

MENDING

By

Sky L. Roehl, M.F.A.

A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

In

Native Arts

University of Alaska Fairbanks

May 2024

APPROVED:

Da-ka-xeen Mehner, Committee Chair
Zoe Marie Jones, Committee Member
James Brashear, Committee Member
Da-ka-xeen Mehner, Chair
Department of Art

Abstract

Oxford Dictionary:

“Mending” (noun) things to be repaired by sewing or darning.

“Mend” (verb) return to health, heal

Sutures and stitches are used to help facilitate the healing of wounds, and with every stitch I build up the form of my soft sculptures in a process that is both therapeutic and healing for me as an artist. Their forms are abstracted versions of what I know and see every day, sutures and seams running across their bodies telling the story of how they came to exist in their current form like scars.

The process of stitching and sewing these forms is a way for me to express and practice my spirituality in a way that allows me to heal and repair my relationship with my beliefs and reclaim the idea of spirituality from organized religion. The act of creating from recycled materials, applying important skills I learned in my youth from my elders, and building on the relationships and observations of the wildlife around me fosters a meditative and safe place to explore myself and the world we share.

Animal forms and bodies have always been at the core of my work. It feels natural and no matter where I am in the world, my attention always finds and fixates on them. The way they move, how they interact with the world, both natural and developed and with other living beings, including humans in a variety of environments is always captivating.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I am an Aleut woman and my family is from Dillingham Alaska, but growing up in Fairbanks Alaska, much of my time in town was spent at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS). Aside from the strict gender roles and rules for prayer, one of the most memorable and restrictive aspects of attending church was the dress code. The nylons I was required to wear beneath the necessary skirts left a distinct impression within my memory.

In stark contrast was the time I spent in the woods or on the rivers and ocean. When surrounded by nature I was taught by my native elders to respect every living being, to thank the land, animals, and plants that sustained us. Instead of worshipping a God, it was those living creatures around me I held in reverence.

As I got older, I was forced to spend more of my time in the church and was supposed to strictly follow their rules. Everything from what clothes I could wear, what role I was to play at home, who I could date, how and when I could pray, and what I could believe was all dictated to me. As I grew and experienced the world, especially away from the city, I realized that these were not my beliefs, and felt a myriad of negative emotions, such as guilt and resentment for the church, faith, and spirituality in general. Through my art, I have begun to repair and rebuild my spirituality based on the beliefs, skills, and rituals taught by my native elders growing up outside of the city. “Mending” explores this healing process, with the manipulation and transformation of materials, especially the restrictive and uncomfortable nylons I was forced to wear, giving them new life in the form of what I worship and hold in reverence now; the animals and other living beings around us.

Chapter 2: Process

Every sculpture starts as a series of gesture sketches, some that I make while directly observing the animals around me, others from studying videos or photographs of them in their natural environments. I use these gestures to study how each animal moves and understand what makes them unique from or similar to other animals.

From here, or even before I make these gestures, I study the anatomy of each animal, their muscles, and especially their defining physical characteristics. I then abstract these studies and more accurately apply them to the gesture sketches of my chosen subject.

I then create a wire armature that follows the sketch and modify it as necessary so that it can stand on its own. If I am making a smaller sculpture I will then start to layer fillers and nylons to start building out the forms, following the general placement of the natural muscle placements, and slowly exaggerate some parts of the anatomy that may help further develop the emotion or sense of form that I want to express.

For my larger sculptures, I use the small wire form as a base mock-up for how I approach building the larger armature. For these, I start by building the torso or central portion of the subject using willow and scrap wood. Then I remove and shift pieces by lashing and untying them until the body is stable and has the general shape needed. I can then carefully grow its limbs and neck from this central form, developing the upper legs first, and then the lower. Making sure it can support its weight and stand on its own, I reinforce and fill in gaps between and around the central part of the limbs and joints, essentially making a wooden skeleton.

Size dictates how a figure may be interacted with, if it is small enough to cradle in one hand there is a sense of preciousness or fragility, while a larger sculpture will take up space and can foster a more monumental spirit within. The chosen gesture establishes the way I communicate each figure's emotions. Once the armature is the right size and gesture, I then start to sew a base layer of nylons or other recycled cloth around the form. Over this I can then begin sewing the layers of nylons and filler over top to build

up the musculature or soft parts of the body. Once it is entirely stable and the body is mostly developed, I then start layering the nylons to reinforce and visually develop the lines and seams across the body.

At this point, for both the small and large sculptures, I start to include strings of beads that generally follow the lines of the body and the placement of veins or arteries beneath the layers of nylons. Some follow the lower layer's seams, others are more loosely left to lay atop the filler or to weave in and out of sight amongst it, much like how you can lose sight of the veins within your arms.

Chapter 3: Materials

The majority of the materials I use for my soft sculptures are recycled women's nylons, and miscellaneous fillers salvaged from old pillows, dog toys, coat lining, and a variety of other sources. One unique and important reason that I work with women's nylons in particular is that as a material it is meant to emulate skin while covering it. Growing up, it was a strict part of my uniform when attending church. By cutting and manipulating the material and using the skin-sewing skills passed onto me by community elders and the sutures I learned to apply after years of being a medic, I transform and give it new life as the skin of my sculptures.

Beads strung beneath the upper layers of my sculptures replicate veins and arteries, tracing the life-blood of each being. By including beads that were passed onto me from my mother, grandmother, and great-aunt, I include how important and vital my learning and existence as an Aleut woman is and how that learning is a deeply rooted and important part of my identity and spirituality. It also echoes the skills I learned growing up when I was taught how to bead by my adopted grandmother Irene. It, alongside skin-sewing, was one of the first skills I was taught growing up that was both practical for fixing and caring for gear but also had applications in making art.

The wires I use for my armatures are often salvaged from the jewelry studio once they cannot be used anymore due to brittleness from repeated heatings. They work well since I only need a few pieces to make my smaller sculptures. For my larger sculptures, I use a mixture of willow and scrap wood lashed together with wire, artificial sinew, and thread.

Chapter 4: Inspirations

4.1: Personal Inspirations

The first and strongest source of inspiration for my work is the natural world around us and my homeland of Alaska, both in the interior around Fairbanks, and the coastal village of Dillingham where my father's family is from. Growing up, the time spent out in the woods was where I was at peace, and where I learned to carefully observe and respect the land and every living being we share this world with.

Learning how to identify and study the plants and environment to successfully and sustainably gather berries and other edible plants was important from a young age. As I aged and became old enough to fish and hunt, I learned to observe, study, and learn about all of the wildlife around me, their anatomy, behaviors, habits, how the time of year or environment impacted or influenced them, and so much more.

One very important observation was that the primary educators within nature are the mothers. While some species have to co-parent, most of the time it is the mother who must raise and impart all of the knowledge and skills required for the next generation to survive. They are also the ones I often found myself watching and learning from while out in the wilderness. The relationships that I saw reminded me of my mother and adopted grandmother who taught me the best they could, and passed down the wide variety of skills, knowledge, ethics, and morals they had amassed over the years.

These wild mothers were fierce to threats but gentle to their offspring and neutral creatures, and were always wary of their surroundings, sensitive to any changes and constantly observing both the environment and their offspring. They allow for curiosity, exploration, play, and other things that help their young develop the skills necessary for survival, while also guiding and protecting them from known threats, and teaching them what is not safe. It was a flexible guidance that I am profoundly inspired by. It stands in stark contrast to the strict upbringing I often faced, especially when it came to my spirituality and church. I try to capture this freedom of form and ingrain the flexibility the animals teach within my own spirituality.

4.2: Inspirational Artists

Sonya-Kelliher Combs, is the artist whose work inspired me to pursue art within my life. Her way of working with materials, both contemporary and traditional in unique and flexible ways, encourage me to continue working with unconventional materials and forms. Her work also inspires me to draw on the strong foundation of ethics and morals, and the connections my cultural heritage has ingrained in me growing up.

I also see a connection between our works as I work with nylons, a material that emulates skin, and sew it the same way I would stitch a wound, or skin-sew a pair of gloves. As her bio states: “Kelliher-Combs' process dialogues the relationship of her work to skin, the surface by which an individual is mediated in culture.” (Kelliher-Combs).

Her work showed me that I could challenge myself and explore my mixed heritage, especially my spirituality or my connections to the land through art in a way that was tangible and respectful to my family's history and culture, while still being uniquely me.

Similarly, Brenda Garand was one of my first instructors in sculpture, and to this day her resilience and dedication to both teaching and making art using a variety of unconventional and conventional mediums helped me first begin exploring recycled materials, and how to apply my history in construction to building large forms. She taught me welding, and that it is ok to take up space with large sculptural works, and to explore my complex history of identity as a woman of mixed heritage. She taught me the importance of material choice, and how it is critical to consider the history of the materials I choose to use. As Brenda's bio states: “Materials hold a great significance for me, whether it is cold rolled steel, wool from the Johnson Woolen Mills, quills from the eastern porcupine, walnut ink I make, or black felt paper reminiscent of days working for my father, roofing.”(Garand). Materials hold not only a history of their own, but also have associated histories and meaning for individuals. This has been increasingly important for me to focus on my material choices, and what they mean to me.

Soo Sunny Park is another massively influential instructor that I had the privilege of working with as a student and intern. Her massive installation works and masterful manipulation of everyday, recycled

materials and how she challenges herself both physically and conceptually on a regular basis with her works is amazing. Her use of intangible materials such as light and how it reflects, refracts, or otherwise interacts with a wide variety of materials. As she said in her bio: “Light is usually treated as a liminal being: something that mediates our visual awareness of the world, but not something that we see in and of itself. In my work, light is not just a means by which the form is seen, but part of what constitutes the work of art. Light is a sculptural material, not because without it one cannot see the forms, but because without it there is no projection, reflection, translucency, or shadow, so the drawing/ sculpture is not complete.” (Park).

Ever since entering the MFA program at UAF, Da-ka-xeen Mehner has been a massive source of inspiration and support. Talking with him about the struggles of finding the boundaries and lines of how I can approach complex subjects that I feel are important but in a way that is genuine and authentic to my own experiences has been extremely important. He has also been instrumental in teaching me other ways to work with materials and more traditional tools, especially carving. He was also able to share a variety of artists who address similar topics that I have been trying to explore within my work, such as religious trauma.

Chapter 5: Exhibition



Figure 6.1: Gallery View from Entrance

My exhibition consisted of 10 sculptures arranged throughout the gallery. Included were 6 pairs of *Little Mothers* with offspring, and 5 individual sculptures. Most are arranged on pedestals of varying sizes and lit with spotlights. *Accumulations*, the largest sculpture, stands on its own in the center of the gallery floor, and is visible with 7 of the smaller sculptures from the gallery entrance (fig. 1). Along the wall to the right of the entrance are the remaining two sculptures. For each sculpture located near a wall, the lighting creates a halo-effect when viewed from the front (fig. 2). This adds to the sacred ambiance of the figures, which is apt for their roles as subjects and objects of worship.

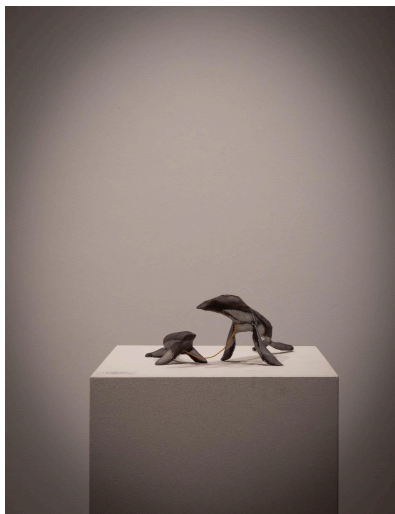


Figure 6.2: Lighting

It is the mothers within the natural world and how they teach their offspring that is of the greatest importance, and the importance of this role is highlighted with half of my show consisting of paired sculptures titled *Little Mothers*. Each mother is connected to her offspring by a series of beaded threads, visually showing the connection and exchange of life between them. The threads emerging from the chest and heart of both figures focus on their spiritual connection (fig. 3). Although tenuous and easily broken if pulled too far apart, they are flexible, and allow the sculpture to be arranged in multiple ways. Meanwhile, the threads also represent the spiritual connection I have with the beads as a material, as they were passed down from my great aunt to my mother, and then to me. Both passed on the knowledge of how to bead and skin-sew, two skills that are important to the creation of my sculptures.



Figure 6.3: *Moose Mother*

Of the remaining sculptures, one is a self-portrait of myself as a maker. Two hands, meant to represent mine, are in the process of making a sculpture, as if frozen in time. We are constantly building

and responding to the world around us, and a major part of my identity is as a maker or an artist. My hands are the key to my work, they are how I interact with the world around me, and what allows my work to come to life. A small hare is growing from the hands, taught threads originating from the hands and from the hare connect them (fig. 4). Just as my works grow from me, I am also tied to them, as the process of making each piece is a core part of expressing and exploring my spirituality, giving life and form to memory. Some of the threads still have needles, hinting that they have room to continue growing and develop in the future.



Fig. 6.4: *Self Portrait*

Accumulations (fig. 5) is reminiscent of a young moose or caribou. It boldly exists in the center of the gallery, walking through the space with purpose, focused on moving forward. Its body crisscrossed with a myriad of seams and sutures, and a variety of colored beaded strings lay beneath its skin emulating

veins and scars. It represents the accumulation of experiences and histories of its materials and the processes that were required for it to exist in its current state. *Accumulations* is the largest sculpture in the exhibition and took the longest to complete at nearly 2 years of consistent work. Just like its name, it is a testament to the work and development of my art overtime, and the painstaking, slow development of my identity and self within my works.



Figure 6.5: *Accumulations*

The remaining two sculptures are *Lunge* and *Solitary*. Aside from *Accumulations*, they were two of the earliest soft sculptures I made when preparing for and making work for my show. *Lunge*, focused heavily on gesture (fig. 6), and has what I consider the most dynamic pose of all of my sculptures. It was an exploration of how I could successfully use my skills of skin sewing and sutures to build a form while using the recycled nylons, and learning how to encourage the seams and pieces of material to flow and work with the figure's form to encourage the viewer's eyes might travel over the entire sculpture. The final sculpture in the show, *Solitary* (fig. 7).. Was one of my first sculptures including threads and other materials beneath the final layer of "skin", and speaks to how my work has developed within the program.

Its title also references how alone it sometimes felt to explore and try to define my experiences and spirituality in a way that others might be able to understand.



Figure 6.6: *Lunge*



Figure 6.7: *Solitary*

Chapter 6: Reflection

Throughout my time in the MFA program, I have learned how to adapt my materials and mediums for making work in order to adjust to events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the biggest challenges was to stay motivated and continue making work in isolation and in new materials. Before the pandemic I worked on large scale sculptures, but when restricted to the confines of my studio dry-cabin, I did not have the space to continue working on them. This lesson in resilience and drive to continue working will stay with me in the future.

The research and process of working through and handling a highly-charged topic such as my spirituality was a challenge. Navigating through the challenge of putting a very private part of myself on display while exploring how my experiences and beliefs fit into a larger narrative of the church's impact on indigenous cultures was difficult. There are a variety of ways that artists have approached this subject. Some use merged imagery and iconography, such as Linda Lyons, some others use less peaceful imagery, such as Da-ka-xeen's 'Weapons of Mass Defense'.

For myself, I wanted to focus entirely on my current art and spiritual practice. How my spirituality and history shape and informs the way I make art and vice versa. I acknowledge and reflect on my past, especially how it has pushed me to where I am today as both an artist and a spiritual person. However, I have chosen not to directly reference my trauma and thus muddle the peace I have been able to find and make with my current artistic practice.

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