





*angle of repose* – dimensions: 22' height, 55' length and 37' width medium: acrylic-treated spun polyester, ink, natural dyes and pins.

## GAIL GRINNELL | *angle of repose*

June 28 – November 30, 2014 | Boise Art Museum

Seattle-based artist Gail Grinnell and her son, artist Samuel Wildman installed a voluminous textile cornucopia in the upper reaches of the Boise Art Museum's Sculpture Court. The patterns of hand-worked material that make up *angle of repose* reflect on the traditions, work ethics and life circumstances that impacted their family over three generations.

Essay by Sandy Harthorn



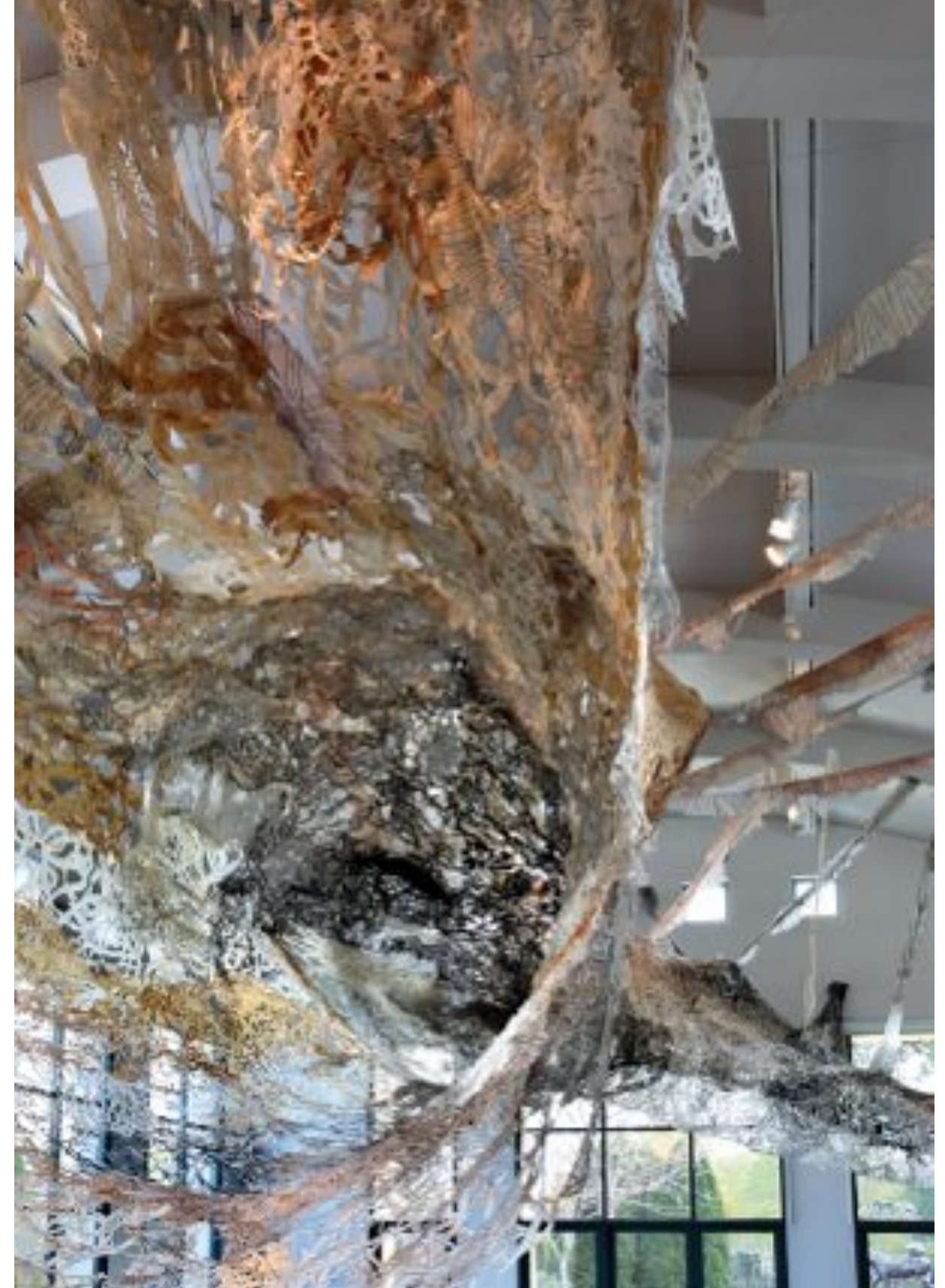
## GAIL GRINNELL | *angle of repose*

Seattle-based artist Gail Grinnell fabricated the lush patterns of hand-worked material that make up the remarkably detailed and voluminous textile cornucopia gracing the upper reaches of Boise Art Museum's Sculpture Court. The artist employs the phrase *angle of repose*<sup>1</sup> to refer to the suspended cornucopia's perfect point of stability between balance and gravity, while its hollow horn shape represents the traditional symbol of harvest, the promise of prosperity and the fruits of productive labor.

Grinnell presents this installation, created in collaboration with her son, artist Sam Wildman, as a meaningful metaphor for her family's saga as well as their legacy – a risk-taking, industrious approach to labor and life. She brings to her art skills acquired as a child from her mother, a talented seamstress, and a creative work ethic instilled by her father, a mechanic by trade. Inspired by her personal history, she reflects on the traditions and circumstances that have impacted her family over three generations and are based in the events and their memories of the turbulent era of change surrounding and after WWII.

Grinnell's installation *angle of repose* finds source in the 1942 migration of her parents from a Minnesota farming community to the federal government's constructed boomtown of Hanford in eastern Washington. The Great Depression, and years of severe drought in the central plains, prompted her father to leave the heartland and hire on as a heavy equipment machinist at the Hanford Engineer Works,<sup>2</sup> later known as the Hanford Site.<sup>3</sup> This relocation was instrumental in altering their lives and changing their expectations of home, occupation and environment. It is an American story, one of struggle, change, adaptation and adjustment that was experienced by her family, as well as those of thousands of individuals who sought employment opportunity through government sponsored endeavors in the American West and across the country in the pre- and post-war era.

During her parents' working lives, the United States saw the development of massive federally sponsored public works projects that were enacted in response to the events caused







by the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl and America's involvement in WWII. The effect of these undertakings brought economic, environmental and societal change. In small rural towns, where communities could no longer support their youth, people flocked to the opportunities of employment offered by public work initiatives. It was one of the largest migrations in American history. Segments of the population moved away from their families, farms and communities, to find new jobs regionally in urban factories, and nationally in federal government work programs, ambitiously gambling their labor for the prospect of a better life.

In the Northwest, federally-funded projects spanned a broad spectrum of endeavors from damming the Columbia River for hydro power and irrigation, to forest harvesty and huge log drives in Idaho's Clearwater River for the timber industry, and later the production of plutonium for the atomic bomb in Hanford, Washington.

Wallace Stegner's acclaimed book *Angle of Repose*<sup>4</sup> holds resonance for Grinnell, whose parents' challenges in emigrating from the Midwest to eastern Washington somewhat parallels Stegner's American migration story. This documentation was based on the correspondence of the 19th-century writer Mary Hallock Foote,<sup>5</sup> a cultured East Coast transplant, who settled with her engineer husband in a remote canyon east of Boise, Idaho, and whose life was inexplicably altered by the experience. Stegner's characters in *Angle of Repose* journeyed across country "not to join a new society but to endure it." It is not without coincidence that in preparing an installation project for the Boise Art Museum, Grinnell found Stegner's novel inspirational, especially since much of the story is set in Boise and chronicles the building of the New York Canal federal irrigation project in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that was responsible for opening southwest Idaho to thousands of acres of new land for cultivation.

Unlike Boise, with its regional agricultural community, the company/government town of Hanford, Washington, during the late 1940s, was a very unique place. Grinnell, who spent her formative years in Hanford, remembers that, although her parents were storytellers, they never spoke about the bomb dropped on the people of Japan or the growing supply of nuclear armaments stored in their hometown. As Grinnell relates, "When I was born in 1950, Hanford was developing nuclear weapons. The Cold War was in full swing. My childhood memories included air raid drills and whole town evacuations intermingled with sewing and canning lessons. It was an artificial, Disneyesque company town with a constant backbeat of nuclear annihilation." The promise of opportunity and the good life in Hanford had a very real dark side.

For Grinnell, generational relationships, family, life and work are paramount and nonexclusive of one another. In effect, the artist brings the domestic rhythms of home into her studio work in a performative undertaking that echoes her mother's labor on a grand scale. "I use the methods that I associate with the movements and materials that are used to do laundry or make garments – all of this grounded in familial memory.... In my studio I mimic my mother's labor."

The handwork that makes up the *angle of repose* installation appears fragile, light and airy – partially due to the use of spunbound polyester, a material that the artist favors for its

resilience. Grinnell first discovered spunbound polyester as part of her mother's dressmaking cache – a basket in their dining room. It is a material that has been around since the 1960s and was used in many ways in the garment industry as a dressmaking interfacing. Its special attributes are its extreme light weight, transparency and malleability. Without touching the cloth, the fabric appears tissue like, yet even after the application of cuts to bring forth a pattern, the seemingly fragile material holds its invisible strength and maintains its stability and structure.

Drawing is an essential element of the process – intricate designs, frequently organic in nature, are sketched in ink to outline the artist's motifs on lengths of polyester material, some extending as long as fourteen feet. The drawings, executed on bands of the fabric, indicate where future cutouts will be made. This results in varied and finely defined patterns, such as complicated knots, skeletal motifs and ribbon-like panels. More recently, intricate garden motifs of quince, plums, cherries and other botanical themes have been introduced.







The spunbound polyester is coated with a clear gloss acrylic to prepare the surface to accept applied color. Each drawing is then dyed with unconventional products such as coffee or tea, resulting in soft shades of faded gray, tan and subtle pastel tints. Grinnell also incorporates gradations of black provided by diluted sumi ink to emphasize patterns that portray limbs of burned-out trees. For Grinnell, these newer blackened arboreal designs make reference to the raging fires that have engulfed the West in recent years.

Grinnell's process in developing her installation at BAM is complex and intuitive. She begins by stretching numerous cut and stained contour line drawings over clothes lines to reveal their separate attributes and coloration. One-by-one, they are selected by the artist, raised to the appropriate height and attached to guide wires that are affixed to the ceiling to anchor the configuration. Grinnell and her son work together to coordinate the process by intertwining and overlapping hundreds of these individual elements. As the drawings are slowly brought into place, they are melded together to form a hollow horn that hovers from the Museum's 26-foot-high vaulted ceiling; each element held together with nothing but thousands of dressmaker straight pins.

Grinnell says, "I think of my mother...living a lifetime in a place she never called home.... washing clothes, hanging them to dry, dying fabric, making patterns, mending, patching; and my father's heroic fixing of the machines in our life. I think of the way he planted vegetables, cared for his animals and his constant motion. And I remember when he started his dawn trek everyday – his metal lunch box in hand (and government



ID clipped to his shirt) – to go to work." These silent reflections on the circumstances of their life at Hanford and the value of her parents' enduring labors are foremost in how Grinnell considers her own ideas and creative efforts.

Gail Grinnell's installation is transitory, meant to be disassembled and repurposed, rather than permanent. As such, her work is both a temporal celebration of a family tradition and an exploration of the ways in which such traditions evolve over time. It is the tension between Grinnell's past and the present that drives the final cornucopia form and it is the voluminous array of her delicate hand-made art finding a point of stillness that constitutes the *angle of repose*.

Sandy Harthorn | *Curator of Art*

1. The term "angle of repose" has a related usage in mechanics, in which two disparate substances come together in a state of stability. The *angle of repose* is gravity dependent. In Gail Grinnell's installation, the cornucopia shape finds stability at the point between balance and gravity, thus it is positioned at an "angle of repose."
2. Hanford Engineer Works was the nation's first plutonium production facility created as a WWII secret government project to provide fuel for the atomic bomb.
3. Site is federal government acquired land that was transformed from a sparsely populated arid desert into a major military and manufacturing complex in 1943.
4. Wallace Stegner's Pulitzer Prize novel *Angle of Repose* was published in 1971.
5. Mary Hallock Foote, working from the middle 1870s to the First World War, created a written and visual document of the West's "social genesis." Foote's correspondence was the inspiration for Wallace Stegner's character, Susan Berling Ward, in his celebrated book *Angle of Repose*.









## GLIMPSE

Gail Grinnell

When I drive across the desert towards the Vernita Bridge (a drive I have made countless times since I got my drivers license in 1966) I often cry. The highway cuts across the old Hanford Nuclear reservation in Washington State. It crosses the Columbia River where it makes a deep bend. In the distance I get a glimpse (one that I always wait for) of an old abandoned homestead located deep on the reservation behind a barbed wire fence. Beyond that, in the far distance is the lovely curving line of the river with the aging ruins of a nuclear reactor perched close to the waters edge. Time and time again the ruins of this structure bring to my mind the remains of an immense temple, and I weep.

## ENTROPY

Samuel Wildman

*angle of repose* was a temporary site specific installation constructed out of corsage pins and sheets of spun polyester. Echoing the movements of my matriarchal grandmother (a seamstress, laundress and depression era homemaker) my mom and I worked the spun polyester; dying it; hanging it; drawing on it and then cutting it out and weaving it together using corsage pins and screws. We used the title of Wallace Stegner's 1971 novel as a jumping off point for the project because of the way he so eloquently addresses the tensions that often separate generations around issues of work, migration and culture. While we were hanging the installation we happened to hear a podcast of a story about Cyclopean Architecture. Apparently there was a civilization that died off long before the Greeks that used to build with massive limestone boulders: the Greeks, unable to fathom how such rocks had been moved, figured that only the mythical Cyclopes of yore had the strength to move the enormous boulders, hence the name Cyclopean Architecture. This anecdote illustrates the sense of entropy – of knowledge and technology that some how escapes transmission between generations – that inspired this project.

## ARTIST STATEMENT: GAIL GRINNELL

Ghostwritten by Samuel Wildman

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. As a child, what made that experience worthwhile was the extra attention she gave me. As a teenager, the experience became meaningful in other ways. 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 mothers hands tracing unabashedly across my back and through my hands. It 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.

When my mother lay dying, her body failing from old age, I noticed a hole in the blanket that covered her. While she was struggling to breathe, I sat and mended the hole in the blanket because somehow that seemed to be the only thing that brought comfort.





## ARTIST ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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