

# Artistic Research on The Creation of Environmental Installations Using Plant Shells

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## Abstract:

As a common waste in nature, plant shells have unique formal beauty, ecological attributes and cultural symbols. By analyzing typical plant shell environmental art cases at home and abroad, the performance characteristics and practical paths of shells in installation art are summarized, emphasizing their important significance in sustainable creation and ecological awareness. Combined with the practice of shell environmental art, it provides a new theoretical perspective and practical path for the application of natural materials in contemporary art. Expand the expressive boundaries of art materials and promote the deep integration of art and nature.

## Keywords:

Installation Art, Plant Shells, Sustainable Design

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## 1. Introduction

As a common organic waste in nature, fruit shells have unique morphological aesthetics and contain rich cultural symbols and ecological values. Although the life cycle of fruit shells in nature is short, they are an important part of the life process of plants and have the potential for reuse and regeneration [1]. Introducing plant fruit shells into the creation of environmental installation art is not only a process of material experimentation, but also an attempt to expand artistic language and convey ecological awareness [2,3]. Environmental aesthetics, as a relatively new branch of philosophical aesthetics, was formed in the late twentieth century. Its core focus shifted from traditional art philosophy to aesthetic appreciation of nature and environment [1]. Through the reconstruction, reorganization and artistic processing of fruit shells, it not only gives them new artistic life, but also explores a future-oriented and sustainable artistic practice path [4,5]. This study aims to explore the artistic research of plant fruit shells in environmental installation creation based on their material properties, ecological aesthetic characteristics and cultural connotations, promote the deep integration of art and ecology, man and nature, and expand the expression form of environmental installations [6].

## **2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

### ***2.1. Environmental Aesthetics and Natural Materials***

Plant fruit shells are hard shells used to protect seeds in plant fruits. Common shells include coconut shells, pine cone shells, cross nuts, eucalyptus shells, etc. In terms of physical properties, most fruit shells have strong hardness and toughness, stable texture, and are easy to store and process. In terms of morphology, their surface textures are rich, their structures are varied, and the naturally formed geometric curve beauty provides great imagination for artistic creation [7]. In addition, different varieties of fruit shells show obvious differences in color, gloss, density, texture structure, etc. These physical properties directly affect their expressiveness and adaptability in artistic practice [8]. For example, coconut shells have a deep color and rough surface, which have an additional sense of primitiveness and heaviness. They are suitable for creating simple, rough, and natural installation structures. They are often used to express macro themes such as mother earth and ecological memory. Pine cones have a natural geometric open and node-like arrangement structure. Their structure gives them good spatial composition potential and has important application value in bionic structures and repeated layouts. In summary, the material properties of different fruit shell materials provide a material basis for the experimental nature and conceptual translation of installation art. The differences in material properties and performance characteristics can be transformed by creators into part of the visual language, allowing natural materials to be elevated from the material level to an artistic carrier with cultural and ecological connotations in the context of the installation [9].

### ***2.2. Ecological aesthetic characteristics of fruit shells***

As a part of nature, fruit shells are themselves a manifestation of ecological wisdom. From the perspective of ecological aesthetics, fruit shells not only help plants adapt to the environment and reproduce new shoots, but also demonstrate the aesthetic characteristics of self-sufficiency and circular symbiosis in nature [10,11]. Fruit shells play the role of protecting seeds in the life cycle of plants. After their “mission” is completed, they can be used as organic fertilizers, animal food, and even transformed into art materials under human intervention to achieve the continuation of the meaning of life.

In artistic creation, this ecological aesthetic feature of fruit shells often becomes a source of inspiration [12]. Fruit shells carry the entire process of natural growth, maturity, withering and reuse, from which we can get a glimpse of the passage of time and the cycle of life. Therefore, fruit shells are endowed with the ability of “ecological narrative”, which can arouse viewers' thinking about natural cycles, ecological crises and the human condition in installation works [13].

### ***2.3. The symbolic meaning of fruit shells in traditional culture***

In traditional Chinese culture, fruit shells often carry the symbolic meaning of auspiciousness, abundance, life and wisdom. For example, walnuts are not only considered to be good for the brain, but their hard shells also symbolize the protection of inner strength and life; grapefruit shells are regarded as a good wish for future generations because of their homophonic meaning of “protecting children”; the dense seeds in lotus shells represent many children, good fortune and prosperity [14]. These cultural symbols give fruit shells a deep symbolic dimension in artistic creation,

making them not only a material carrier, but also an emotional and spiritual sustenance.

Using fruit shells in environmental installation creation is not only a reuse of natural resources at the material level, but also a contemporary expression of traditional cultural symbols. In contemporary art discourse, this combination can inspire viewers to resonate with local cultural memories and deepen the cultural connotation and social significance of the work [15].

### **3. Current Application of Fruit Shell Materials in Contemporary Installation Art**

#### ***3.1. Analysis of relevant case studies at home and abroad***

##### ***3.1.1. Reconstruction of fruit shells under light and shadow***

Xu Bing, a famous contemporary Chinese artist, is known for his profound social and cultural reflections and the reconstruction of traditional symbols. He interprets culture and nature through unique materials and forms of expression [16]. In the Hong Kong digital art exhibition *Along the River During the Qingming Festival 3.0*, Phoenix Jixiang Song Dynasty Amusement Park is an immersive experience exhibition specially designed for parent-child families. Empowering imagination with modern art, it activates the grand occasion of the “Lantern Festival” described by Meng Yuanlao in “Dongjing Menghualu” in the Northern Song Dynasty, and creates a Song Dynasty atmosphere of “fish and dragons dancing all night”.

Mr. Xu Bing, a contemporary Chinese artist, was specially invited to exhibit “The Story Behind: Jiangshan Wanli Tu” (Figure 1) and the textbook experience installation. Mr. Xu Bing used dead branches, leaves, corn husks and other materials, trimmed, spliced and pasted them on the back of frosted glass. Under the light, the pure white frosted glass looked like the rice paper used in traditional Chinese landscape paintings. The shadow of the obstruction created water stains in the near distance and smudges in the far distance, reconstructing the Song Dynasty Zhao Fugie’s “Landscapes of the River and Mountains” [3].



***Figure 1. The Story Behind: A Vast Landscape.***

The principle of using waste to create has prompted people to rethink “waste recycling”. The description of it in the exhibition catalog at the time was as follows: “... In the end, what the audience sees is what is hidden behind these beautiful pictures. We are blinded by the surface phenomena of things, especially beautiful things. Only by trying to find the deep things hidden under the surface can we explore its unknown inner meaning” [4].

The picture presented in “The Story Behind” is not composed by mixing material pigments to imitate three-dimensional effects (light perception, stereoscopic effect, etc.), but by mixing light. In other words: mixing light in the air, and the light is scattered in the space, recorded by a piece of frosted glass that cuts off the space. This frosted glass acts like a slice of light in the air, and “The Story Behind” can be said to be a painting of light.

### ***3.1.2. Nutshell texture in the device***

Tina Mars, a Dutch artist, is good at combining natural materials with human history, memory and identity. Her works often touch the depths of human emotions and show the complex relationship between people and the environment through different media [17]. “Entangled Memories” (Figure 2) is one of her representative works. The work uses a large number of fruit shells and plant residues as basic materials, combined with other organic substances, to show the dislocation and continuity of memory and time.



***Figure 2. Entangled Memories***

Through these discarded natural objects, she explores the construction and preservation of human historical memory. Mars’s works use fruit shells as a symbol of memory. Through its alternating hardness and fragility, it symbolizes the accumulation of time and the change of memories [20]. The use of fruit shells in the work not only enhances the physical feel of the material, but also gives the work a deeper ecological philosophical thinking, bringing the audience to contemplate human existence.

### ***3.1.3. Fruit Shell Performance of Commercial Space***

The Arc’TERYX flagship store is located in Sanlitun, Beijing. The design concept of this store is deeply influenced by the brand’s admiration for nature and environmental protection. Installation art and material experiments are integrated into the design and layout of the store. One of the most eye-catching installations in the store is a 2-meter-high pine cone art installation located on the suspended staircase platform. The installation is made of recycled rusty plates from the factory, echoing the large tree roots that run through it, creating a strong artistic atmosphere [18]. This design not only reflects the brand’s commitment to sustainable development, but also symbolizes the close connection between nature and humans. Fruit shells, as natural materials, are used for space embellishment and structural support after being transformed through modern industrial media. Through clever design, the fruit shells show the original natural aesthetics, while combining with modern design language in details, showing the collision of traditional and modern craftsmanship, making it a

part of contemporary commercial space and reflecting the design concept of harmonious coexistence between man and nature [19]. (Figure 3)



**Figure 3.** Pine cone installation at the Arc 'TERYX flagship store.

**3.1.4. Case Summary**

Through the three cases of Xu Bing’s “The Story Behind: A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains”, Tina Mars’ “Entangled Memories” and the Arc'teryx flagship store in Sanlitun, we can see that natural waste such as fruit shells have been transformed into symbolic media in contemporary art and space design [3][4]. Xu Bing used materials such as dead branches and corn husks to create a landscape illusion on frosted glass, emphasizing the structural logic behind the visuals and revealing the “reconstruction” and “regeneration” of the spirit of Chinese painting; Tina Mars used fruit shells to symbolize memory and time, transforming natural materials into symbols that carry culture and emotions; and the Arc'teryx flagship store incorporated fruit shell modeling installations into space design, embodying ecological aesthetics and sustainable concepts.

The three together embody the multiple meanings of fruit shells in contemporary creation: they are both natural objects and spiritual symbols; they carry historical memories and activate current aesthetics. The reuse of fruit shells is not only the recycling of materials, but also the extension of culture and thought [20].

**Table 1.** Case summary.

| Works                                                             | Material                                                                                                                                                           | Features                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>The Story Behind: A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains</i> | Dry branches, fallen leaves, weeds, pine needles, seed shells (such as sunflower seed shells), hemp, foam plastic fragments, old newspapers, rags, hemp rope, etc. | Transform "garbage" into landscape images, recreate classics with the cheapest materials, and reflect on nature and ecology in the reconstruction of light and shadow.                                                              |
| <i>"Entangled Memories"</i>                                       | Living moss, mycelium, silk, rotten wood, pistachio shells                                                                                                         | The suspended installation constantly rewrites the form of the installation in the entanglement of silk and the interweaving of fruit shells, forcing the audience to face the nonlinearity, fluidity and fragility of memory.      |
| <i>Pine cone installation at the Arc 'TERYX flagship store</i>    | Customized stainless steel, brass                                                                                                                                  | Using recycled pine cones as a medium, the adaptability of natural organisms is transformed into a spatial narrative language through metal bionic structures, dynamic mechanical systems and environmental interaction technology. |

### 3.2. The conceptual value of the fruit shell installation

#### 3.2.1. Ecological aesthetics and natural symbols

As a part of nature, fruit shells have unique ecological aesthetic characteristics: they are not only a tool for plants to protect seeds, but also an important part of the ecological cycle [21]. In installation art, the natural beauty displayed by fruit shells: such as their natural texture, shape and color, have become a source of inspiration. As natural materials, these fruit shells carry the passage of time and the cycle of life. Their forms change from growth, maturity to decay, and then to reuse, symbolizing the impermanence and eternity of nature [13].

Not only is it a manifestation of natural aesthetics, it is also a metaphor for the ecological cycle and an exploration of the origin, growth and decline of life. The vitality and fragility of fruit shells in art works trigger the audience's reflection on the natural environment and remind humans to cherish and respect natural resources [14].

#### 3.2.2. Cultural symbols and human emotions

In traditional Chinese culture, fruit shells are often given the symbol of auspiciousness, abundance, life and wisdom. For example, pomegranates represent fertility, peaches represent longevity, and water chestnuts and lychees represent intelligence. [16] Among these traditional cultural symbols, fruit shells are not only a material existence, but also carry human emotions and social intentions, conveying human expectations for a better life such as happiness, well-being and abundance.

Applying these fruit shells with cultural symbolic meanings to contemporary art is not only a reuse of materials, but also a re-deconstruction and presentation of traditional cultural symbols, inspiring the audience to resonate with local culture. [17] (Figure 4)



Figure 4. Dong Hao, Qing Dynasty.

## 4. Artistic Expansion of Fruit Shell Materials

In artistic creation, fruit shell materials often undergo a transformation from natural substances to artistic media. This transformation is not only a change in form, but also a redefinition of concept and function. [22].

#### 4.1. Material Logic: The Ecological Nature of Fruit Shell

As an important part of the plant growth cycle, fruit shells naturally contain strong ecological attributes. This ecological nature is mainly reflected in the following aspects:

First, renewability. Fruit shells are a product of the self-circulating system of nature and a natural derivative of the plant life cycle [6]. Unlike industrial materials, fruit shells can be directly obtained without additional chemical processing, which is in line with the environmental protection concept of sustainable development [9]. Choosing fruit shells as materials is actually choosing an artistic expression method that is friendly to nature and responsible for the ecological environment.

Second, diversity and uniqueness. The fruit shells produced by different plants have their own characteristics in shape, color, and texture. For example, the rough and heavy coconut shells, the compact and tough walnut shells, and the loose and porous lotus shells. These naturally formed differences provide rich visual and tactile languages for artistic creation [3]. When creating, we can carry out targeted modeling design and creative transformation based on the natural properties of fruit shells, so that the works not only retain the natural and simple authenticity, but also have a high degree of artistic expression.

Third, vitality and sense of time. Fruit shells naturally carry traces of life's growth and decay, and the temporality of this material can be magnified and extended in artistic creation [24]. Through the artistic use of the natural aging, damage, and discoloration of fruit shells, the work is able to present a dynamic sense of life flow in a static state, evoking the audience's thoughts on natural time, ecological cycles, and human existence.

Therefore, the material ecology of fruit shells not only provides a material basis, but also embeds a profound response to natural vitality, ecological systems, and humanistic care at the conceptual level [10].

## ***4.2. Artistic Logic: Creative Practice of Media Transformation***

In artistic creation, nutshell materials often undergo a transformation from natural substances to artistic media. This transformation is not only a change in form, but also a redefinition of concept and function [4].

### ***4.2.1. Reshaping of material language***

In traditional concepts, fruit shells are regarded as agricultural waste or simple living materials. However, through deconstruction, reorganization, superposition, splicing, dyeing, weaving and other means, fruit shells can be given new aesthetic meanings and cultural connotations [23].



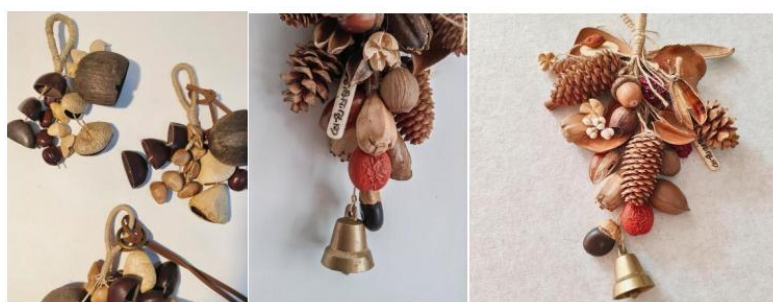
***Figure 5. Ceramic relief on the culvert.***

This deconstruction and reshaping of material language is not only a redefinition of the material itself, but also a deep rethinking of the relationship between nature and human society. For example, Witzke van Leeuwen created large-scale, dense installation works by magnifying and extending the microstructure of fruit shells,

giving the originally tiny natural elements a grand visual impact, thus challenging people's perception of the boundaries between "tiny and macro" and "natural and artificial" [24]. (Figure 5)

#### **4.2.2. Multimedia Convergence and Cross-border Experiments**

In the process of artistic development of nutshell materials, the integration of multiple media has become a common and fruitful creative path [25]. Nutshells are often combined with metal, glass, resin, fiber, light, sound and other media to create a complex sensory experience. Combining nutshells with sound installations, such as nutshell rattles, gives the material new life at the auditory level through the sounds of knocking, friction and breaking. This cross-media creative method not only expands the nutshell material in the visual dimension, but also extends it in the sense of touch, hearing and even smell, thus achieving a richer perceptual experience and narrative space, and promoting the multi-dimensional development of installation art [26]. (Figure 6)



*Figure 6. Fruit shell rattle.*

#### **4.3. Field Logic: Material Expansion in Public Space**

The artistic expansion of fruit shell materials in public spaces demonstrates their great potential for interaction with the environment, society and audiences [27]. By placing fruit shell artworks in specific public spaces, the transformation from single works to site installations, and from individual experience to group empathy, is achieved.

Public art often needs to consider the coordination between the work and the environment. As a natural material, fruit shells have strong environmental adaptability and site integration [21]. Whether it is an urban square, park green space, community space or cultural heritage site, fruit shell materials can have a dialogue with the surrounding environment in a flexible way. For example, in an urban park, an installation based on fruit shells can be naturally integrated with trees and grass; in a cultural heritage site area, fruit shells are used to symbolize the sedimentation of history and the continuation of life, echoing the deep spirit of regional culture.

Fruit shell works exist not only as art objects, but also as part of the environment, becoming an organic part of people's life experience, enhancing the humanistic care and ecological awareness of public space [28].

The natural properties and affinity of fruit shell materials make it extremely suitable for encouraging public participation and interactive experience. By setting up a touchable, combinable, and participatory fruit shell installation, the "untouchable" boundary of traditional art appreciation is broken, stimulating the public's creative participation. This participatory setting makes the artwork a platform for social

dialogue, prompting art to transform from a one-way display to a two-way exchange and co-construction, and deepening the social value and cultural energy of public art [29].

## 5. Artistic Expression Based on Fruit Shells

The work “Annual Rings·Rebirth” is inspired by the philosophical concept of “circle” and “cosmic order” in Eastern culture [16]. With the earth as the canvas, the work uses natural waste to construct layers of radiating concentric patterns, forming a quiet and solemn picture of life. The overall structure follows the geometric order of the circle. The center is a relatively deep pine cone that carries the image of “beginning”, and the surrounding layers are covered with fruit shells, leaves, dead branches, etc., which spread out radially in all directions.

All the materials used in the creation are collected from the natural environment, emphasizing accessibility and ecological sustainability [10]. Pine cones, cross fruits, amaranth, blood vine slices, maple fruits, sycamore shells and other fruit shells are selected to symbolize the life form of nurturing and wrapping; naturally fallen branches, tree roots, rotten wood and other dead wood are used as the skeleton material of the space, which is rich in weathering traces and shows the precipitation of time; leaves are selected from fallen leaves of different textures and colors, presenting the visual rhythm of seasonal changes and the flow of life. In terms of material processing, simple cleaning and drying are carried out to maintain its original texture, making it more suitable for on-site layout and artistic expression. (Figure 7)



*Figure 7. Annual Rings: New Life.*

During the creation process, the ground was first cleaned up, and then various materials were laid out in order according to the structural divisions. The cohesion of the image was constructed through color and texture. Finally, dotted stones, shells, and plant seeds were added to fill in the details and enhance the overall rhythm.

From a visual perspective, the work has a strong sense of central focus, the colors are warm and natural, and the luster of the fruit shells and the veins of the leaves form subtle changes in the sun, which are full of layers and vitality [30]. When viewers walk around the work, it is as if they are participating in a meditation ritual about nature, order, time, and the heart. The work does not rely on any modern tools, but is completely built by hands and nature, thus presenting a strong sense of land presence and spirituality.

The special feature of the installation is that it emphasizes the process of “interactivity” and “co-creation”. During the entire creative process, multiple participants were invited to complete the construction of the installation. Each person chooses materials and arrangements according to his or her own feelings, collaborates with each other, and retains space for free expression [31]. People gradually calm

down and enter a state close to meditation by repeatedly picking up, placing, and adjusting around the circular composition. This co-creation behavior not only breaks the traditional way of “single expression of the artist”, but also makes the work a field of empathy and dialogue. The interactive process itself is a kind of artistic expression, which blurs the boundary between the audience and the creator, allowing the “ritual” of land art to be extended and concrete in reality. (Figure 8)



*Figure 8. Creation process*

After the creation is completed, the effect is observed and reflected upon. It can be found that the combination of natural materials such as fruit shells, dead wood, and leaves achieves harmony in structure and rhythm. Due to its symbolic attributes and the combination of circular patterns, the work transcends formal beauty and turns to a deeper cultural and spiritual expression [32].

However, there are also certain limitations. First, the instability of the materials. For example, wind and sun will cause leaves to crack or curl quickly, making it difficult to preserve the work for a long time. Second, the fragility of the structure. Some fruit shells become fragile after being dried, requiring a high degree of patience and skill in the creation process. But it is precisely this “transience” and “impermanence” that gives the work an aesthetic power of timeliness. It reminds us that everything has a beginning and an end. Life comes from the soil and will eventually return to the soil [33].

## 6. Conclusions

This study systematically demonstrates the multi-dimensional value and practical path of plant husks in environmental art [34]. The physical properties (hardness, texture, structural diversity) and ecological attributes (renewability, sense of life and time) of husks provide a material basis for artistic expression, while the cultural symbols they carry give the work a deep spiritual connotation [1][2]. The creative practice “Annual Rings·Rebirth” further verifies that the combination of husks, branches and leaves can construct a field art with a sense of ritual. Its circular pattern echoes the Eastern cosmology, while the transience of the material is sublimated into an aesthetic meditation on the impermanence of life, highlighting the essence of land art “returning to dust” [16].

Husks are not only a microscopic carrier of ecological cycles, but also an artistic medium that connects nature, culture and technology. Its reuse practice redefines the value of “waste” and provides a methodological paradigm for environmental installations that combines ecological responsibility, humanistic depth and formal innovation [9,10]. Current research still has three limitations: First, the instability of material properties leads to a short preservation period of the works, such as the rapid weathering of leaves in “Annual Rings·Rebirth”, which relies on chemical treatment

and ecological concepts to form a practical paradox; second, the scientific and technological development of the acoustic resonance and structural bionics of fruit shells is insufficient, and interdisciplinary collaboration (such as material science and digital technology) has not yet been deepened [30]; third, the evaluation system of ecological aesthetics has not yet been established, and the mechanism of cultural symbol translation mostly relies on case analysis, lacking a systematic model of “natural materials-artistic language-social feedback” [31].

The artistic vitality of the fruit shell installation lies in its use of short-lived existence to warn eternal philosophy - true sustainability is not about the eternal existence of materials, but about the endless cycle of spirit [32]. Future exploration needs to expand the boundaries of form through technological innovation, deepen ecological awareness through humanistic care, and open up more abundant creative possibilities in the dialogue between nature and civilization [33].

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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