

Gail Meyer Grinnell  
Statement of Intent  
Art Installation/Shaw Gallery  
Ogden State University, Ogden Utah  
2024

...and there is this lingering thought.

The work that I am creating for the Shaw Gallery will be partly constructed from used, hand mended, tenderly groomed and repurposed plastic blue tarps collected from the western states – both desert and rain forest – city and rural. I intend to arrange these tarps to form a large diameter hollow structure starting at the ceiling from which concentric layers of differently configured fabric would change in color and texture as they descend to the floor. The materials vary and range from tarps to hand cut drawings on translucent spunbonded (nonwoven) polyester\* that is traditionally used in its different iterations in the garment industry and by the home seamstress as well as landscaping and other industrial processes. All of this is very light weight – the tarps have a translucency that will vary depending on their level of wear and the available light source. The sculptural form emerges as the pieces are pinned together under light tension making the finished work stable.

The use of these plastic tarps and nonwoven polyester is a meditation on the wide spread proliferations of the makeshift tent cities in urban places and the lone desert shelters I often see as I live in and travel through the western states of this country. Always they feel inspired and vulnerable in turn – appearing variously in the distance as an oasis or a mirage.

As I work with these materials I am reminded of the origins of my childhood community that started as a desert tent city - a military installation tasked with creating plutonium for the weapon that brought an end to the Second World War and introduced a planet ending destructive force into our world. I find this history haunting and humbling and am reminded that I am caught up in the comingling of historical events with personal matters of the heart.

With the larger than life elevation of an arrangement of these evocative materials in a public art space I hope to encourage dialogue about how we attempt to care for ourselves, our dreams and one another as we engage in creating our future while standing on the contaminated ground of our own recent past.

Gail Meyer Grinnell: Artist Narrative 2024  
Shaw Gallery, Ogden State University, Ogden Utah

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My choices of worn and mended plastic tarps and nonwoven polyester as building materials for this installation are inspired by the trips I have taken with my family car-camping around the northwestern United States during the 1950s to the current time. The sensation of sitting under a tarp at a picnic table in the woods is my starting point for imagining the form that will fill the exhibition space. Those camping trips were a kind of collective imaging for my family: a chance to fantasize about what it would be like to live a little closer to the land, to organize our own living space and other structures, and to reflect on the prescriptive military/government housing we lived in - a community born from the war era of the 1940s that was tasked with developing the plutonium used to fuel the atomic bomb that was ultimately dropped on the people of Nagasaki, Japan.

Growing up in this cloistered outpost of the Manhattan Project in the 1950/60s was idyllic in some ways. I knew only vague things about the war that was over before I was born. The town was designed to be a self-contained community. Commissioned by the Federal Government and built in the course of one year it felt a little like a theme park with restricted areas and bomb shelters as clearly defined as all the other types of spaces that make up a town.

The early residents were highly focused people responding to a nation-wide call for workers to assist with the war effort. Isolated in the high desert of Washington state my home town was an odd oasis of overwhelmingly white Americana with a flavor of military secrets and surprise reveals that kept the developing circle of my childhood experience closed.

Currently the town of Richland and the Hanford nuclear reservation site are now part of the the Manhattan Project National Historic Park that prioritizes engagement with all the communities with historical ties to the land particularly the Indigenous peoples. Hanford is an active research site exploring methods of remediating the environmental damage and managing the hazardous waste storage remaining from its war time activities.

I remain grateful to my parents for including us in their relentless wanderings across the deserts and forests of the western United States and for staying open to communicating their own dreams even as these dreams were deferred by the historical events of their time. We built makeshift shelters full of filtered light and shadows located in the midst of dramatic landscapes. The trips were a chance for us to step out of the highly planned, gendered and debt laden architectural stylings of our government town and imagine other ways of existing together in the world. For me, the canopies and campsites we built in the forests and deserts provided the opportunity for my family to collect itself, and to re-form around our own abilities and aspirations.

\*The REACH – notes on materials

Temporary Reuse

Gail Meyer Grinnell

2024

Materials have an identity. They contain a history of human concern. The spun polyester that I used for this work came from my childhood in the 1960s and my experience of my mother's sewing practice. She was a home seamstress born in 1916 and adapted her patternmaking to incorporate a brand new fragile looking but indestructible material that came into common use in the 1960s. The polyester had no weave and was very thin and translucent. It would not tear and she used it as inner facing to strengthen the delicate points in the garments she was producing.

This material, takes on many forms and has several applications outside of garment manufacturing. Its strength, weight, permeability and archival qualities have applications for land remediation, sewage treatment, underlays in upholstery, and building construction - to name a few. The enduring quality of the material reflects the ambitions of my mother's generation to make durable products that resist the natural process of decay and regeneration.

Its toughness makes us and our environment vulnerable even as it speaks to my tender associations with my mother's touch as she made my clothing. It also reminds me that I am the caretaker of my finite cache of this material. It has been the supporting canvas for my temporary sculptural work for two decades. There is a sad poetry here that is difficult for me to articulate. Love, loss and polyester - through time and endless combinations of circumstance and choice - I feel this burden.