

BY CHRISTOPHER SCHNOOR

Now the good life could be to cross a field
And at a paradigm of earth new from the lathe
Of ploughs.
—SEAMUS HEANEY, *Field Work*¹

Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind.
—SIMON SCHAMA, *Landscape and Memory*²

FORTY YEARS AGO, in October 1968, the Dwan Gallery on New York's 57th Street heralded a new movement in art with an innovative group show of ten artists entitled *Earth Works*. The exhibition was a seminal event that included such works as Robert Morris's pile of dirt and industrial debris called *Earthwork*, and Robert Smithson's *A Non-site, Franklin, New Jersey*, comprised of five trapezoidal bins filled with rocks, plus photographs and artifacts of projects by other artists sited in outdoor locations. It was revolutionary on two levels. First, although presented in a mainstream gallery-row space, the Dwan exhibition inherently subverted the relevance of such traditional venues, adding fuel to the "out of the box" dynamic that increasingly dominated contemporary art at the end of the 1960s; and second, it took the concept of the radical potential of non-art materials and mediums to a new level, one that was not only anti-elitist but in many cases anti-form, while at the same time dovetailing with the emerging public awareness of environmental issues.

In the decades since, of course, what has become known as earth or land or environmental art has had a long list of notable practitioners including Robert Irwin, James Turrell, Richard Long, Alice Aycock, Andy Goldsworthy, and Patrick Dougherty, to name a few. Each, in their individual way, and often in remote wilderness settings, transformed the planet's most basic, mundane substances into a sculptural medium and created a new kind of art that can be described as "landscape as sculpture."

For Seattle-based artist John Grade, these labels fit rather uncomfortably. Unlike the earlier earth artists who chose permanent outdoor sites where their work was made and meant to be seen, the excursions Grade's sculptures make into the wild are private and temporary, part of the process but not the end destination. It is a testimony to the originality of his sculpture that it defies the showman categories of art criticism. In this, he can be called as perverse as his predecessors at the Dwan Gallery, but it is perversity of a different sort. His is not

documents how dramatically and inventively the artist has transformed his art, and in the process has broken new ground in sculpture.

With the large-scale work that is the focus of the Bellevue Arts Museum exhibition, Grade has introduced a fresh paradigm for art inspired by the earth. His art is not made from the land yet resides there for extended periods. It evades an unmistakable sense of place and circumstance but is not chained to one spot, and instead is adaptable to multiple sitings. Precision crafted, his projects make use of industrial materials and carefully strategized engineering only to be left at the mercy of unpredictable elements that may alter the work in unforeseen ways. The impetus for this art originates as much in literature and the romantic imagination as it does in science and the artist's own confrontations with the hard facts of geology and physics. Grade's sculptural installations have a broad ecological sweep to them and a sense of multiple lives that seems far removed from the excavated, found physicality of works by Smithson and company. As the exhibition's subtitle underscores, Grade creates sculpture *through* landscape; here a poetic, abstract sensibility harnesses the forces of nature to shape surfaces and forms that embody those processes while remaining separate from them. At its core, this is an art that is elemental and itinerant. After this exhibition, too, each work will strike its tent, so to speak, and move on to its next encampment.

Since completing his BFA studies at the Pratt Institute's School of Art and Design in New York, Grade has not been one for limiting his creative life to the studio, hunkering down within its walls to come up with ideas. Typically, rather than continue the academic track by pursuing an MFA, he obtained instead a generous travel grant from Pratt that enabled him to spend an extended period traveling abroad. The destinations

he chose to visit are revealing in that they were not those boasting the iconic sites and collections of Western art history. He was seeking new visual experiences, and in countries such as Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, Vietnam, Laos, and India, Grade went off on his own, hiking into remote areas, lured by the unfamiliar and the unexpected, photographing and sketching as he went. He further indulged this impulse with trips to the Middle East, North Africa, and the former Soviet bloc countries of Eastern Europe.

In his continuing determination to get out of the house, Grade has also participated in numerous residencies offered by foundations, such as the Art and Industry Program at the Kohler Arts Center in Wisconsin in 2003, and five residencies since the summer of 2005 from the Pacific Coast to New Hampshire, from the North Rim of the Grand Canyon to the northwest corner of Ireland. Interspersed have been visits to London, Uganda, and weeks at a time in the deserts of Utah, Nevada, and Arizona. Each of these residencies and trips has contributed in one way or another to the conception and/or development of specific works of art.

The diverse geographical, biological, and cultural experiences of his travels in the 1990s collectively provided a wealth of source material that inspired the body of work surveyed in Boise. The sculpture in that exhibition encompassed small-scale pieces presented on pedestals to large, life-size works suspended in space or seemingly sprouting out of the walls and floor. Essentially abstract, they represented biomorphic form in flux, evoking the natural processes of generation or degeneration. Some had anthropomorphic overtones, others an architectural aspect, with a number insinuating a vague functionality. As composites of plant, animal, and human forms, these objects revealed a fascination with the patterns and designs found in nature, and the artist's gift for instilling

an anti-aesthetic bent on soiling the purity of "elitist" art, although Grade's new work also embraces entropy. Grade's contrariness is more subtle and has a teasing aspect to it that is best expressed in those pieces that play with our perceptions through ambiguous forms and suggestive associations, insinuating an element of doubt that undermines their quasi-familiarity. It is also evident in his ability to make us feel slightly uncomfortable, as in the claustrophobic *Cleave* or the imposing mass hovering inches above our heads in the recent *Seeps of Winter*.

But this is not to say there are no precedents for Grade's approach to sculpture. As art critic Matthew Kangas has written, Grade's aesthetic is firmly rooted in that of Postminimalism, and in his emphasis on process, impermanence, and chance we see the markings of artists like Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis, Bruce Nauman, and others. Richard Serra has set an important precedent as well, not only in his Postminimalist moment and early landscape pieces but also through the earliness of his sculpture generally, the way it relates to the body and the passage of time, and in his return of the outdoor aesthetic to indoor venues. Gordon Matta-Clark, with his influential urban version of earth art, his proclivity for turning environments inside out, and his interest in issues of decay and renewal, can also be seen as a forerunner of Grade's endeavors.

Nor is Grade alone in his quest to broaden sculpture's horizons today. Among his contemporaries, Olafur Eliasson, who also uses landscape components in his art, shares Grade's focus on creating experiences rather than static representations. Critic Peter Schjeldahl's recent description of Eliasson as an artist whose "character suggests both the mental discipline of a scientist and the emotional responsibility of a poet," fits Grade perfectly. Grade has found inspiration, too, in the



SEEPS OF WINTER (view from above)
2008
Cast paper pulp, glassine, and fused silica
120 x 600 x 360 in.

works of two contemporary British artists, Turner Prize-winner Simon Starling, and Darren Almond, both of whom interact with landscape through sculptural projects that incorporate ideas about nature and technology, time, geography, and space. Yet Grade is clearly on his own track, approaching his art with a single-mindedness that tunes out distracting art-world buzz about what's hot and what's not.

Four years ago, at the age of thirty-four, Grade was at a crossroads in his art. His exhibit of forty sculptures and drawings at the Boise Art Museum in 2004 surveyed a body of work completed over six years, and an intellectual process going back well before that. It was his first solo museum exhibition but also marked the end of an important first phase in his career as a sculptor. Although many of the concepts and sensibilities he developed in this period would continue to inform his art, Grade's restless mind was already heading in new directions, conceiving projects on a grander scale. A mere four years later, *Disintegration: Sculpture Through Landscape*

a sense of awe and mystery. Many of these characteristics have remained crucial elements of Grade's art.

Anecdotes from his numerous travel destinations and foundation residencies tell of events that foreshadowed the sculptural projects currently on view in *Disintegration*. For example, during his travels in several remote, third-world locales Grade left behind sculptures or earthworks made from the indigenous materials at hand as a response to the landscape or a particular aspect of it. Likewise, on Washington State's Olympic Peninsula in 1994 he created the site-specific *Dripper*, which Grade describes as a "perpetual motion piece" propelled by the accumulation of near-constant rainfall there, which sets in motion subsequent sections of the work, lowering and distributing the captured water to the ground.³ This impulse to make and leave behind works that commemorate the artist's time in a place, that have a private significance rather than a public one, and that interact with and sometimes succumb to the elements—while leaving a subtle imprint too—is one that survives to this day in the new works.

There has long been a narrative element to Grade's art, as each work incorporates some experience in the natural world that triggered it in the first place. However, since 2004 Grade has been especially concerned with carrying a narrative thread through the multiple locations he chooses for his projects. He says his conversations with composers and writers "helped me to think about my sculpture not as static objects with an intended ideal state to preserve, but instead as stories or compositions with an arc, with life . . ."⁴

Unlike the artists of the original earthworks movement, Grade finds his inspiration in communing with nature rather than merely hunting out a site to accommodate or realize an idea. Most often, a place captures his imagination long before he knows what he will do with it, whether this happens while

walking on the bogs of Ireland or climbing the glaciers on Mount Rainier. Over the years, Grade has acquired an unusual perspective on landscape, one he is continually refining. As an avid climber and hiker who does not shy from risk-taking, he has spent months exploring the nooks and crannies of harsh terrains, crawling in and out of slender slot canyons and breathtaking glacial crevasses. As a result, Grade has developed a habit of thinking about nature from the inside out, achieving a dual vision that sees not only the surface but what lies beneath it as well (a sixth sense encouraged by his reading of certain poets). As early as his 2000 work *Stem* he made sculptures that simultaneously presented interior and exterior views of organic subjects. He developed this perspective further in his Boise Art Museum exhibit with his large, horizontal *Candex* piece (2004). Hanging suspended from the ceiling, it allowed viewers to not only see its strange, mammalian exterior up close but also to experience its interior space, which, with its doubled-over folds and membrane-like construction, felt like peering inside a breathing organism. This idiosyncratic approach to nature became a departure point for several of his large installation works, like the *Seeps of Winter* project at Suyama Space earlier this year, and before that *Cleave*, now reinstalled for this exhibition.

It was during his nomadic period of discovery that Grade also acquired a new appreciation for the relationship of the human body to the earth's surface. He found that exposure to ancient rituals and beliefs involving the body, including burial and entombment practices in places like Peru and Vietnam, awakened in him the deeper implications of the body's intimate relationship with landscape. An esoteric Southeast Asian tribal practice of entombing the deceased in carved-out trunks of old-growth trees for one year, after which the remains are retrieved and the trees allowed to heal, never to be used again,



PAIRED CACIATRICE
2003, Cast iron, steel, and acrylic
55 x 38 x 36 in.

CADEX (VERTICAL HALF)
2004, Resin and wood
186 x 24 x 22 in.

STEM
2000, Wood and resin
30 x 37 x 16 in.



Friedrich's dolmen paintings, *Seeps of Winter*'s tribute to the human component of the bogs, and the wooded environs of Grade's new work all imply some form of renewal after death. Both artists tap into the basic human yearning that Simon Schama has described as "the craving to find in nature a consolation for our mortality."⁵

The transformation of the human organism into an agent of regeneration is only part of Grade's larger interests, which involve and investigate themes of decay and transition as sculptural processes. Of the new sculpture, *Fold* will be buried to provoke decay through prolonged exposure to desert humidity, while both *Collector* and *Host* are premised in part on the notion of contributing to the environment in the course of their decomposition. Clearly, Grade's art represents a reciprocal rather than an impositional approach to landscape.

Cleave, the introductory work in *Disintegration*, dealt with transition at a much slower pace. Completed in 2006, this labyrinthine composition is an important piece for Grade, representing his own transition to a new monumentality through an installation that takes to heart the processes that create unique geographical features. At eleven feet in height and approximately seventeen feet long it allows, and indeed compels the viewer to enter and respond from within, eerily reliving the artist's own confrontation with narrow, water-carved fissures, both glacial and geological. By setting up a dialogue between the body and this composite environment, the artist strove to "humanize" the claustrophobic yet awe-inspiring attributes of these subterranean places. The result is similar to the strong sense of self-awareness one gets when standing within Richard Serra's curved canyons of steel.

With its darkened entrance and curved passageway that denies us a caressing eye view, *Cleave* reveals itself slowly. Inside, the cracked, river-rock-like walls are actually a compos-

resonated with Grade. The ceremonial restoration of the body to Mother Earth, both symbolically and literally, and the related concept of empty vessels that once held something of value, was the subject of Grade's dark *Paired Caciatrice* sculpture of 2003. Increasingly, and in a variety of ways, a dialogue with the human form became part of the equation he turned to in the formulation of his visual ideas, whether in his earlier anthropomorphic works like *Paired Caciatrice*, or his empathetic communion with Ireland's lost "bog people" in *Seeps of Winter* ("through my fabrics and skins / the seeps of winter / digested me").⁶

The artist's interest in ritual interments tied to landscape is not a morbid one, but it does reflect a neo-romantic sensibility reminiscent of the nineteenth-century German painter Caspar David Friedrich. Friedrich's scenes of snow-covered graveyards and ruined cloisters amid leafless, twisted oaks are well known, but it is in his paintings of dolmens, the pagan graves sealed by megalithic boulders, that we especially find a spirit kindred to Grade's. The moist, misty forest settings of

clay being immersed in pools of milk creates aureoles of positive and negative space that unevenly illuminate the resin. The work becomes a collage of ice and rock, and intimates a time-less process of change.

Change as a sculptural practice is at the heart of the other four installations in the exhibit. Together, they are a loosely linked series Grade conceived from his readings of mathematician Rene Thom, whose catastrophe theory posits a dichotomy between two types: (1) irreversible, sudden change, or (2) calamity followed by recovery. Grade's idea is that "instead of dividing these types of collapse, I want to overlay them . . . by charting both conditions within the play of one sculptural object."⁷ Accomplishing this entails placing each carefully considered and designed work within a pair of successive, often harsh landscape settings, and letting nature take its course. While the two environments he chooses are disparate, they share one or more common elements as well. And sometimes Grade will also assist the process with embedded structural responses to events.

Of the projects in this vein, *Collector* is the first the artist undertook, and, consequently, the one furthest along in its ordeal. Actually, the chronological sequence of this series is very loose, and there can be considerable overlap while he juggles different projects in various stages of development. But Grade's concept of bringing two landscapes to bear on one sculpture first came to fruition here, and, true to form, its story is a complicated one.

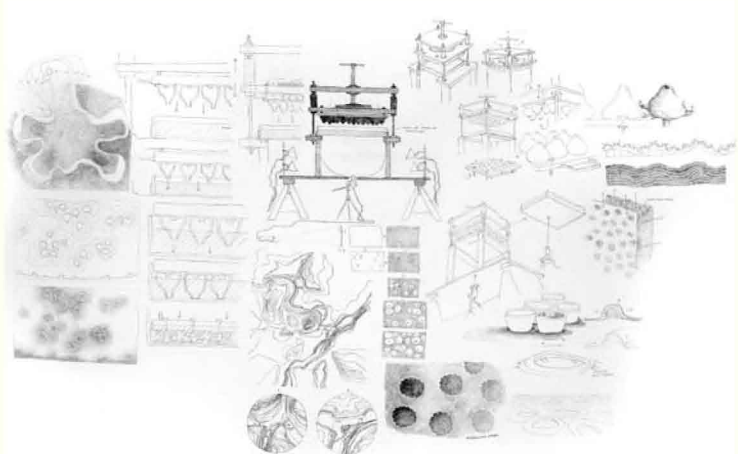
To begin with, the title of this work is significant in that collecting mechanisms of all sorts have intrigued Grade since he discovered them in various cultures, such as the pre-Inca funerary towers in Peru. The concept of collecting things—objects, bodies, even sounds and beliefs (both Christian and pagan)—struck a chord in him, and a number of pieces in his

2004 survey embodied this theme. In *Collector*, and in subsequent works, Grade has shifted this interest from a specific cultural context to a hybrid environmental one, allowing this collecting capacity to transform the piece.

Then there is its design. The two halves of *Collector* are long, tapered, horn-shaped structures made of an interlocking latticework of laminated teak wood that fit together to make a six-and-a-half-foot diameter circle. The horn shapes of each half were inspired both by the shape of the longhorns his aunt in Uganda mounted on the front of her truck to ward off bandits (a long story), and by the dimensions of the slot canyon in Utah for which *Collector* was ultimately destined. The latticework enhances the work's sturdiness and collecting abilities in its two intended settings, which, as diverse as they seem, do share one common element: water.

In its first outdoor stage, *Collector* was immersed in the waters of Willapa Bay on the Washington coast beginning in March 2007, where it provided a bed for oysters to collect and grow while also acquiring layers of seaweed, barnacles, and other marine life forms. Lashed with ropes to a metal ring attached to vertical PVC posts in order to secure it during pounding storms (with assistance from the local fisherman, lending a social, community effort element to the project), *Collector* sat semi-submerged for a year until it was retrieved this spring, an occasion celebrated by Grade and his local crew with an on-site oyster harvest and feast.

The transition to the second stage was potentially part of the process too. For the track down to the southern Utah desert, the horns of *Collector* were secured on the roof of Grade's pickup. On the road, much of the seaweed and oyster remains would supposedly be blown off, presumably to be replaced by splattered bugs. During a brief stopover in Boise, Idaho, the artist and I inspected the piece. After ten hours of

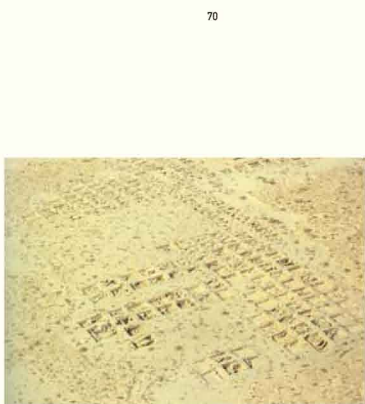


CLEAVE (preparatory sketch)
2006
Graphite on paper
13 x 20 in.

of cast resin, clay, and goat fur, methodically subjected to an extended erosive process to evoke a sense of a worn slice of the earth. A staggering amount of material and effort went into accomplishing within a matter of months what would take countless centuries to achieve naturally. Grade coated the translucent cast resin with thousands of pounds of clay mixed with goat hair to create a furlike consistency. After being dried and cured, this surface was subjected to hours of being

dressed with pressurized water, which eroded away much of the clay surface but left the goat hair grafted to the resin, giving the interior the appearance of a long-dry watercourse, and imparting an ancient, airless quality to the interior.

Cleave is actually a multimedia work that brings orchestrated lighting effects and video into the mix as well. Shifting light from above provides the shadow play, while from behind the translucent walls projected video imagery of wet, black



(left) Burial ground at Saar on Balhain
(right) detail of *Fold*

driving, *Collector* was still encrusted with barnacles, bits of oyster and mussel shell, and enough dried-on seaweed to give the work a greenish glow in the right light. Grooves had been worn into the hard teakwood where ropes restrained it during the 100 mph winds of a December storm. It was a sculpture with its own, intact natural history.

In Utah, phase two hit a glitch, bringing the elements of chance and the unexpected into play. The slot canyon for which the work was designed was clogged with debris, dumped there by the same spring flash-floods that were supposed to batter *Collector*. So Grade instead built a framework that would hold the circular piece upright in the hot desert air for the birds and insects to pick at it until it is retrieved for the exhibit.

The second installation, *Host*, can in some respects be considered *Collector*'s sister piece. It, too, is a circular sculpture with tapered ends, has a latticework look to it, and interacts with the local wildlife. *Host*, however, is almost twice the size, but rather than strong and sturdy like *Collector* it is quite fragile, vulnerable even to rain, and thus more transitory in nature.

Approximately eleven feet in diameter, *Host* is made of (digestible) cast cellulose covered with ground seeds, with twenty-four telescoping parts, and was sited at two different locations in the Kaibab National Forest just beyond the Grand Canyon's North Rim. Whereas with *Collector* birds became a fallback agent of change, in *Host* they (specifically the desert wren) play an integral role in the work by picking apart the cellulose while eating the seeds.

Grade first installed the linked-together sections in a burned-out swath left by a recent forest fire. The primitive, white cellulose mesh suspended among the fire-blackened tree trunks made for a striking sculptural image. Unfortunately, the birds were not in sight and insects came to feast instead. A week later, Grade moved *Host* to a stand of flourishing aspens, but this time rodents crowded out the birds. Only after coating the cellulose with a jalapeño pepper derivative was Grade able to keep the squirrels at bay to the advantage of the wrens. After several weeks, *Host* was taken down, and is presented here, to quote the artist, in a state of "arrested development."⁸

rain, which weakens the binding characteristics of some surface materials while intensifying the bonding of others, and the winds, which will have a coring effect, should cause the sculpture's mass to gradually widen and transform from a vertical to a stretched horizontal form, in effect creating a new horizon line in the site. Over several months it will also collect organic material, fusing into a rigid net of forest and man-made matter. Recovery retrieved from calamity.

Part of the intellectual beauty of Grade's new installation work, one of its most stimulating characteristics, is its openness. For all the research, planning, and workmanship that goes into these sculptural projects, none of them can be considered complete or at the end of the creative process. *Seeps of Winter*, made from cast paper pulp, glassine, and wood, and disassembled at Suyama Space in April, will be moved to a glacier on Mount Baker, in Washington, where it will be mounted upside-down on stakes, to be covered with snow, and through whose holes icicles may form. After it thaws, it will be taken apart and moved again, to a soggy and wrinkled bogland. For *Collector*, after the *Disintegration* exhibit, Grade will attempt to find another slot canyon to accommodate its design so it can yet experience the spring flash floods of the desert. And *Host* will be returned to a new stand of trees so birds can reap the benefits of its return to nature. Who knows how many lives and afterlives are in store for *Fold* and *Meridian*?

While these to-be-continued sculptural narratives give Grade's art an elusive quality, they also reflect the balance he strikes between what he gives and what he takes in this aesthetic interchange with the land. Grade goes to great lengths to insure that an idea inspired by nature *works* in nature, and to adhere to a way of making art that is both meaningful and respectful of the environment. What he takes back is the

NOTES

- Seamus Heaney, "Glennon Sonnets," in *Field Work* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), p. 33.
- Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Knopf, 1995), pp. 6–7.
- Peter Schjeldahl, "Unclattered," *New Yorker*, April 28, 2008, p. 82.
- Audio recording of John Grade interview with Jen Graves of *The Stranger* (Seattle), January 23, 2008.
- Email from the artist, June 6, 2008.
- Seamus Heaney, "Bog Queens," in *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), pp. 25–27.
- Simon Schama, p. 15.
- Interview with the artist, April 2008.
- Artist's project proposal statement, 2007.
- John Keats, "On the Sea," in *John Keats: The Poems* (New York: Knopf, Everyman's Library Edition, 1999), p. 271.