How The Fossils Of Ancient Sea Creatures Became Jewelry

Learn from the Smithsonian's curator of vertebrate paleontology, Gregor Beltemeyer, a pioneer in the study of how organic remains become fossils

By Gregor Beltemeyer
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This is the third in a five part series written by Gregor Beltemeyer, the curator of the Smithsonian's Fossil Hall of Vertebrate Life at the National Museum of Natural History. Part 1 can be found here, Part 2 here, and Part 4 here.

Deep Time Spectacle Report

Corsets in purple belled, hexagonal or cone-shaped bodices, with a tiny waist and a distinctive textured surface that looks as much like an organism is made of, where it lives and dies, as it looks like a piece of jewelry. Such is the contemporary work of Lithuanian artist Ugnė Marčiulaitė, who is currently in residence at the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History, where I work. Ugnė's corset pieces of fossilized coral, sponge, and crinoid remains, dangling with fossil crinoid, are a treasure collection—an eternally fossilized, frozen-in-time, ancient ecosystem, with the fossils of the organisms that lived there, and died, and were then each fossil and dentelle for the ages.

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Ever—and there is a sequence to each fossil's transformation from living creature to fossil, and there is a sequence to the fossil's transformation into a piece of jewelry, and there is a sequence to the fossil's transformation into a piece of jewelry that is worn by a person, who, like all people, is a sort of living, breathing, fossil-to-be, and there is a sequence to all of this. Fossilization is a sequence of events, and there is a sequence of events