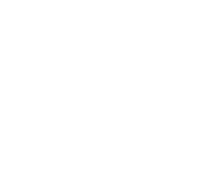
John Grade, *Siwa*, Oasis, Egypt, Photograph, 1998

It was the English poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge who defined poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquility." Similarly, it is possible to describe the art of John Grade as place recaptured in materials, as well as "emotion recollected in tranquility." The poetics of place might be another way of describing Grade's project, now into its second decade and assembled at the Boise Art Museum in order to help viewers retrace the steps of the 34-year-old artist's imaginative and geographical journeys.

Grade's art could only have been made in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The works collected in Boise comprise a survey of "early Grade"—sculptures inspired by long sojourns on five continents (Asia, Europe, Africa, North and South America)—because what will come later for Grade is bound to be of comparable interest, but it is unclear whether it will remain as closely tied to his poetics of place.

Furthermore, as visitors inspect the sculptures and drawings on view, they may not sense the links to the numerous off-the-beaten-track locales Grade has visited since graduating from the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York, in 1992—Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Panama, India, Vietnam and Laos, to mention a few. In that case, it is worth separating out the intentional and biographical dimensions of Grade's art so we can examine its other strengths: formal, material and volumetric. After all, with the passage of time, the inspirations and influences on his art may become unknown or unclear; better to supplement the remote geographical origins with a strict analysis of Grade's art in terms of, among other things, early modernist abstract sculptures, the earliest historical tradition that his art relates to, one that also connects him to other certain sculptors working at that time. Briefly, Barbara Hepworth and Alexander Archipenko, with their strongly declared inner voids, come to mind.

John Grade, *Panama City*, Photograph, 1994

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Despite the peculiarly enigmatic quality of resemblance that suffuses Grade's sculptures, by and large they resist any clear-cut association with actual objects. This sets them in an aesthetic realm constructed for the purposes of pure contemplation. As such, the various references to body parts, marine life, insect life, plant life, archaeological and anthropological artifacts are keys to inviting the viewer into a wholly imaginary space, an unknown, unplaceable world that may begin far afield in Timbuktu or, rather, Morocco, for example, but which may only be entered by the willing and sympathetic viewer.

Grade's international travels between 1994 and 2003 set the young artist on a path of close observation accompanied by on-site drawings, some of which led to sculptures that evoke a sense of the uniqueness or unusualness of particular places: a street in India, a forest in Vietnam, or a jungle in Peru. Once back in his successive studios in Pioneer Square and the International District in Seattle, however, the task is not to re-create or recapture specific scenes but to transform memory into sculptural objects of compelling and mysterious quality.

This transformation process is what sharply distinguishes Grade from the art style dominant during his early youth, Minimalism. With those sculptors (Donald Judd, Carl Andre and others), materials were used as acquired from the hardware store or lumberyard, unintervened upon and usually displayed as repetitive modules set directly on the floor or wall. Grade's origins derive more from the reaction to Minimal art in New York and elsewhere during the 1980s and 1990s, Postminimalism, a term coined by the art critic Robert Pincus-Witten. Artists like Lynda Benglis, Bruce Nauman, Eva Hesse, Lucas Samaras, and Jackie Winsor were all praised by Pincus-Witten for their

attempts [to] embrace open and unstable modes, forms not only beautiful in themselves despite their unfamiliarity—beautiful on the level of intellectual sensation—but forms that also called in question the stabilized appearance of the day's abstraction.¹

Grade's advance from Postminimalism to his own world occurred over at least a ten-year period and encompasses a handsome range of sculptures, many of which are on view here in Boise. Two new works, collectively titled *Caudex* (2004) have also been created especially for this exhibition.

In addition, several large-scale drawings are on view. These works date from 2002. Grade's earliest drawings suggest on-site observations of foreign locations: street scenes, forests, natural phenomena. More recent ones, like *Ground and Edge* [both 2002], are more abstracted, places "recollected in tranquility," after the artist had returned home. They fit into a category that is to be prized: sculptors' drawings. Not preparatory for specific sculptures or paintings, they frequently concentrate on aspects of sculpture-making that can be best expressed in two dimensions before being located or transferred to three dimensions: shading, contrast, shadow, light, fluctuating space.



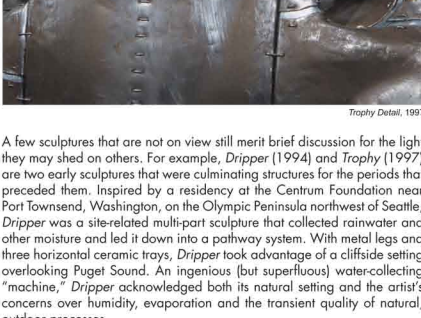
Caudex Detail, 2004



Caudex Detail, 2004

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Trophy Detail, 1997

A few sculptures that are not on view still merit brief discussion for the light they may shed on others. For example, *Dripper* (1994) and *Trophy* (1997) are two early sculptures that were culminating structures for the periods that preceded them. Inspired by a residency at the Centrum Foundation near Port Townsend, Washington, on the Olympic Peninsula northwest of Seattle, *Dripper* was a site-related multi-part sculpture that collected rainwater and other moisture and led it down into a pathway system. With metal legs and three horizontal ceramic trays, *Dripper* took advantage of a cliffside setting overlooking Puget Sound. An ingenious (but superfluous) water-collecting "machine," *Dripper* acknowledged both its natural setting and the artist's concerns over humidity, evaporation and the transient quality of natural, outdoor processes.

Trophy (1997), executed after a long stay in India and Vietnam, was the centerpiece of the artist's first solo gallery exhibit at the artist-run Site Gallery in Seattle's Pioneer Square arts district. Its arched-back vertically distantly recalls a tall crouching animal. Tall, rounded and with a curving "head," *Trophy* was covered with wire-woven sheets of galvanized and anodized steel, perhaps in the manner of Indian metalwork but, seen in the U.S., with an oddly industrial sheen.

The attractive ambiguity of many of Grade's later sculptures, their mixed aspects of organic and manmade, is first seen clearly in *Trophy*. Suspended by hanging metal wires, it also addresses frank sculptural problems like positioning, support and placement, technical issues that the artist would subsequently address with greater sophistication and mastery.

After the Site Gallery debut, Grade expanded his encounters with a variety of materials, some, like Honduras mahogany in *Confessional* (1999), with ties to the Third World nations he had visited. Complex processes of cutting, casting and carving also became more important as the artist embarked on what became the bulk of individual objects drawn upon for this exhibition.



Trophy, 1997



Dripper, 1994

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Open and closed versions of the same piece are significant and operative distinctions for many of these works. *Tower Sullustani* (1999), *Opening Sphere*, *Siwa* (1998), *Confessional* (1999), *Carapace with Cuffs* (2000) and *Burial Seed* (2002) are among the group of sculptures dealing with concealed and open inner spaces. Whether on the floor, hung on a wall, or set upon a pedestal, these remarkable works are all visually quite different from one another but each contains a double identity of sorts that is crucial to its overall character. An early modernist example of this is the stackable and repositionable laminated wooden sculptures of Seattle artist Doris Chase.

Function and practical purpose, hallmarks of much contemporary craft art, are left undetermined in Grade; he toys with the notion of usefulness rather than invoking particular functions associated with traditional craft media such as clay, glass, wood, textiles and metals. In this sense, Grade's work is part of a broader movement where art and craft have merged, breaking down historical barriers between fine art status and craft-related function. Potential function is a playful level of meaning in Grade, never solemn nor historicist. Sculptor Martin Puryear's work is another analogy for fine art adapting craft processes. His *Thicket* (1990), for example, uses wooden lattice work in complex ways, as do Grade's *Confessional* and *Spiral* (1995).

Thus, *Opening Sphere*, *Siwa*, when open, may be a Moroccan container for sweetmeats; *Confessional* mimics the wooden latticework of a Roman Catholic confessional booth; *Carapace with Cuffs* unfolds itself to present two stylized sets of wrist restraints; and *Tower Sullustani*, at five feet high, aspires to architectural status with one entire side dropping to the floor, acting as if it were a ramp over a moat. In their differing ways, place as well as function is invoked. The mystery of each work is intensified, complicating and delightfully confusing the viewer's apprehension of the concealed inner space. Once the void is revealed, the ambiguity of the piece is increased, not solved, as in a giant puzzle. In this way, the potential for other meanings is multiplied depending upon the willingness of the viewer to embrace interpretations.

Perhaps the most dramatic of the open/shut works is *Burial Seed*. Closed and sitting upon a rubber base resembling a sand dune or water rippled, *Burial Seed* has phallic references as well as plant analogies. Opened up, it seems a lifeless husk at first but, upon closer inspection, reveals a simple, upright, wire-tipped extension of amber, cloudy rubber. Grade's contrast between the two versions is at its most extreme here. As he wrote in an artist's statement in 2003,

The shape of a seed or the pattern on a piece of discarded plastic slowly opens out into an imagined landscape to be transformed into a piece of sculpture.²

Stem (2000) is an important transitional work. Like the stem of the spinal cord, or of a plant or flower, it expresses an open inner core that constitutes the void or inner space common to much of Grade's work. As such, it relates to Hepworth and Archipenko but is tied more closely to the real world, whether biophysical or organic. The beautiful ridges and light yellow stain



Confessional, 1999



Burial Seed Shut, 2002



Burial Seed Open, 2002

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embody much of the beauty of the work yet its irregularities keep it in the realm of abstracted nature or anatomy. *Stem* is closed and open at all times, its inner void is more openly dealt with in other works but, as it stands, *Stem* has its own logic and determination of content.

The period of Grade's residency in the Art/Industry program at the Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin (April 6-July 5, 2003) was perfectly appropriate to the directions the artist's work was already heading. Utilizing the numerous facilities and technical processes available at the huge plumbing fixtures factory, Grade came up with a striking variety of works, several of which are on view at Boise Art Museum.

For example, *Siamese Lids* (2003) and *Siamese Tainoja* [*Waterholes*] (2003) both took advantage of iron-casting facilities, the former two separate rounded shapes with numerous indentations, the latter twin mountain shapes with a beautifully oxidized surface surrounding the openings at the top of each mound. Such bulging shapes have generative implications and give a sense of contained energy. Once again, the hollow inner space of each shape adds mystery and ambiguity.

Paired and Pared Cicatrice (both 2003) extend the ambitious casting process into an even more adventurous realm. A two-part work, *Paired* is one part indented cube, one part pebbled mound. *Pared Cicatrice* is the most complex (and largest) of the twin shape explorations in cast iron. Grade also confronts head-on the problem facing much contemporary sculpture in the early 21st century: after Minimalism [which largely repudiated the pedestal in favor of the floor], how should the medium-size sculptural object be supported? Grade has incorporated the support [a white acrylic tabletop on four slim steel legs] directly into the overall image of the piece. Two inverted, stylized and



Siamese Lids, 2003



Paired Cicatrice, 2003

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joined, headless torsos. *Pared Cicatrice's* lower part is an altered mirror image of its upper part. With gaping holes for the two necks and breast areas, the upper torso has a strong figurative presence, ominous and brooding, obliquely reminiscent of Siamese twins.

Rind [*Flood Route*] and *Shoal Interior* (both 2003) explore all-over patterning that defines and shapes these wall-mounted works, as do *Support and Shoal* [*Bone Shoal Sonance*] (both 2003). Using the wall as a wall abruptly differentiates any volumetric character. The hard chrome-plated, cast-brass surface of *Rind* [*Flood Route*] presents a surging shape, seemingly growing before our eyes and emerging [or cozzing] from the wall. Like a cell dividing, it seems to pulse and shift yet, rigid in its material execution, remains static.

Shoal Interior suggests the interior area of a saltwater tide pool, like a sea anemone or microscopic marine organism. In pale, irregular yellow and white colors, the rubber "tentacles" reach out toward the viewer, apparently capable of motion yet fixed again to the wall support. In works like these, the artist activates natural phenomena, toying with our expectations of live organisms, yet always coming back to the openly constructed nature of each object. They embody what Grade calls a "metaphorical opportunity."

Shoal [*Bone Shoal Sonance*] extends the metaphor of the detritus of a shoal, a beach, or the twilight area of advancing and receding tides. More overtly constructed with a "collar" or "neckpiece" at its top, *Shoal* joins together dozens of similarly shaped but differently sized perforated wooden hemispheres, all linked together in a community of elements. Like barnacles and shells, the make-up of *Shoal* suggests life and death coexisting, either activated by water or doomed by a desiccating atmosphere. Grade has written extensively about *Shoal*, comparing it to the giant areas of surface organisms on oceans called coccolithophores.³

Swell takes on comparably interconnected polygonal shapes. Mounted on a wall, like *Shoal* and the others, *Swell* is like a rush of sea foam as the waves wash out, or the bleached-out carcass of an underwater organism. With white fur flocking, its surface is tenderly tactile, contrasting to the harder and harsher metallic and wooden surfaces of the others in this informal suite.

Cuffs (2003) continues the eerie use of fur as a surface covering. With a hollow continuous inner volume made of cast iron, the shape of *Cuffs* is ingenious. Its darker, outer black spots contrast with an inner, fuzzy white lining. The hair-like surfaces defy animal or mineral analogies and, when experienced with the hard outer casing, *Cuffs* is one of Grade's sculptures that is so wholly imagined that its own aesthetic logic overpowers any convincing "metaphorical opportunity."

Could it be that Grade's most successful and compelling sculptures are the ones that exist on this solitary plane of meaning, the aesthetically autonomous object? Though many retain their functional analogies, largely due to an inner void that may also be read as a container space, they also operate on levels independent of use. Similarly, residues of excursions into exotic places



Shoal Interior, 2003



Shoal (Bone Shoal Sonance), 2003



Swell, 2003



Cuffs, 2003

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ultimately are subsumed within complex and imaginative treatments of chosen materials.

For example, *Costa's* form is so convoluted that its title becomes nearly irrelevant. Similarly, when contemplating *Costa*, the subliminal torso shape (a breastplate or bullet-proof vest) gradually evaporates due to other studio interventions such as the amber-colored rubber-filled perforations that cover its surface. Mounted on a simple rod not unlike a museum specimen stand, *Costa* undulates with its own formal logic, alluding to the body but not dependent upon any precise anatomical echo. Instead, the work is activated into aesthetic independence by the eye following its graceful profile and by the transmission of light through the rubber-filled perforations. Suspension, instead of wall or pedestal placement, transcends the sculptural issues such as positioning. Now more a work of independent and self-contained art than a focus of retrieved place recaptured in materials, *Costa* builds on all the material breakthroughs of the past decade, the far-flung travels to exotic cultures, and the important period of time spent at Kohler, so often the site of turning points for participating artists in residence.

Costa may also present an oblique confrontation with Minimalism. So reductive and simplified in shape, form and profile, it counters Minimalism's dictum of blunt positioning with its own seemingly weightless site on the steel rod. It is one of the artist's least complicated shapes, addressing what one critic of Minimalism called "primary structures" instead of the extended, tangential and accretive volumes associated with Grade's earliest works.

Finally, *Costa* can be seen as a way-station along the journey of John Grade. It tackles the issue of Minimalism's repeated module, not in discrete sequentiality, but with the irregularly repeated rubber-filled perforations on its surface. Thus, *Costa* fetishizes the manmade into the natural and vice versa. The hard industrial surface gleaned from Kohler is rendered uncannily natural looking, building on all this, so eloquently summed up in this survey, future projects of John Grade should be of great interest.



Costa Detail, 2003



Costa, 2003

1 Robert Pincus-Witten, *Postminimalism into Maximalism*, Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1987; 1.
2 John Grade, "Route," unpublished artist's statement, September 2003.
3 John Grade, "Skins," unpublished artist's statement, October 2002.

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