

# The art of waste

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By Ken  
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“Accessories” by Sheilagh McCafferty  
and Madge Davis made with wire, beads  
and 32 cartridges.

PHOTO BY KEN MAGRI



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*Carts for the Arts* is on display through Jan. 28 at the Atrium 916 Gallery, 7300 Folsom Blvd.; [atrium916.com](http://atrium916.com).

[California's cannabis turf](#)

SN&R, 12.19.19.

**If the vape cartridge health crisis** wasn't enough bad news, another problem cropped up this year: empty THC and e-cigarette cartridge disposal. Due to leftover THC residue in used empties, the state has classified them as hazardous waste. That means recycling businesses won't touch them, and waste management companies can only keep the cartridges in storage or throw them into landfills.

To bring attention to this issue, Up Kindness, a local nonprofit organization, is hosting an art exhibition called *Carts for the Arts* at the Atrium 916 gallery on Folsom Boulevard. On display until Jan. 28, a dozen local artists have tackled the subject of cartridge waste by using the products to make paintings and sculptures.

A panel discussion at December's gallery opening focused on the urgency of the issue.

"I talked to the major hazardous waste companies, and right now no one will incinerate failed vape pens," said panelist Maria Espinoza, director of services at GAIACA Waste Revitalization.

"The issue with vapes is that they are mixed materials, including glass, metal and rubber along with the battery," added Gary Altunyan at Easy Waste Management, a Los Angeles based waste specialist.

Disassembling cartridges and separating the materials for recycling is not cost-effective. Altunyan told SN&R that his firm found a few chip-and-grind facilities that accept vapes, but it requires consumers to remove or break off the battery or else it's a universal waste.

Heidi Sanborn, executive director of the National Stewardship Action Council, was another panelist and is an advocate for "take-back" programs that require retailers to accept returned waste products such as unused prescription pills, empty paint cans or, in this case, used vape cartridges.

"Cartridge Wall Display" by Clinton Petrino, made with repurposed wood, LED light strip and 225 cartridges.  
PHOTO BY KEN MAGRI



"The good thing about the cannabis industry is it knows about the waste problem and wants to help fix it, which is very unlike big tobacco," Sanborn said.

For the exhibition, artists had the challenge of repurposing both disposable cartridges and standard "510" style screw-in empties. These were all manufacturing rejects, donated by Jupiter Research, a Santa Clara wholesale distributor for CCELL cartridges.

Sheilagh McCafferty and Madge Davis created a dynamic choker necklace that festoons downward in front and back. Its neutral color scheme and measured curves recall the elegance of 1930s art deco, while making a contemporary statement about unwanted waste.

Clinton Petrino went the other direction with his “Cartridge Wall Display,” which hides 225 disposable cartridges inside a simple abstract painting. The cartridges were installed in the back and are undetectable in front, except for tiny light-emitting circles. After stripping out the cartridge tubes, Petrino installed colored LED lights that viewers can manipulate with a remote control.

As with vape cartridges, lithium batteries present a unique disposal problem.

Because batteries can catch fire inside garbage trucks, drivers “are told to go to the nearest parking lot and dump that load, and not to let a quarter million dollar truck burn up,” Sanborn said at the panel discussion.

Lithium battery fires were reported to have caused the recent Sandalwood wildfire in Ventura, and the Conception boat fire near Santa Barbara that killed 34 divers.

For Sanborn, the solution starts with passage of Senate Bill 424, introduced by Senator Hannah-Beth Jackson. SB 424 bans single-use vaping products, while requiring vaping products to be reusable and retailers to offer a take-back program for recycling.

“The bill only addresses cigarettes”  
“Flapper Dress” by Martha Jones uses 1,000 repurposed vape cartridges.  
PHOTO BY KEN MAGRI



and tobacco vaping products now,” Sanborn said, “but it lays the groundwork for a similar bill we want to do [in 2020] with the cannabis industry to address vaping products.”

In the art exhibition, Yennie Zhou cleverly incorporated hundreds of vape batteries into a large tree-like structure. Installed along one wall of the gallery, a thick slash of red interrupts her predominantly black-and-white color scheme.

Seth Dougherty turned 300 single-use vape pens into a pop art-style lamp base, beautifully topped off with a repurposed lampshade. Martha Jones had fun with her donated batteries by fashioning 1,000 of them into a wearable outfit. Featuring 11 tiers of dangling horizontal stripes, her design mimics the beaded fringe on a 1920s flapper dress.

During the panel discussion, attorney Tom Zuber said that because federal prohibition prevents a coordinated approach, “remedies are state-by-state.” Zuber also mentioned the unregulated black market as the biggest contributor of THC vape cartridge waste.

But some unregulated businesses are making an effort to lessen the problem, mostly by agreeing to store used empties until a solution is found.

“If someone brings back my packaging, I always give them a free item,” said Thomas Shaffer, an unregulated vendor from Oakland, “because they are helping to eliminate my carbon footprint.”

Turning carts and batteries into artwork is an innovative response, but can only highlight the problem, not solve it. In the end, manufacturers, retailers and government regulators need to find a solution together.

Until then, the simplest thing consumers can do is to store their own empties, or ask their vendor to take them back.

“Support brands that advocate for solutions, and tell your dispensary you would like to see more sustainable packaging options,” said Mindy Galloway, CEO of Khemia Manufacturing. “The more awareness we bring, the more manufacturers will listen.”