam, but let me keep going and contrast that with up cycling.

**Kim Bernard** (09:19): So if I have that bottle and I consume the water and I put it into my shredder, which turns that plastic into small particles, and I put it into my extruder and I squeeze out a sculptural line that I sculpt with and twist and turn, I have upcycled it myself. I've turned one piece of plastic that had a purpose as a water bottle into another sculptural object that has another purpose. So I've done the whole process soup to nuts.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (10:00): I think that's a great description. Thank you, Kim. So when you began to upcycle, did you learn from other artists or did you experiment on your own?

**Kim Bernard** (10:16): I've been using a lot of different materials. The earlier materials that I was consistently working with... I'll just choose one... Was bicycle inner tubes. I was an artist-in-residence in the physics department at Harvard for a year and a half. And the there's a bike shop on campus run by students, and they fix bikes and flat tires. They have their own little internal bike shop. They keep all their bikes with holes in them from the flats. So I would go and get garbage bags filled with bicycle inner tubes and shredded them into these long spaghetti strands, spaghetti, linguini, fettuccine. I figured out how to make strands of all different diameters, figured out how to sew the inner tube material to itself with a Teflon foot with my sewing machine. So that was 100% experimental.

**Kim Bernard** (11:18): And then other materials that I've worked with, for example, the plastic. There's a lot of information... One of my favorite websites is Precious Plastic, and that's a group that has an online forum, all kinds of information about different types of plastic and melting temperatures and fusing and how to mold, and the equipment and tools that are needed. So there's a lot of information out there. I can't say that I have one source, but I have lots of sources that I go to. And sometimes it's just trial and error. Like I don't know of a source to show me how to do something, I'll just start working with it and figure it out myself. It's all bound for the trash anyway, so this is where I feel like I can be really playful and experimental, because what have I got to lose? So I just work it out and try things myself, and sometimes that is fruitful and sometimes it's a total bust, and that's okay.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (12:29): What is the most interesting item you've chosen to work with, and in what way did you use it?

**Kim Bernard** (12:39): Oh my goodness, I have so many. Okay, I'm going to grab something that's within reach. I mean, I could answer this question in many different ways. But here is an oyster... Yeah, oyster bag.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (12:57): Right.

**Kim Bernard** (12:58): This is made out of number two plastic. It's black. I can cut it easily. It's still got a little bit of dried mud on it. Someone who was interested in recycling these brought it by and asked if I could experiment and put it through my shredder. So that's really an interesting material and it's had this whole life already and it's destined for the dump, but we figured out that this can very easily be recycled, upcycled, into... I could use it to create sculpture with by shredding it and putting it through my extruder. But I also look at this material and think, "Geez, without even cutting it up, it's a beautiful object." And it could be opened up and stacked and I could build structures with it, so it might not even need the machines that I have.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (13:59): See, I think that's a great example of why Maine is a good place to find things to upcycle.

**Kim Bernard** (14:08): Yeah.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (14:08): Because you're not going to find that in Iowa.

**Kim Bernard** (14:12): Right. Well, I've got a bunch of things that are waiting. Hold on a sec. So this is a chum bag. Oh, these are very Maine things, right? This is what they put the lobster bait in when they go out and go lobstering. So stinky fish goes in here. This goes in the lobster trap. That goes over the side of the boat down to the bottom. Lobsters go into the trap because they're attracted to the chum, and it gets pulled up. This one is totally... Well, pretty much spent. I have a friend whose husband is a lobsterman, and she gave me hundreds of these. Ah, I see why. There's a hole in it, right? But this has great texture and color and it's free, and I'll turn it into something at some point. So I have all kinds of things like that that are just waiting for an idea and time.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (15:18): So where did the idea for the PopUp Cycler originate?

**Kim Bernard** (15:22): I can't remember exactly. I think that I was obsessing on building a trailer, and it seemed like a good idea to have a trailer that would bring my recycling machines around to different communities. Usually, I'll pack my tools and equipment into my vehicle or van, but the machines are big, so they needed a bigger vehicle to travel with. And building a trailer that could also be a workshop really fit the bill. So the PopUp Cycler has fold-down sides, work benches. So when I show up to an art center or a school, library, museum, wherever I go, I have everything that I need, my equipment. I have the work benches. I have everything together, so it's the way that I bring my studio around.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (16:29): Got it. So maybe I should have asked, but I didn't know this. Where did the idea of you building a recycling machine or an upcycling machine come from, or a series of machines?

**Kim Bernard** (16:43): So I didn't build them, I acquired them. But that was an obsession as well. So I think I obsessed for a couple years almost, on having these machines that turned plastic into sculptural material. So after so long of obsessing on something, I usually just make a decision and say, "I'm going to regret it if I don't fill these now. This a good time, or acquire these. Now is a good time," and I do it. So I think that it happened just before the pandemic started, and I used that time to... I had to do a big campaign to crowdfund, come up with the funds to purchase them. They're 10 grand for the four machines. And then after I got that done, I needed something to travel around with them, so I was obsessing on building a trailer for a few months, then finally said, "I'm just doing it."

**Kim Bernard** (17:45): I'll tell you what my current obsession is; we'll see if I follow through with this. I'm thinking about buying a cargo van, small cargo van, and then outfitting the inside of it as a little camper, so that I'll have everything I need, my little camper where I can stay, and then my PopUp Cycler with my machines in it. So I'll be like a traveling, live, work studio.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (18:12): So would you tell me about one community where you took the PopUp Cycler? Where did you take it and what sort of things did people bring to upcycle?

**Kim Bernard** (18:21): So I have brought the PopUp Cycler with my recycling machines to about 10 different communities already, and I've got a lot more on my schedule to go to. The PopUp Cycler, the triangular trailer, is pretty attention-getting. So if I go to a school, I make sure that I park the PopUp Cycler where the students coming in on the buses can see, so they can get excited about what's going on that day with the visiting artist.

**Kim Bernard** (18:58): So it's as much about raising awareness and drawing the community to the project and having them participate as anything. So usually there's a lot of excitement when they see the PopUp Cycler there. You know, "What's going on with this thing?" And it's a teal color and it's obviously something that's been home-built. It does not look like anything that a tradesperson drives around with or a camper that you'd sleep in. So it looks like a one-of-a-kind for sure. And it's got writing on it, PopUp Cycler on it. So it's pretty attention-getting. I get a lot of looks and double looks when I'm driving down the road.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (19:48): Is there a certain level of creativity that artists need to have in order to feel comfortable about upcycling material into artwork?

**Kim Bernard** (19:58): No. In fact, I think that you... Because it's, like I said, destined for the landfill anyway, or maybe the recycle bin anyway, it shouldn't be intimidating at all, because nothing we try to do with it or build with it or experiment with it, it's precious. It's just plastic. And if it doesn't work out, we can shred it up and do it again.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (20:28): Finally, I'd like to ask you what sort of message you might share with listeners about how they might approach their use of plastic. What alternative solutions might they find in reducing their impact on the waste stream?

**Kim Bernard** (20:43): Right. So we all know that reducing and reusing and recycling is good, but really the best thing that we can do is to not use plastic whenever possible. So obviously, there's times where we have to, but if plastic can be avoided, if instead of buying a plastic water bottle at a convenience store, bring a reusable water jug. Instead of filling up plastic, styrofoam coffee cup, bring your own reusable cup to the counter to fill it up. I carry a spork in my purse.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (21:35): Lovely.

**Kim Bernard** (21:35): So I never ever take a fork, knife, spoon that's made of plastic. Even doing a head to toe, "Where is my plastic?", like where am I using plastic? I have plastic glasses on. I have, let's see, maybe some plastic jewelry. Maybe there's plastic in the watch. Certainly plastic in our phones. Are my shoes made of plastic? Buttons. Just being aware of the way that plastic is ever present in our lives and trying to reduce,, and if at all possible not buying... At least not buying new plastic, but giving plastic that's already had a use another use. So using any kind of a... I have ice cream containers here that now have become paint containers for touching up my PopUp Cycler. So trying to use it again, if at all possible. Just reducing our consumption of plastic. Use something else instead whenever possible. And if you have to buy plastic, at least try to find ways to keep it out of the waste stream and the landfill.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (22:52): Well, thank you, Kim. I really appreciate you being on Women Mind the Water Podcast. I hope listeners have enjoyed my discussion with Kim Bernard about art upcycled plastic and community engagement, and finding creative solutions to dealing with waste. I'd like to remind listeners that I've been speaking with Kim Bernard for the Woman Mind the Water Podcast Series. The series can be viewed on womenmindthewater.com. An audio-only version of this podcast is available on the Women Mind the Water website, on iTunes and other sites. Women Mind the Water is grateful to Jane Rice for the use of her song, Women of Water. All rights for the Women Mind the Water name and logo belong to Pam Ferris-Olson. This is Pam Ferris-Olson.