

Gail Grinnell: tinker, tailor, mender, maker
Drawings 2011
Catalog essay by Patricia Watkinson, published by Jean Behnke
For an installation at Anchor Art Space, Anacortes, WA
<http://www.anchorartspace.org/>

An imposing column—a pale monolith—dominates the Anacortes Anchor Art Space. Seemingly organic in nature it wells up from the floor layer upon layer and begins to creep across the ceiling. Or does it fall from the ceiling and, gathering force, tumble foaming to the ground? A waterfall in spate? Or the endless train of a cascading wedding dress, the work of a thousand seamstresses, each with her own exquisite virtuosity?

This is Gail Grinnell's installation, "tinker, tailor, mender, maker." A closer viewing reveals that the first impression of flowing cloth holds true. Swirls, pleats, and curlicues of translucent fabric drop and twist as if caught by an unfelt breeze. Tendrils of fabric create lace-like patterns and between them there are glimpses of an interior world where diaphanous forms hint at creeping roots, intertwining boughs, and ghost blossoms. Ribbon shapes morph into intricate knots or coiled intestines, braids give way to vertebrae, and a few pale skeletons float close to the ceiling.

Here and there the layers of white, cream, or ivory are tinged almost imperceptibly with the palest pink, the lightest blue, set next to shadowy grey. Translucent forms catch the light and allow glimpses of luminous, pale shapes deep in the heart of the structure. What at first glimpse had seemed an overwhelmingly powerful presence reveals itself, up close, on the molecular level so to speak, to be composed of individual pieces that are surprisingly insubstantial and delicate. White, luminous, ethereal: all is as weightless and as airy as a moth's wing.

Each individual element is defined, outlined in black or white, by the hand of the artist: Grinnell has drawn on the polyester fabric with sumi ink and brush or a solvent-based ink pen using a line that reveals her joy, abandonment even, in the act of drawing. (A collection of Grinnell's charcoal-on-vellum drawings accompanies this installation, clearly revealing the Cy Twombly-like energy of the artist's non-stop line.) Grinnell's line loops and swirls and dances without ceasing, at times energized into swiftly repeated patterns, at others more languid in the shapes it creates. These shapes are then painstakingly cut out by the artist, released from flat drawings to take up space and to come alive in the real world.

The cut-out elements have antecedents with deep-rooted meaning for Grinnell. They resemble the dressmaking patterns printed on tissue paper, with dark outlines and instructions to "cut here," made by Butterick or Simplicity. This association is Grinnell's intention and inspiration. Dressmaking patterns were used by her mother, a gifted and

self-taught seamstress who throughout the 50s and 60s made clothes for her growing daughter with patience and love. Grinnell remembers pouring over pattern books together and the touch of her mother's hands as she pinned the dress over her daughter's body. At her mother's death Grinnell inherited hundreds of patterns that her mother had frugally saved. The desire to use these, to cut and pin as her mother and so many others had before her, became a strong motivation—not to make a dress *per se*, but to make art that was life-affirming and spoke to connections that bind through the generations. After making several works using her mother's actual tissue-paper patterns, Grinnell switched to another dressmaker's fabric, a spun polyester used for interfacing, which serves the same purpose but is much less fragile. This she coats with a clear gloss coat of acrylic which makes it able to receive color and line.

References to her family history, to her mother and father, to those who make, mend and sew, are only some of Grinnell's intentions in "tinker, tailor, mender, maker." Initially inspired by a vintage child's crinoline dress that came into her possession, with its virtuoso ruching, pleating and lacework, this towering installation not only layers fabric but also layers Grinnell's ideas.

Grinnell asserts that the body, the land, and the natural world are her greatest interests. She is inspired by the patterns of the human skeleton as well as those found elsewhere in nature, for example in spider webs. She sees webs as opportunistic, temporary constructions that parallel her own artworks in many ways: she too builds and rebuilds self-supporting structures that must be adapted to different environments. Skeletons, too, have significance on several levels. In the Anchor installation, skeletal parts—spines, ribcages, jawbones—as well as organ-like shapes are caught up in the rising melee, cycling to the crest of the work where skulls and full skeletons hide among the foaming fabric shapes. Fabric surrounds these human skeletons, just as tissue clothes all our bones. The reference to human life is intentional. Grinnell sees this upward movement as a dispersal of life through the generations, representing at once the transience of life and its continuity. She likens her installation to a breath, an exhalation, that dissolves into the atmosphere. It is merely a moment in time.

Grinnell also talks about her formative years and her growing appreciation of the elegance of the science of physics. Most specifically she cites her understanding that everything on a molecular level is the same, be it body, nature or landscape... that there is no boundary between human society and the natural world. It is merely the rearrangement of atoms that changes outward appearances. Thus her cut-out drawings of decorative flounces morph into plant forms and into bones; her fabric pleats become the fan-like shapes of the basalt rock outcrops found around Grinnell's childhood home. All is fluid in Grinnell's work... and in her thinking.

But fluidity and the intentional rearrangement of atoms, she knows, can lead to darker outcomes. Grinnell's parents were chased from their Minnesota farm in the late 1930s by the ravages of the Dust Bowl. Her father found a job at the brand new Hanford

Nuclear Reservation in south central Washington. Her family joined other transplants in this rapidly growing town. Plutonium manufactured at Hanford would soon create the bomb dropped on Nagasaki, Japan, at the close of WWII. Grinnell was born in the ensuing the Cold War as Hanford continued to increase in size and importance. It is no coincidence that her installation piece at Anchor also echoes the awesome beauty of the atom bomb and its iconic mushroom cloud –an image that hovered over Grinnell’s youth.

Grinnell has known from the first that she was an artist, not merely that she wanted to be one. And she has always understood that her art needed to be intimately interwoven into family life. Her thinking goes beyond the merely pragmatic, although practicality plays a part. A wife, a mother of four, and eventually a caregiver to her own mother, Grinnell was not exposed to the art world or to other artists until her mid-20s. By her late 30s she had completed a degree in painting at the University of Washington in Seattle. Painting, however, was to prove too complicated a path to follow in a household setting. Grinnell needed to find ways to express herself that better fitted her existing life, yet still allowed her to pursue her aesthetic concerns—her compositional interests, her focus on the places of tension where forms meet, her fascination with the edges of shapes. “Piecework,” as she aptly calls it, was art that not only answered these concerns but could be picked up and put down easily to fit domestic needs. Her children as well as their grandmother could lend a hand in the creation of this work, often helping to cut out shapes. In addition, materials readily at hand in the home could be used. For example, tea and coffee are some of the subtle colorings in the current installation at Anchor.

This focus on the domestic has always been Grinnell’s imperative, although she concedes that the women’s movement of the 60s, with its elevation of “women’s work” in art, has created a much broader acceptance of her thinking and her art. She takes pleasure in the parallels between art-making and domestic activities, describing the application of glue to paper as “the same as buttering a piece of bread.” She sees the choreography of many of her movements in art-making as paralleling those of doing the laundry— “old-fashioned” laundry, that is. Dipping her fabric pieces and then pinning them up to dry on a clothes line requires a similar sequence of activities and movements as her own mother’s on wash day...and *her* mother before her. In Grinnell’s studio large sheets of acrylic-coated polyester fabric are hung on lines to dry: the image of the clothes line is so meaningful that several of her exhibitions have featured pieces displayed in this fashion. She also uses humble wooden clothes-drying racks to sort and organize her work before and after installation. And for Grinnell the intense and time-consuming work of cutting out shapes is also a comforting activity, a physical memory that connects her to the past and to her own childhood. It is through these unassuming yet ritualistic actions that Grinnell taps into memory—body memory and familial memory. These are connections that for her transcend the seeming commonplaceness of the actions involved and resound with meaning.

“It is my overriding goal,” Grinnell says, “that life and work should be one and the same, without boundaries.” Just as she strives for a seamless fluidity between life and art, so too does Grinnell’s art recognize the underlying fluidity among all manifestations of the natural world. This is a world that, in its many dimensions, in all its beauty and fascinating complexity, is celebrated and honored in Grinnell’s visually stunning, and sadly transitory, installation at the Anchor Art Space.