

MENDING

By

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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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Abstract.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Figures.....	v
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Process.....	2
Chapter 3: Materials.....	4
Chapter 4: Inspirations.....	5
4.1 Personal Inspirations.....	5
4.2 Inspirational Artists.....	6
Chapter 5: Exhibition.....	8
Chapter 6: Reflections.....	13
References.....	14

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Figure 6.1: Gallery View from Entrance.....	8
Figure 6.2: Lighting.....	8
Figure 6.3: Moose Mother.....	9
Figure 6.4: Self Portrait.....	10
Figure 6.5: Accumulations.....	11
Figure 6.6: Lunge.....	12
Figure 6.7: Solitary.....	12

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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 sp

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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.

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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.

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9 The first and strongest source of inspiration for my work is the natural world around

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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.

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Figure 6.1: Gallery View from Entrance

My exhibition consisted of 10 sculptures arranged throughout the gallery. Included were 6 pairs of [redacted] with offspring, and 5 individual sculptures. Most are arranged on pedestals of varying sizes and lit with spotlights. [redacted], 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 t²

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 λ. 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 _

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:

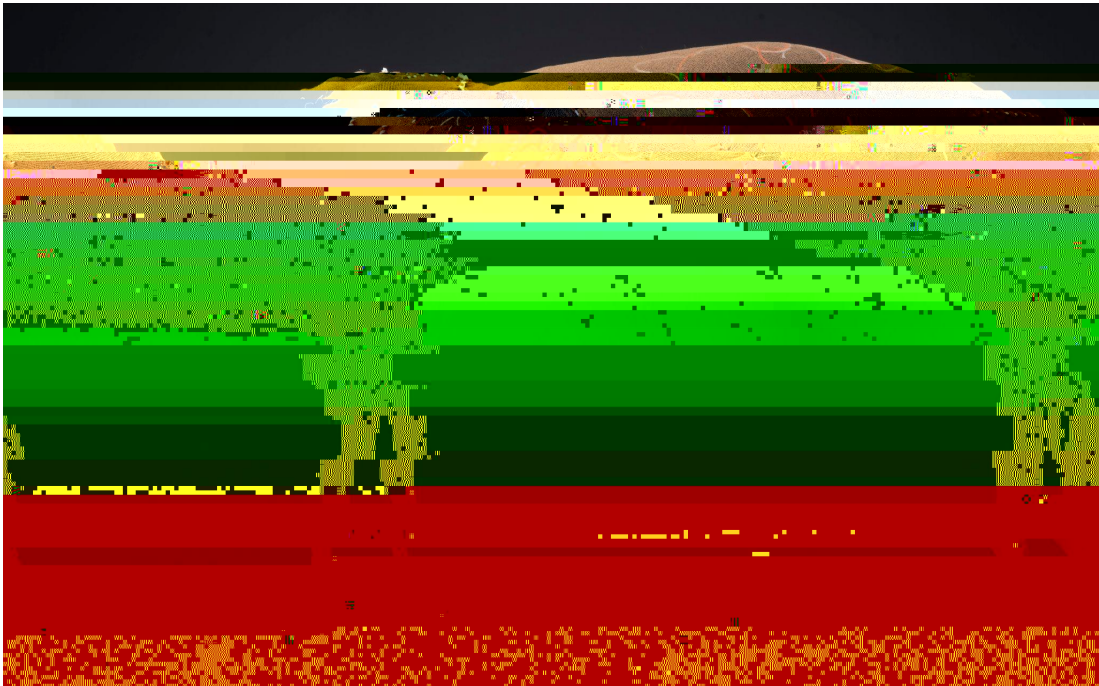


Figure 6.7:

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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.

