

It's always the smell that hits you first. More than the smell of salt on overheated seaweed at low tide, much more than that. This smell comes once a year, like Christmas only it lasts longer. This smell greets you in the parking lot. It says welcome, like my grandmother's damp basement use to say. Welcome to one of the finest treasure hunts on the planet. A place of endless inspiration. The beach calls out to me, not with promises of a musty one eyed stuffed dog, a chest of quilts loved into tatters, or a box of vintage family photos at the bottom of a dark narrow stair case. Nay, the beach has new things every time I visit. It's vast and wide and open and full. Especially full in the fall and it calls to me with its smell of rotting fish after they've spawned and it says come, come and find what I've brought you. More fish bones than can be collected. More shells, dried seaweed, dead fifty-cent sized red crabs and wave worn pebbles. But it's mostly the bones I come for. Buckets and bags, cleaned by hosts of maggots but still fresh and stinky so the spinal cord, intact, keeps the bones strung together.

Any flesh still clinging to the salmon skeletal remains will be gone as they finish decomposing in my five-gallon bucket behind the chicken coop below the alders. Thus began my obsession with salmon vertebrae 20 years ago as I collected them in small quantities at first, one or two fish at a time. My initial attempt was an embellished corset paired with a "fish net" skirt for a wearable art show I entered. Earrings, bracelets, and necklaces followed filling my jewelry box. A dear artist friend spotted a pair of earrings I was wearing and asked for a pair of her own. Thus began my earring phase. She invited me to do a show with her called 100 under \$100. The goal was to create 100 items under \$100 for a gallery walk open house. I accepted the challenge and learned a lot about my creative process as I stretched to make pieces that I might not have worn myself but helped provide diversity in my collection. It was there, I met a woman who worked for the department of fish and game and she commissioned me to make a pair for an employee who was getting married. The bride and I met so I could assess her style, take pictures of her dress and ultimately make something I would never have come up with on my own. They were light and lacey looked nothing like fish bones. I loved them and so did she wearing them in her wedding with a beautiful traditional gown. I would have love to have seen her mother's face when she told her she would be wearing fish bone earrings at her wedding and then showed her what they actually looked like. The next wearable art show I wanted to have my

10-year-old daughter join me so I made two flapper dresses that jingled and rattled properly. Her fringe was made with vinyl records cut into strips and sewn on in tidy rows. The goal was to use all bones on my dress, but I ran out of vertebra so I had to alternate with strips of vinyl records and bones. The experiment was a big hit. The positive feedback, experience with my daughter, and a good challenge had me hungering to do more. What next said my subconscious. Push harder said my competitive self. Entering a wearable art event with my creations each year gave me the inspiration and the timeline and now I would create something over the top. Even though there are no prizes or placements at our wearable art event, I wanted to challenge myself to see how far I could go.

Knowing I would need more fish bones than I had ever collected before, I enlisted the help of my husband and daughter to collect carcasses off the beach. "Just this once," I would plead. "Please, I promise just today.... I really need your help." Each weekend for about 6 weeks, I would beg and plead with my daughter that she needed the fresh air and that it would be fun. This experience, my daughter informs me, is why she is so afraid of bugs today. Bugs are an important partner in this process. When collecting bones from a beach awash with dead salmon they are all in various stages of decomposition. Some are just the skeletal remains while others have just died. It's the fish in-between that can turn your stomach. Their cavities full of maggots and sand fleas feasting on the soft slimy flesh. This is a good sign and means that the following weekend there will be more clean bones to gather.

Collecting complete, my five-gallon buckets got tucked out of sight to sit. I would get to them later when their smell died down. Three years, a move and a house remodel later, I never forgot my bones and my patient husband helped me keep track of them, now stacked under the eaves of our new home outside against the garage. Each year I attended the wearable art show to keep myself motivated. Each year everyone would ask when I was going to make something again. Tiring of talking about my big idea and not doing it, I finally stopped talking and started the long process of sorting and cleaning the bones. I had a sinking feeling that I might not have enough vertebra so I approached a local seafood processing plant about getting salmon carcasses that they normally put into a grinder and then out to sea. "You're going to do what with the frames (standard jargon for the

remains of a filleted fish at a seafood plant)?” That was pretty much the uniform response, even from people who knew me. One fish tote and 255 fish later I had what I felt was enough in my collection to make the dress of my dreams. These new bones would help to about double what I had already collected off the beach.

A tote full of fish carcasses with heads on is a lot of smell, even for me. I had to get these critters paired down as soon as possible so I could manage the decomposition process better. It was possible to reduce the waste in half if I cut the heads off and once I did that, I thought, hey... I can just cut the tails and ribs off now too. What remained was a tidy sheathed membrane wrapped around the vertebra keeping the bones intact. Kitchen scissors worked well for me and my husband used an old paper cutter from his shop. Two days of cutting left us with a 5-gallon bucket full of just vertebra. Perfect! Clean! Fast! I loved it and was happy to know that I would not have to deal with all the pokey, tiny ribs later. These vertebra were placed into a large screen lined crab pot and dropped into the ocean so that it would speed up the cleaning process. I was nervous about losing the bones to an aggressive predator in the ocean who might get past the screen so as soon as most of the flesh was gone I took them out of their ocean home and let nature finish cleaning them in the yard.

King Salmon is what the fish processor said they had given me. These new bones were much bigger than the Pinks and Silvers I had been collecting off the beach. Sprawled out on trays in the garage, they needed a chance to dry and I needed a chance to see what I had to work with. The barbs left behind from cutting the ribs off would have to be sanded down, no way around that. I considered tumbling them with sand or rocks in an old cement mixer but after trying a batch decided that there was too much chance for the sand to beat its way into the porous bones and permanently discolor them. This already happens naturally on the beach. I had noticed some bones simply won't turn white in the bleach and peroxide baths I give them at home. The imbedded sand colors them perpetually grey, still lovely, but not the look I was going for. With an old pair of leather driving gloves, the tips of my pointing fingers and thumbs clung to the edge of each cylinder-shaped bone. Gripping the edge of the bone and pressing it into the whirling sanding disk, I held tight as the barbs scattered to the floor of the garage, first one side and then the other. Yes, and again thanks to my husband's

help we were able to sand approximately 10,000 king salmon bones that make up the bottom half of the dress. The smaller pink and silver salmon were delicate enough that I was able to use only the bones that didn't have ribs, no sanding required.

Fashion from the 1920s has always been a love of mine. I knew I wanted a dress with that vibe as well as something that mimicked the shape of the salmon vertebra that I first fell in love with on the beach. With a natural hole in them from the spinal cord, stringing them together was easy.

Now to get them as white as possible. Bleach, I knew was too harsh if left on for extended periods and eats the porous bones. Oxi Clean worked well in the first round as it possessed enzymes that eat blood. Even though there was no visible blood on the bones their honey comb structure was still saturated with omega 3 oils and salmon essence. Short exposure to bleach began the whitening process but they still resembled the stained teeth of a coffee addict. An overnight bath in hydrogen peroxide gave them the Champaign white I was looking for. Another overnight air dry and the bones were ready to string. My kitchen, stacked with cookie sheets and ode de salmon for the next six months became the center of my creative process. Luckily the bones off-gas over time and are no longer burdened with the distinctive, heavy sent of lip curling, bleached fish.

Construction on this dress ended up being my biggest challenge. Getting the strands to hang and move how I wanted with the strength to stay on a garment being worn multiple times was a huge trial and error process for me. In hind sight, I can see how simple and straight forward it could have been but since there are no instructions on how to do this type of sewing I took almost two months trying different techniques. What ended up working best was to use a heavy gage fishing line monofilament and tie off the end with a knot so that the bones are on an individual string before sewing them onto the dress. If I could do it all over again I would have built the dress from the top down working on the symmetry as I went down the dress. Instead I built one side and then the other trying to match them up. This resulted in having to re-string many parts of the dress and although it's hard to see, it's still not perfectly symmetry.

There were hours upon hours of sorting and stringing bones. With this mostly mindless repetitive task and iPad in hand, I binge watched a few Amazon Prime

and Netflix shows. To this day if I see that show or hear the music I'm transported right back, like a time machine, to my dining room table full of bones stringing and sewing my dress. Toward the end, I stopped cooking for my family and started eating and snacking in my work space and since my space took up the entire dining room table my daughter and husband, fending for themselves, ate their frozen pizza and bowls of cereal on the couch. I sat there in sweats, hair pulled back into a pony tail, my show on pause so I could talk with my family. Stringing bones and eating from a dry bowl of granola I had grabbed for myself as a snack, crunch, crunch, crunch they both looked at me with big eyes and said, "are you eating bones?" "Wow, you really are obsessed with your bones." The funny part is that I did almost eat them a few times my fingers dipping into the bowl of bones next to my granola snack.

Through trial and error I strung and sewed and re-sewed many strands of bones. I found myself stuck as I continued to try and perfect the construction of the dress. Through something unrelated, I was led to a woman in town who had a background in costume design. She loaned me a much better dress form and coached me through some of my construction issues. Although this all took place after the wearable art show I was determined to make the dress as perfect as possible because it was starting to get legs.

I had invited a photographer from "The Salmon Project" to come get pictures of the process, the dress as it was under construction and at the wearable art show. Through social media it had an invitation to be in an "All things salmon," art show at the Coos Art Museum in Coos Bay Oregon and the Museum of the North in Fairbanks was interested in writing a grant to procure it for their permanent collection. Alaska is passionate about its wild salmon everyone was falling in love with the dress. It's not only a way of life and our livelihood for many generations, but wild salmon stocks are good for the environment. To my surprise, the dress has ended up creating a bridge between art and community. It's exciting that so many people are inspired by it and that it has a life that doesn't include a box in my attic.

Twenty thousand bones, 4 months and countless hours with friends and family members helping and I had created something that I was very happy with.

Through social media, the dress had made a name for itself and had a future of its own.

I feel like a proud mother whose child is out of college, living on their own and paying their own rent. That is what I'm hoping for my dress, that it gets a job in life and has a future independent of me. I'll still be able to visit it but it won't be living with me anymore. I have more ideas and to make room for them to come to life it's helpful for projects to move on. I'm honored and thrilled that others have been inspired by my creativity and it gives me fuel to try and be even more creative in the future. Not that a Salmon theme is intentional, but I'm hoping my next project to encompass something built with Salmon, Halibut and Rock Fish skin. And now that I've told you, I'm going to have to do something about it.