Growing up in Boston, Jessica Joslin spent time hiking, canoeing, and beachcombing with her sister and father. During their adventures, the trio would collect leaves, bones, seashells, and mushrooms. “We would find these things and bring them home,” Joslin said. “We would look them up in reference books and find out what they were.” Joslin also spent time at the Harvard Museum of Natural History where she admired the Victorian displays—bright, shiny brass plaques, huge collections of articulated skeletons, and taxidermy skeletons—in dark wood cases.

"THEY HAD A KIND OF NOIR CYBERPUNK THING GOING ON."

ANIMAL ALCHEMIST

By Shauta Marsh
“In part, that really shaped my attitude toward working with bones, because I never saw them as macabre,” Joslin said. “I saw them as a beautiful thing left over from an animal. People tend to associate bones and mortality so they have an instinctual aversion to them. But for me, I’m coming at it from a long-standing interest in naturalism and osteology.”

No wonder, then, that antlers, leather, bone, brass, velvet, and even the occasional antique ceremonial collar—all reminiscent of the trinkets and treasures she picked up as a kid—go into Joslin’s artistic endeavors. The artist bolts, threads, screws, and glues pieces together to create her intricate animal sculptures, 75 of which she has made since 2000.

In high school, Joslin took up photography and had some of her work included in group shows. In 1989, she graduated from high school, moved to New York, and attended the Parsons School of Design. By then she was doing constructions for her photos.

“I was building temporary sculptures, almost like collages of material with open three-dimensional, perishable materials,” she said. “From the beginning I was working with man-made materials integrated with organic, natural material. It’s something that clicked early on. There were bones integrated into the pieces with very high-tech-looking hardware. They had a kind of noir cyberpunk thing going on.”

But eventually Joslin became disenchanted with her photos and took more interest in the sculptures themselves. Around the same time, someone broke into her apartment.

“They stole every bit of photo equipment I had,” she said. “It was a big deal. I had spent every penny I had for seven years on photo equipment. It all walked out the window.”

Still covered on her parents’ insurance, Joslin was reimbursed for the loss, but only about 10 percent of what it would cost to buy it all back. This changed the direction of her work. “When I got the insurance money I set myself up with a little metal shop,” she said. “I bought a drill press, a grinder, and hand tools. That was when I started making sculpture as my primary focus.”

After studying abroad for a year, Joslin left Parsons and moved to Chicago. There, in 1992, she received a care package from her father that
contained items she had collected as a child. From that Joslin started making vertebrates. She also began attending the Art Institute of Chicago where she graduated in 1993.

Joslin admits she only expected to be in Chicago for a year or two, but she met her husband, Jared Joslin, there, and “we haven’t found any city we’ve liked more,” she said. Inside her apartment, Joslin shares a small studio with Jared, a painter. There, she does most of her work—from taking pictures of her sculptures to making bones for her creatures. It can take a couple of months to years for the artist to complete a piece, and much of her work is kinetic. “For the most part the work is bolted together,” she said. “I use a ton of little miniature machine bolts in brass so things are bolted, hinged, or jointed in some way. A lot of them have movements that you can’t see; some are meant to move; some aren’t.”
For the past year, Joslin has been working on a new set of animals and bringing to life a more-accessible version of her work for a book, Strange Nature, which will be published by Lisa Sette Gallery.

“It covers the last eight years of my work,” she said. “I’ve heard so many lovely, wonderful things from people who have seen my work online and enjoy it, but can’t afford to be an art collector, so I wanted to do something. I am hoping those people will see the book and get a better idea of how finely crafted these pieces are, and it will get my work to a wider audience.”

For more of Jessica Joslin’s work, go to www.jessicajoslin.com.