Artist Statement
Gail Grinnell

Farming

My parents had deep roots in a lush Minnesota farming community. The great depression, WWII and a couple of years of drought prompted my father to hire on as a heavy equipment machinist at the Hanford works in the early 40's. I grew up with these former farmers who stockpiled canned peaches, who made and fixed everything and loved the land and the river. They never spoke about the bomb dropped on the people of Japan or the growing supply of nuclear warheads stored in our hometown. – I never recall anyone talking about these things directly but the there was an atmosphere of secrecy and threat even as that threat was trivialized by the culture of that time and place. There was and still is the mushroom cloud logo and the bomb casing used for the high school mascot and endless graphic representations of all thing nuclear everywhere you looked.

I found a copy of the August 1945 Richland villager (Hanford’s newspaper) in my parents’ dresser drawer after they had died. The headline read: “It’s Atomic Bombs! President Truman releases secret of Hanford Product”. Again, they never spoke of this but I did hear many stories- some about whole locomotives buried in the desert or boats sunk in the river because they were radioactive or the sad recounting of the suicide of a whistle blower – a friend of my father who lost his job for questioning unsafe practices at work. I remember visiting him in his dark apartment and the grief at his death.

When I was born in 1950 Hanford was stockpiling nuclear warheads. The cold war was in full swing. My childhood memories include air raid drills and whole town evacuations intermingled with the sewing and canning lessons. It was an artificial, Disneyesque company town with a constant backbeat of nuclear annihilation. I grew up feeling that we would all vaporize unexpectedly one day and that no amount of hoarding – whether canned goods or war heads would help anyone at all.

My family’s daily focus on nourishment and shelter while waiting helplessly for the sky to fall at any moment has prompted me to make certain choices in my work and life. I make my art incrementally, scaled to what I can handle physically. I like to complete something at each work session and then assemble the parts into more complex constructions as they accumulate and the circumstances evolve.

In life and in the studio I am likely to undertake things with uncertain outcomes if the immediate is compelling in some way. I want to see what will happen and I
don’t feel waiting is ever a good choice. Planning and thinking provide the ballast but it is the physical making that propels me along.

I never thought I would live this long and I am surprised everyday that we are all here.

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