**Pam Ferris-Olson** (00:00): Today on the Women Mind the Water Artivist Series, I am pleased to welcome Blue de Gersigny, a plastic artist and designer. Blue lives in South Africa, a country quite literally at the southern tip of the African continent. It is a country with nearly 3000 kilometers or 1800 miles of coastline bordering the Indian, South Atlantic, and Antarctic Oceans. From the beaches near her home, Blue collects colorful plastic and transforms it into eye-catching wearable art. Her intention is to make people aware of plastic debris and to pick it up rather than walk by it. The Women Mind the Water Artivist Series Podcast on womenmindthewater.com engages artists in conversation about their work, and explores their connection with the ocean. Through their stories, Women Mind the Water hopes to inspire and encourage action to protect the ocean and her creatures.

(01:02): My guest on the Women Mind the Water Artivist Series today is Blue de Gersigny. Blue worked for many years as a textile designer, until she realized she wanted to be an artist working with found objects. Originally, Blue collected natural objects like bone, driftwood, and stone. Eventually she was attracted to the colorful plastic that littered the beaches. Today, her work is created almost entirely of plastic. I cannot emphasize enough that listeners should watch the video version of this podcast at womenmindthewater.com. Blue creates eye-grabbing wearable art.

(01:44): After seeing one of her posts on Instagrams, I knew I had to have her on this podcast. Welcome, Blue. I want to apologize in advance for any and all mispronunciations. I imagine that for most of my listeners, as it is for me, South Africa and its place names are unfamiliar. In preparing for our interview, I learned a great deal about South Africa. For example, I learned that South Africa is bordered on the north by Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique. I was surprised to learn that the countries of Lesotho and Eswatini, formally Swaziland, lie within South Africa's borders. Let's begin by having you give me a brief description of the South Africa you know. Blue, would you describe for me the coastline you frequent?

**Blue de Gersigny** (02:36): Thank you for having me, Pam. Yes, you're right. We are right down here. Just an hour from where I live is Cape Agulhas, which is in fact the most southernly point in Africa, which is where the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans meet. I'm incredibly fortunate to live in such a beautiful part of our country, which is also home to one of the world's whale watching and shark cage diving meccas. In fact, just a few hundred meters behind me is our Kleinbaai Harbor. Kleinbaai translates into English as small bay, which is where the boats go out. And it's amazing to see that the foreigners have returned after the quiet of COVID and that people are getting their livelihoods back.

(03:21): My dogs are incredibly badly behaved, so we tend to walk them in slightly more isolated areas where the most that we'll see is a single fisherman or a group of abalone poachers, which is quite common in our parts. I actually Googled what a group of poachers is. The collective noun is a tsunami, so that was interesting. But no matter where I walk or who I see or how pristine it might look, there's always plastic to collect, sometimes so much of it that it can feel quite overwhelming. We are going into summer now, although you wouldn't think it today because it's been pouring with rain. So a little different to where you are.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (04:08): Thank you. So tell us a little bit about your journey as an artist, since it is obvious from Instagram that you have a strong design aesthetic. I'd like to know how your background in industrial design has shaped your art.

**Blue de Gersigny** (04:24): So I think there are many aspects that have shaped the current art that I do. I studied textile design as a matric subject at school and then worked as a textile designer after that. It was only some years later after being overseas for a while that I started studying, when I did industrial design, but somehow landed up choosing graphic design as a career. So in my sculptures, I certainly lean towards the industrial side of me, yet when I photograph them up close, parts of them have such a huge graphic quality for me and with the graphic quality I can imagine making textiles out of them. So all three of these disciplines have found their way into my art.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (05:09): Have you always lived along the beach? How has this aspect of your life shaped your art and philosophy about art?

**Blue de Gersigny** (05:16): I've tried to always be beside the sea. I haven't always lived next to the sea, no. It's certainly where I'm the happiest. I love the openness and somehow I feel I breathe better when I'm near the sea. I know that swimming in the sea is surely one of my greatest pleasures in life. Living here affects my art and that I work with found objects. Beach found objects are so abundant, they're interesting, and I even find the plastic incredibly beautiful. Now, of course, I'm committed to cleaning up plastic along our coastlines, so the cleaning and my art are completely inseparable at the moment.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (05:54): So after a career in graphic art, you say you realized you wanted to be an artist working with found objects. What is the difference between working as a graphic artist and as an artist working with found objects?

**Blue de Gersigny** (06:07): Using my hands, I guess, working three dimensionally, being able to touch and feel, to look at things from different angles. Some of the plastics that I work with have incredible texture, especially those that have been in the water for a long time. Also, I have no clients with specs that I need to follow. So I have no restrictions. And because I work so organically, so much by feel, with little or no intention, most of the time, it suits me to work alone without someone else needing an outcome or having expectations of me.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (06:47): When you were working as a graphic artist, did you develop a business plan for your pivot to work as an artist using found objects, or did you simply follow your heart?

**Blue de Gersigny** (06:57): Pam, I wish I was capable of making a business plan. It just doesn't seem to be in my DNA. So yes, I followed my heart. I was very lucky to have a supportive husband at a time in my life when my confidence wasn't that great, but I certainly have never looked back.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (07:15): Very nice. You began by collecting natural objects like bone, feathers, and stone. Did you use those in the same manner you now use plastic, or did you create a different sort of art?

**Blue de Gersigny** (07:28): That's such an interesting question. I like order and structure and I think these elements straddled both of those worlds, especially my small frames, which have a similar format. But the plastic hats and their [inaudible 00:07:47] that I have done recently have gone off in a completely different direction of all of their own. Some of the hats are quite rigid and symmetrical, but others are a lot more free and organic, which I didn't see in my natural work, which is somewhat unexpected for me.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (08:08): Talk to me about redefining your art from natural to plastic found objects. What drove the change and how did it change your art?

**Blue de Gersigny** (08:17): I joined Instagram a couple of years ago to showcase what I then called organic art, my quiet natural art. And quite early on, an artist from Porto in Portugal started following me. In fact, it was Ricardo who is the same artist that Suzanne in Fiji...

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (08:39): Interesting.

**Blue de Gersigny** (08:40): ... that inspired Suzanne from one of your earlier podcasts. His incredible work is a hundred percent plastic and hugely colorful, and I wondered why he had started following me. I scrolled right down to the beginning of his Instagram feed and then I understood. Because he had a thing for driftwood too, and he laid it out in a way that I loved. So there was driftwood and then all of a sudden there was plastic in his work, and lots of it. And that was that, for me. It was literally as simple as that.

(09:11): The next day I went to the beach and I looked for plastic, plastic that up until that day I would've walked past and been completely oblivious to. It was a huge transition for me. And transitioning from naturals to plastic, you can imagine, certainly wasn't that easy. To go from a neutral palette of creams, whites, browns, rust, to all of a sudden these bright colors, and to go from soft rounded shapes to hard, rough plastic, it was quite a thing. But by then I was completely committed, so I was there for the long haul. Working with plastic certainly didn't come naturally to me at all. Initially it was very hard and I even wondered if it was something that I could continue with. But I experimented a lot and slowly started to find my creative feet, which is where I am today, feeling a lot more confident with the plastic.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (10:10): That's really interesting about how you have began to find a community centered around art and plastic. I think that's what I love about Instagram, the positive aspects of Instagram and social media is us finding each other and inspiring each other. So I'm glad you brought that up. What sort of things do you find on the beach? Do you have any idea about the origins of the plastic you find?

**Blue de Gersigny** (10:42): You name it, it'll land up on a beach somewhere from far and wide. Logos often give clues to where things come from. Just very recently I found a coffee mug from Brazil. I found an oil container from a petrochemical plant in East Java, bottles from further north in Africa, from Kenya, from Ghana, even oil containers from America have turned up. I have just recently, or I'm currently busy with a series at the moment called The Usual Suspects, which are the kind of plastics that turn up in our collections all over the world. And when I say our, I mean beach plastic artists. So anything from straws to toothbrushes, earbud sticks, toys, lollipops, so much fishing gear, flip flops, et cetera, et cetera. Those are actually, I'm posting them at the moment on Instagram.

(11:40): But a particular bugbear of mine are water bottles from China that are thrown overboard from the passing ships. Obviously [inaudible 00:11:50]. The most prevalent of these being Master Kong and Nonfu Spring. And when I say that I find them, I find masses of them, and I know it's not just me. If you look on Instagram, you'll see, well, when I look on Instagram, beach plastic, people find them all over the world if they're on one of those major shipping lanes. So they dispose of them at sea rather than disposing of them responsibly when they get to the next port. So I think it's time I made a hat about these two bottles.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (12:24): You are so joyous in your art that when I hear about the masses of plastic that you see on the beaches, how does one maintain an upbeat when it's so depressing to know that people are just throwing it overboard and washing on your beaches?

**Blue de Gersigny** (12:46): It can be overwhelming at times. I know there are times that I've got out of my car at a beach and seen how much plastic there was and wanted to just turn around and get back in my car and drive away. So what's interesting about these Chinese bottles is there actually is a Convention in place that's been around since the eighties, I think, which tries to prohibit people from disposing of garbage at sea. And apparently there are 150 countries that are part of this that have signed on for it. But it's optional, so there actually isn't really anything that stops people from throwing more garbage overboard.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (13:27): Unfortunately, there's a lot of lip service like that. How did you come to use the plastic to create wearable art?

**Blue de Gersigny** (13:36): I think I wanted to create something that was instantly recognizable for people out there. So you see the hat and you see the earrings and you see the necklace and then hopefully you'll look again when you realize that it's all made from beach found plastic.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (13:54): I have to just say that your designed aesthetic is front and center. It's very engaging how you display your work with the black background and then your head wearing the head pieces or earrings or neck pieces. What is your process for selecting the plastic to make a piece and how do you determine whether it'll be earrings or a head piece or whatever kind of wearable art that it ends up becoming?

**Blue de Gersigny** (14:23): I have to say I don't think about these things too much. I walk around the studio and see what I see and feel what I feel, and things just kind of evolve out of that. But with the hats, I used either a particular kind of plastic for each ensemble or a particular color. So just take away cutlery, for example, or just polystyrene, or just cool drink bottles. How did I decide that it would be earrings or necklace, or these things just kind of happen? Sometimes I'll have a load of plastic on my desk and I'll shift it across because I need a bit of space and all of a sudden it'll land in a way that just kind of makes sense to me and all of a sudden there'll be a necklace.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (15:06): There's something funny about having something that's manmade and then talking about an organic process to make it into art.

**Blue de Gersigny** (15:12): I know. Yes, yes.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (15:14): Yeah. So I recently saw that you were working with youth to create wearable pieces from plastic. I'd like to know more about this. Was this a one-time event or are you adding that to your practice?

**Blue de Gersigny** (15:30): I've only done three workshops so far, but I do hope to make it something going forward with adults or with children. I think everyone can benefit from knowing about plastic pollution or rethinking their single-use plastic consumption. It's not an age-specific thing. But I look forward to doing more of them.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (15:51): So finally, Blue, I'd like to ask you if you have a call to action for us, what message would you like to leave with us?

**Blue de Gersigny** (16:01): That's such a big question, but quite simply, we don't have to be Greta Thunberg to make a difference. I think even the small changes that we make in our daily lives matter. And it costs nothing for each of us to do our little bit. I do get messages in my inbox when people say they'll never walk on the beach again without picking up the plastic, or how I've changed their way of looking at the world or something. And well, that's why it's done, why I do it, I suppose. So, I mean, if Ricardo could [inaudible 00:16:36] so simply for me, then hopefully I can do it so simply for others.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (16:39): That's all we can hope for is making a little ripple.

**Blue de Gersigny** (16:43): I know that wherever we turn in our lives, we are confronted by plastic and I can't see that changing much in our lifetime, or in my lifetime, but what I can change is my attitude to single-use plastic. I follow the American actress, Amy Aquino. I don't know if you know her from watching the series Bosch, although on Instagram she's called Aquino Amy. And she inspires me no end. She has this way of sharing her tips about finding alternatives to single-use plastic in the most open and honest and straightforward way, and she always makes me want to do better in terms of single-use plastic. She's definitely worth a watch.

(17:30): And in terms of beach plastic, there are hashtags out there, #2MinuteBeachClean or #Take3fortheSea, which talk to how simple it can be. Two minutes of your time is all it could take, or just pick up three pieces and then dispose of them, or give sea life a hand or plastic fishermen, which make it a bit more fun, where you pick up the plastic and you shape it into a hand or you shape it into a fish and then dispose of it, just to make it a little bit lighter. It doesn't matter how you do it or how much time you spend doing it, just that you do it.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (18:08): Well, I love talking to you. I wish we lived closer because I think we're sisters in this and I would have a lot of your jewelry. I think the world of what you're creating. But I want to thank you from my heart for being on the Women Mind the Water Artivist Series podcast. I hope listeners have gained a new view of our world, plastic, the ocean, and the role artists can play in shaping the conversation.

(18:34): I'd like to remind listers that I have been speaking with Blue de Gersigny for the Women Mind the Water Artivist Series podcast. The series can be viewed on womenmindthewater.com, MuseumOnMainStreet.org, and YouTube. An audio only version of this podcast is available on womenmindthewater.com, on iTunes and Buzzfeed. 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.