



Gail Grinnell



# Gail Grinnell

2011

*tinker, tailor, mender, maker*

An installation and drawings curated by Jean Behnke  
Anchor Art Space, Anacortes, Washington

Essay by Patricia Grieve Watkinson

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.

Patricia Grieve Watkinson is an art and museum consultant in Seattle. She is the former director of the Museum of Art at Washington State University, the Fort Wayne Museum of Art in Indiana, and Pilchuck Glass School in Washington State. She is an occasional essayist on the art and artists of the Pacific Northwest.

## *tinker, tailor, mender, maker:* Installation by Gail Grinnell

Patricia Grieve Watkinson

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. Rib-bon 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.

## Statement from the Curator

Jean Behnke

Looking up, it was there and also not there. I was astonished seeing this work for the first time, as if the experience was unknowable. For her exhibition *tinker, tailor, mender, maker*, Gail Grinnell imagined new work for Anchor Art Space. Like an immense thing expanding, it was not entirely contained.

During two days of installation, Gail traveled up and down the tall ladder diligently carrying layers of drawings like laundry tossed over her shoulder. She uses her drawings as raw materials like a hive builder or web maker, working with pins in her mouth and pins stuck to her sleeve as a tailor might. Building, layering, more tracing back through things in life. It is her perceptive gaze over the process that is the most assuring to me, and Gail said it is all drawing. All of it.

As I had the privilege of getting to know Gail, we talked about departure points in her art-making that reverberate from childhood. I delighted in her way of working, her tinkering, telling of things in her own experience and her confidence in “messing around” in the studio. Gail does the heavy work, stirring a heavier emotional caldron so we can see what is in life’s soup du jour. Not one to look away from tragedy but rather behold the realities of loss, Gail goes about opportunistically mending the holes between loss and renewal. Gail also acknowledges vulnerability, seeking evidence of real connection and remembered tenderness in her own childhood; she recognizes the small things that embody the coded messages. This kind of reckoning and coming to terms with the fabric of one’s life is remarkable.



For discussion you can try to take Gail’s work apart, although why would one? It is an indivisible composite: layers of columnar basalt, revisited layers of a child’s dress, drawn vines and growing things, buds that bloomed in a permeated sulfuric bog, layers of a coalescing past, beckon-ing shapes and bones, lightness and foam. Gail refers to the importance of childhood tent-making, now conjured up like an apocalyptic funnel form born in the origins of the Hanford nuclear reservation.

The idea of *tinker, tailor, mender, maker* is relevant to the idea of Anchor as an artist-run project. Without a long-range plan, the space opened in December 2008, evolving from a series of personal connections and path-crossings between myself and other artists with a simple intention to exhibit exceptional art. Not surprisingly, the more closely Anchor fitted with a personal vision of compelling work, the better it became. Located in an out of the way place for contemporary art, the project’s distinctive identity steadily attracted the attention of a dedicated regional audience.

Anchor belongs in the territory of artist-run spaces fostering and furthering important experiential work, experimental in its scope, process, or inquiry. This work triggers recognition of other ways of knowing or seeing immediate experience. Things overlap, collide or suspend, may not be translatable but may be understood. As an artist-curator, I respond to gestural activation of space and connections revealed through unpredictable alignment, all leading to the possibility of a renewed imagination. The ongoing important/unimportant discourse about art continues, and the inspiring artists involved with Anchor brought a generous spirit to this project. I am pleased that this catalog can serve as a mark on the wall for Anchor Art Space

and these relationships. I would like to extend deep gratitude to Gail Grinnell for professional integrity and generosity that are inherent in her ways of working and ways of being. Gail defined and utilized the space in an extraordinary way, providing paths into the deeper bog surrounding our physical and emotional experience.

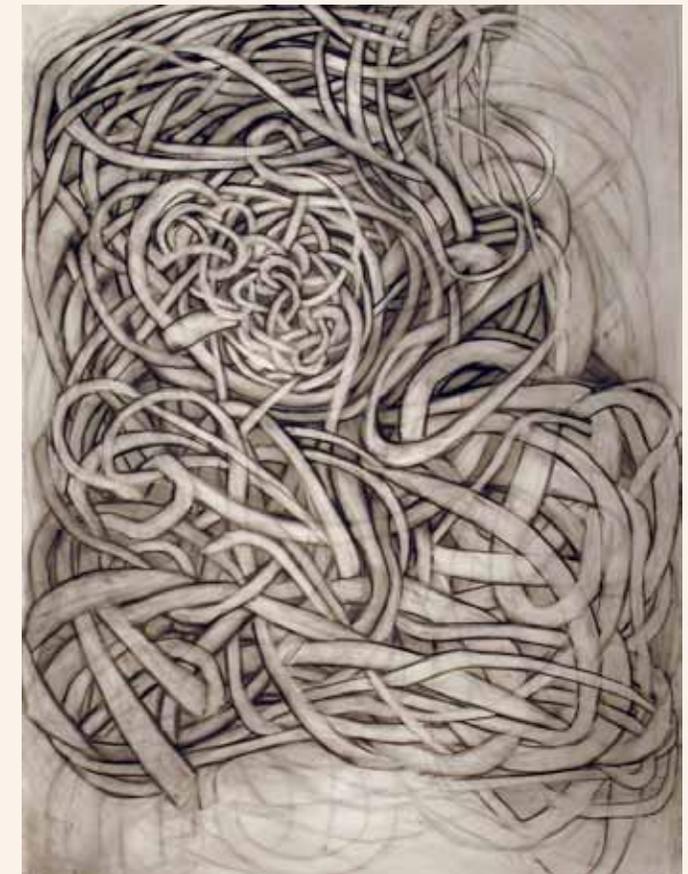
Jean Behnke is currently an artist/curator working on new projects. During a three-year run, Anchor had strong exhibitions from committed artists who responded to the alternative opportunity and the exceptional qualities of the space. Among these standout shows: *tangle*, an installation by the Kathryn and Ron Glowen, intrepid sculptural work by Stephen Kafer, map work by Cynthia Nawalinski, contemplative print-drawings by Carolyn Law, meditative work by Chris Watts, and penetrating installations by Lanny Bergner and John Feodorov. The Video Room at Anchor included unforgettable video work by Julia Oldham and Ford Gilbreath. Literary events at Anchor brought wall-to-wall audiences to hear profound readings by renowned author/poets Alex Kuo, Sherman Alexie, and poet Jane Allyn. In 2012, with Behnke’s assistance and support, Anchor Art Space transitioned to a new group project formed by connection. Anchor Access continues to bring compelling exhibitions and create thoughtful dialogue, attracting a wide audience from the Northwest and beyond.



*tinker, tailor, mender, maker*. 2011. Acrylic-treated spun polyester, ink, and natural dyes. 17 feet high, 6.5–12 feet, variable diameter



Charcoal drawings. 2010. Charcoal on vellum.  
38 x 25 inches





## Artist Statement

Gail Grinnell  
as told to Samuel Wildman, 2011

While working in the studio I often find myself repeating gestures and movements that my mother made while sizing me for a dress. She would stand me up on a chair in the dining room and smooth pieces of pattern paper across my body, pulling out all the moments—the two-inch too short torso, the extra wide hips—that made my body different from an average-sized person. Standing still on the chair was hard but what was harder was finding out just how many inches separated me from other people.

What made that experience memorable though and worthwhile was the extra attention she gave me. With her touching and her measuring I came to understand that the oddities of my body were something special and sought after, something worth caring for and accommodating. Often times when I'm in the studio I feel my mother's hands tracing unabashedly across my back and through my hands, and that reinforces everything I learned from her about myself and about working.

She taught me quiet things about bedding—about all the places we sleep and make love, give birth, and die. She showed me how to make and mend the pieces of fabric that have enfolded my body during every significant moment of my life.

All of her lessons came full circle, in a way, when she was on her deathbed. When my mother lay dying, her body failing from old age, I noticed a hole in the blanket that covered her. I sat and mended it because somehow that was the only way to show her that it was okay to die. Just as her measurements taught me



*Bog Blossom*. 2010. Acrylic-treated spun polyester, charcoal, ink, coffee. 92 × 27 inches

that the uniqueness of my body was something to take pride in, mending that blanket and smoothing it over her shape seemed somehow to reinforce an old notion that death isn't the end of life but its completion.

These days, increased wealth has brought me into contact with the idea that things are purchased instead of fixed. As it stands, I generally just buy new things when old ones break, and I've found that my platform for making and fixing things is now in the studio. Of late, the focus of my drawings and installations has become more and more directed towards finding the oddities and holes in my relationship to the world around me and measuring, fitting, dressing, and mending them in any way I can.

Samuel Wildman earned his BFA in Sculpture from the Rhode Island School of Design; he currently works and writes in Seattle.



Images from the studio.



# Gail Grinnell

## EDUCATION

---

1988 BFA University of Washington

## HONORS & AWARDS

---

2012 CityArtist Award, Seattle Office of Arts and Cultural Affairs  
Individual Artist Projects Award, 4Culture, Seattle, WA

2010 Fellowship, The Ballinglen Arts Foundation, Ballycastle, IRELAND (also 2008)  
Jentel Artist Residency, Banner, WY

2008 GAP Grant, Artist Trust, Seattle, WA (also, 1998)

2007 Artist Residency, Fundación Valparaíso, Mojacar, SPAIN

2005 The Drawing Center Viewing Program, New York, NY

1996 Artist in Residence, Pratt Fine Arts Center, Seattle, WA (also 1997)

1996 Western States Arts Federation, Honorable Mention, Santa Fe, NM

1993 Artist in Residence, Centrum Foundation, Port Townsend, WA (also 1990)

1991 Collaborative Project Grant, Museum of History and Industry, Seattle, WA

1978 Artist in Residence Program, Seattle Arts Commission, Seattle, WA

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

---

2012 *Ruffle*, Suyama Space, Seattle, WA

2011 *tinker, tailor mender, maker*, Anchor Art Space, Anacortes, WA

2009 *Lightly Here*, Featured Object Installation, Bellevue Arts Museum, Bellevue, WA  
*Body of Work*, Lorinda Knight Gallery, Spokane, WA  
*Beans, Gail Grinnell and Samuel Wildman*, Upstairs/Francine Seders Gallery, Seattle, WA

2008 *Lightly Here*, Upstairs/Francine Seders Gallery, Seattle, WA

2006 *Bitter Love*, Francine Seders Gallery, Seattle, WA

2004 *Rug Drawings*, Lorinda Knight Gallery, Spokane, WA

2002 *Imbue*, Francine Seders Gallery, Seattle, WA

2000 *Dependence*, Lorinda Knight Gallery, Spokane, WA

1999 *Out of Whole Cloth*, Francine Seders Gallery, Seattle, WA

1998 *Fabrication*, Archer Gallery, Clark College, Vancouver, WA

1996 *Gail Grinnell: Remainder*, Art Museum of Missoula, Missoula, MT

1995 *Work*, Francine Seders Gallery, Seattle, WA

1991 Ag 47 Gallery, Seattle, WA (also 1990)

1986 Cunningham Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, WA

1984 King County Arts Commission Gallery, Seattle, WA

1982 *Gail Grinnell, New Work*, Women's Cultural Center Gallery, Y.W.C.A., Seattle, WA (also 1977)

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

---

2011 Selected Work, Regional Arts and Culture Council Collection, Portland, OR

*Drawings*, Francine Seders Gallery, Seattle, WA

2009 *Images from North Mayo*, The Courthouse Gallery, Ballycastle, County Mayo, IRELAND

2008 Ballinglen Arts Foundation Gallery, Ballycastle, County Mayo, IRELAND  
*Glue*, Linda Hodges Gallery, Seattle, WA

2007 *Raiment*, Museum of Northwest Art, La Conner, WA

2005 *CWU Intersections*, Sarah Spurgeon Gallery, Central Washington University, Ellensburg, WA  
*Prints*, Shenzhen Art Institute, Shenzhen, CHINA

2003 *South Meets North*, Instituto de Artes Graficas de Oaxaca, Oaxaca, MEXICO

2000 *4 Decades x 4 Artists*, Jacob Lawrence Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, WA  
*Manufactured Nature*, Seattle Art Museum SAM Gallery, Seattle, WA  
*Artists Making Prints*, Jacob Lawrence Gallery, School of Art, University of Washington, Seattle, WA

1998 *North Westerners*, Fresh Paint Art Advisors, Culver City, CA

1997 *Seattle/Portland, Black/White*, Seattle Art Museum, SAM Gallery, Seattle, WA  
*PONCHO Artist-in-Residence Show*, Pratt Gallery, Center on Contemporary Art, Seattle, WA

1995 *Carved and Incised: Prints*, Whatcom Museum of History and Art, Bellingham, WA  
*Endowment: Refittings II*, The Art Gym, Marylhurst College, Marylhurst, OR

1994 *Time Away*, Tacoma Art Museum, Tacoma, WA

1993 *Botanic*, Sean Elwood Fine Arts, Seattle, WA  
The New England Fine Art Institute, State of the Art '93, New England Art Expo, Woburn, MA

1992 *Seattle Invitational, 20 Galleries/20 Artists* (with Vic Haven), Security Pacific Gallery, Seattle, WA  
*Lux Sit*, Galleria Potatohead, Seattle, WA  
*Retablos and Ex-Votos*, Cheney Cowles Museum, Spokane, WA

1991 *Illuminations*, Museum of History and Industry, Seattle, WA

1988 King County Arts Commission Gallery, Seattle, WA

1987 Washington Women Artists Annual Juried Exhibition, Significant Form Gallery, Seattle, WA

1983 *22 Artists Statements About Nuclear Proliferation*, Traver/Sutton Gallery, Seattle, WA

## SELECTED COLLECTIONS

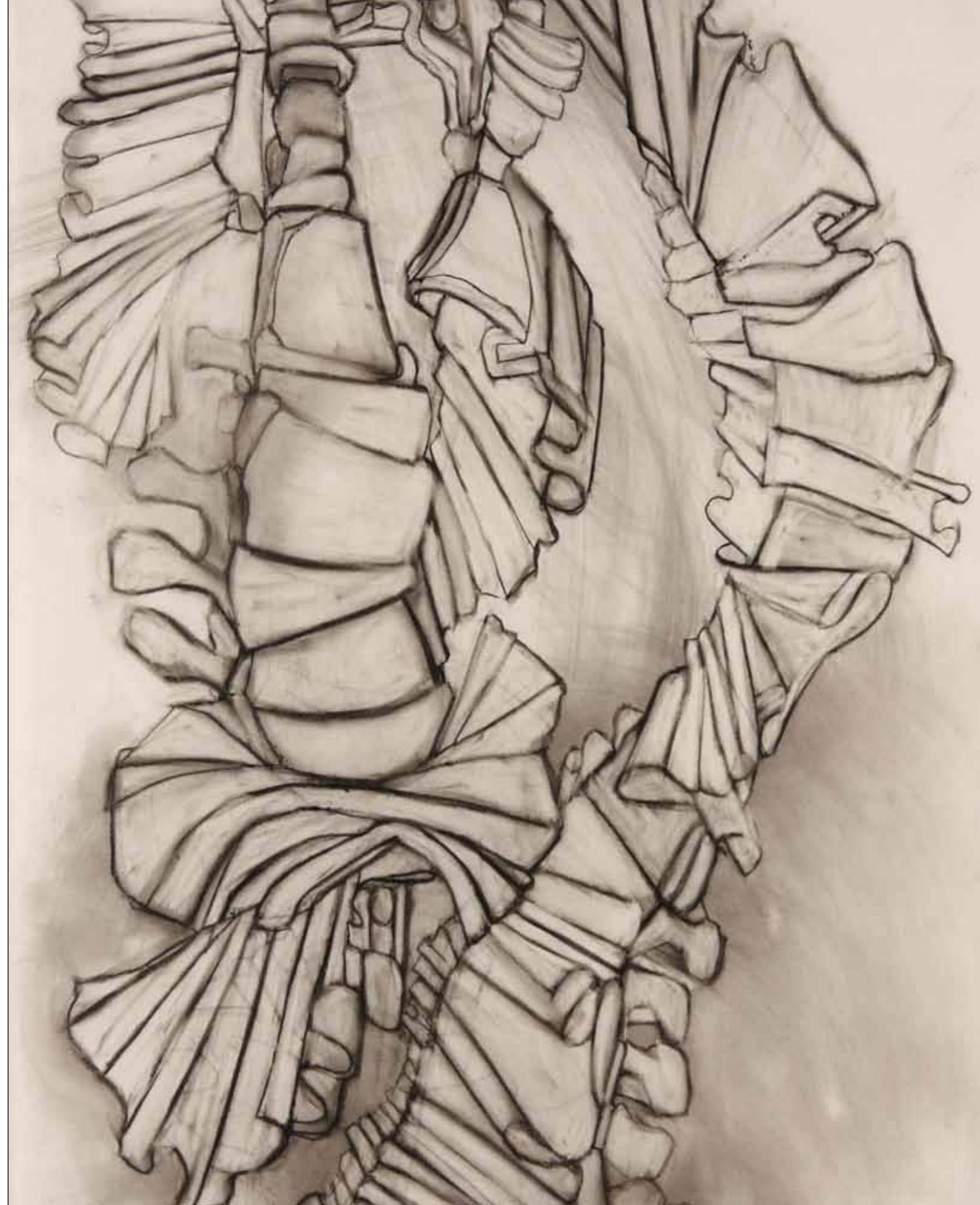
---

Washington Art Consortium, Bellingham, WA. Ballinglen Arts Foundation, Ballycastle, IRELAND. Regional Arts & Culture Council Collection, Portland, OR. Centrum Foundation, Port Townsend, WA. Portable Purchase Collection, King County Arts Commission, Seattle, WA. Harborview Collection, King County Arts Commission, Seattle, WA. Tacoma Art Museum, Tacoma, WA. University of Washington Medical Center, University of Washington, Seattle, WA. Corr Cronin, Seattle, WA. Deloitte & Touche, Seattle, WA. Frank Russell Company, Tacoma, WA

## PUBLICATIONS

---

[http://www.gailgrinnell.com/Allpages/Work\\_Press.html](http://www.gailgrinnell.com/Allpages/Work_Press.html)  
[www.gailgrinnell.com](http://www.gailgrinnell.com)





## Acknowledgments

This installation, or any large project that an artist undertakes, requires help and support both in the development stage and during the actual installation. I was the recipient of such support from many sources.

I want to thank Jean Behnke artist and former owner of Anchor Art Space ([www.anchorartspace.org](http://www.anchorartspace.org)) for providing me the opportunity to install my drawings in the wonderful space that she created in the community of Anacortes, WA. That Anchor is continuing on as a non-profit art space without her speaks to the quality of her endeavor and the recognition of this quality by the community.

This body of work was developed during several residencies that provided essential support. Fundación Valparaíso in Mojacar, Spain ([www.fundacionvalparaiso.es](http://www.fundacionvalparaiso.es)); the Ballinglen Foundation in the community of Ballycastle, County Mayo, Ireland ([www.ballinglenartsfoundation.org](http://www.ballinglenartsfoundation.org)); and the Jentel Foundation, Sheridan, Wyoming ([www.jentelarts.org](http://www.jentelarts.org)), provided time and studio space in which to develop this work. Artist Trust ([www.artisttrust.org](http://www.artisttrust.org)) provided funds towards my travel expenses.

A very special thanks to Benjamin Wildman, Hannah Wildman, Dan Sundberg, Samuel Wildman, DJ Grinnell, Taylor Grinnell, Emily Miller, and Nola Sterling for their generosity of mind and spirit as well as the hard labor involved in the making of this work and to Francine Seders and Pat Scott for their always sound advice.

Published by Jean Behnke for Anchor Art Space, Anacortes, WA

Designed by Jeff Wincapaw and Ryan Polich

Photography by Chris Terrell and Jean Behnke (installation images) and Richard Nicol (drawings)

Produced and printed by Marquand Books, Inc., Seattle

Cover: Charcoal drawing, 2010. Charcoal on vellum. 34 × 25 inches

Inside back cover: Charcoal drawing (detail). Charcoal on vellum. 38 × 25 inches