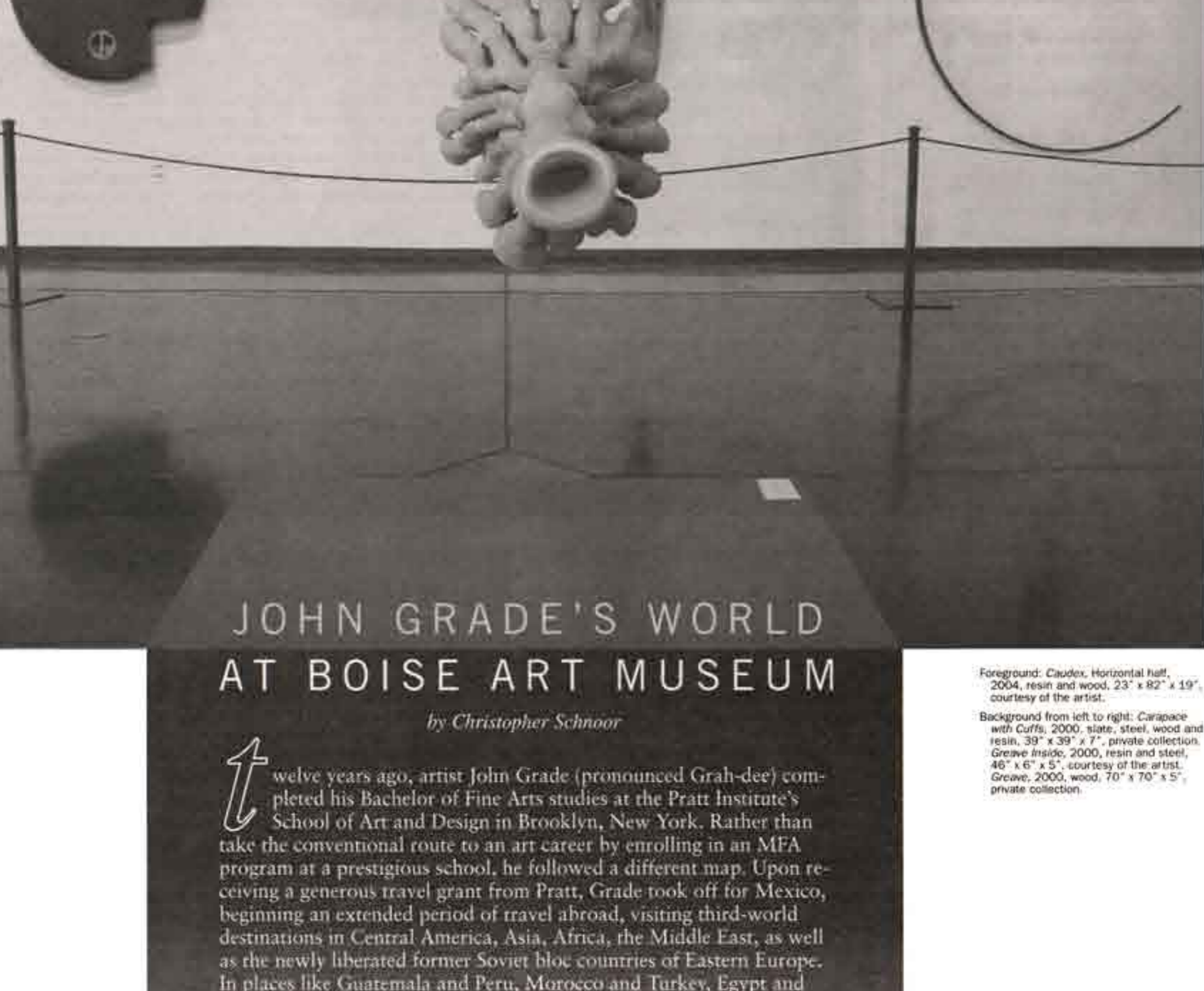


# form in flux



## JOHN GRADE'S WORLD AT BOISE ART MUSEUM

by Christopher Schnoor

Twelve years ago, artist John Grade (pronounced Grah-dee) completed his Bachelor of Fine Arts studies at the Pratt Institute's School of Art and Design in Brooklyn, New York. Rather than take the conventional route to an art career by enrolling in an MFA program at a prestigious school, he followed a different map. Upon receiving a generous travel grant from Pratt, Grade took off for Mexico, beginning an extended period of travel abroad, visiting third-world destinations in Central America, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, as well as the newly liberated former Soviet bloc countries of Eastern Europe. In places like Guatemala and Peru, Morocco and Turkey, Egypt and Jordan, Poland and Bulgaria, India, Vietnam and Laos (to name a few) he sought out new visual experiences, hiking in to remote, little-known sites, all the while observing, photographing, sketching and soaking in the sights and sounds of unfamiliar, exotic locales. The imprint of his sojourn is everywhere in a beautiful show of his sculpture and drawings now at the Boise Art Museum.

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Foreground: *Caudex*, Horizontal hull, 2004, resin and wood, 23" x 102" x 19", courtesy of the artist.

Background from left to right: *Carapace with Cuffs*, 2000, brass, steel, wood and resin, 39" x 39" x 7", private collection; *Green island*, 2000, resin and steel, 40" x 6" x 5", courtesy of the artist; *Costa*, 2000, wood, 50" x 100" x 5", private collection.

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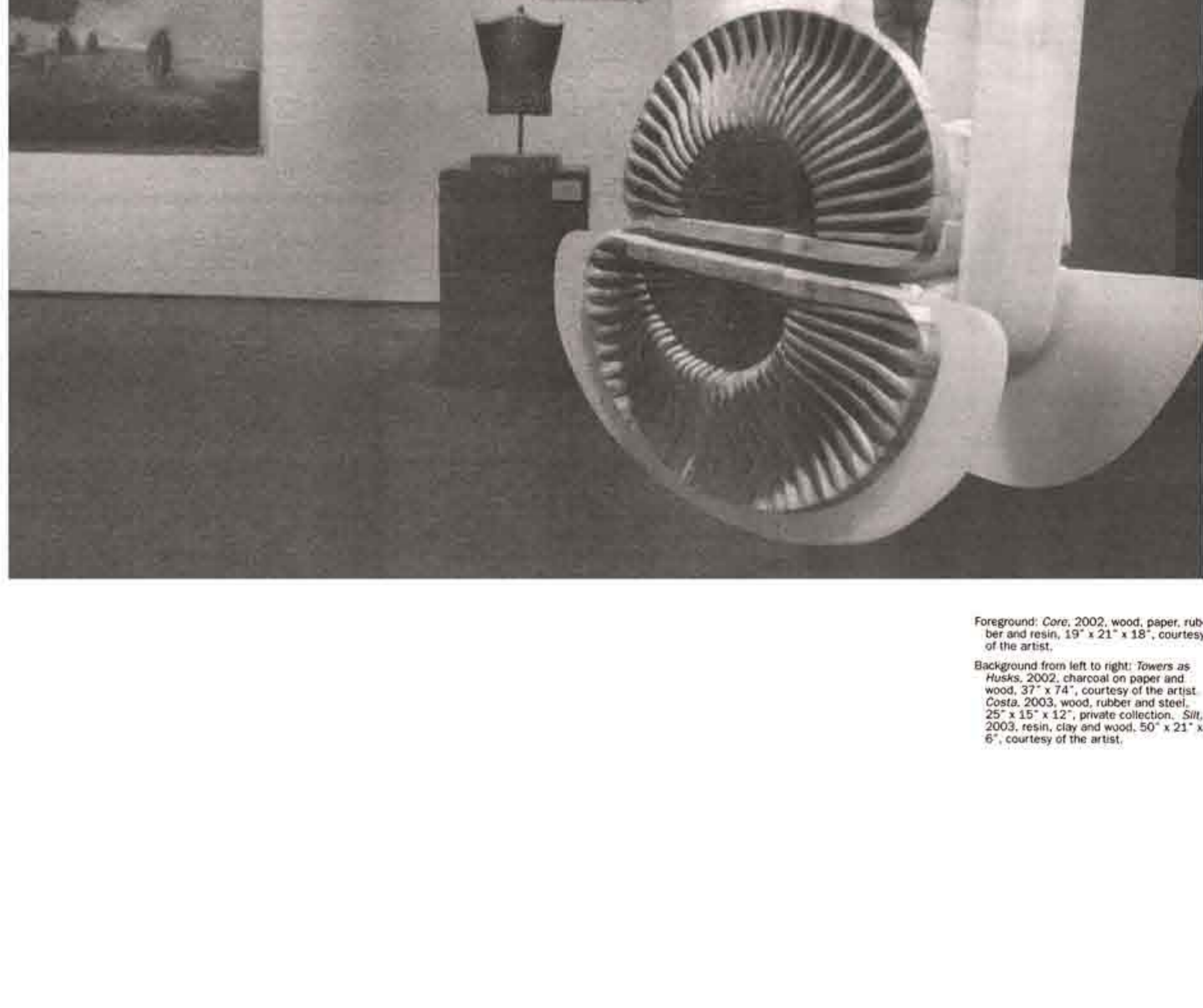
The artist returned to the States with his mind brimming with the memory of these sights and sounds, and over the next six years created a body of work that transformed those impressions and experiences into abstract sculptures that allude to mysterious life forms and phenomena while evoking a unique sense of place that seems to dwell both in the imagination and the physical world. In addition to expanding his vocabulary through further travel from 1994 to 2003, Grade was introduced to the Pacific Northwest through a residency at the Centrum Foundation near Port Townsend, Washington, and eventually moved to Seattle, drawn there by its climate and mix of cultures. One senses that the verdant northern environment further nurtured Grade's aesthetic instincts as his art evokes the lush rain forest of the Olympic Peninsula and the marine life that teems at its shores. Landscape and geography are clearly inspirational forces in his work, and the *feel* of the Northwest is a tangible presence in this exhibit.

This is Grade's first solo museum exhibition, comprising 39 works dating from 1998, and including two sculptures specifically created for this event. Funded primarily by an exhibition and publication grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, BAM has put together a very handsome catalog with an essay by Matthew Kangas, Seattle's elder statesman of art criticism. Together, the show and the book represent a distinct chapter in the artist's young career from which he has already begun to move on, making it a very timely event. Grade said that the exhibit gives him, too, a new perspective on a body of sculpture and drawings in which he worked through, and resolved a number of issues that were central to his art-making.

His lecture at the museum on December 5 will be of particular interest as he reflects on where he's been and where he's going.

Entering this exhibit is to enter a world of suspended animation. BAM's Sculpture Court and adjacent Nelson Northwest Perspectives Gallery are inhabited by organic, biomorphic and anthropomorphic abstractions that have a strong architectural component. A number of them hover in space, while others seem to have sprouted from the floor or out of the walls. Beautifully crafted from unconventional materials, these pieces represent an aesthetic rooted in the nature-inspired abstract sculpture of pioneers like Brancusi, as well as the minimalist movement of the 1960s, but transcend both by reflecting Grade's intense curiosity about natural history and cultural anthropology, and a post-modern sensibility. Kangas' essay correctly situates Grade's most direct antecedents in the postminimalist endeavors of Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis and Bruce Nauman, with their emphasis on process, impermanence and randomness. Grade's creations are often composites of plant, animal and human forms, and betray a fascination on the artist's part with patterns and designs that occur in nature. In many instances, it is an art of decay, its forms undergoing the physical transitions that occur with death and organic decomposition, with the attendant implications of renewed growth. As a result, few of the works in the show are static. Instead they mostly suggest an active degenerative or regenerative process caught on pause; a petri dish in stop action. These are sculptures of life-forms in flux.

Grade, who has always essentially been an abstract artist, actually started out as a painter, which probably accounts for the painterly surfaces we see in his three-dimensional work



Foreground: *Cave*, 2002, wood, paper, rubber and resin, 19" x 21" x 15", courtesy of the artist.

Background from left to right: *Towers as Holes*, 2002, charcoal on paper and wood, 37" x 74", courtesy of the artist; *Costa*, 2003, wood, rubber and steel, 25" x 15" x 12", private collection; *Silt*, 2003, resin, clay and wood, 50" x 21" x 9", courtesy of the artist.

today. In fact, the large, atmospheric charcoal/pencil drawings in this show that conjure up imaginary landscapes have the look and feel of paintings as well. Grade says that in the early paintings his emphasis was on both dramatic color and form but that the combination got to be too much, so he segued into sculpture, where he could focus primarily on formal issues. His abstracted sculptural objects initially comprised of linear, skeletal forms that were less fluid than they are now. After completing his BFA at Pratt, Grade began making site-specific sculpture and installations, something he continued to do on his travels abroad. Stuck without studio facilities in countries like Guatemala, Egypt and Vietnam, Grade took to doing outdoor projects, sculptural works that both responded to the local landscape and reflected his personal experiences of the same. From this vagabond, Johnny Appleseed manner of planting works of art wherever he went Grade absorbed a powerful presence of place into his aesthetic.

A new appreciation for the human form and incorporating figurative elements into his sculpture was another unexpected impact Grade's travels had on his work. His exposure to ancient cultural rituals involving the human body, particularly burial and entombment practices such as the Pre-Inca funerary towers in Peru, which inspired the 1999 *Tower Sillustani* and *Tower Amantani* included in the show, awoke in him a desire to make art that encompassed a dialogue with the human body. The rows of human teeth that edge the spiraling *Jaw*, the suspended pair of legs in *Rift*, the cast rubber lips in *Mouths* (which double as vertebrae when the piece is not "aglow") are just the most obvious examples of how Grade has incorporated the attributes and connotations of body parts into his art.

gesture of a breastplated torso, are subsumed to its elegant, reductive abstract form. While its perforations would seem to connote a breathing, living organism, it is a surface design that allows light to interact with the piece, serving to etherealize its presence.

The playful *Cuffs* is a good example of Grade's propensity for messing with our minds this way. Made of cast iron and resin, with the apparent collapsibility of thick fabric and its fur-lined interior, *Cuffs* looks at first like a glove. But the fact that it is open at both ends like a muff and seems designed to accommodate a claw rather than hands subverts any functional analogies. As Kangas comments in his essay, "*Cuffs*' form is irrelevant." This streak of perversity in Grade's sculpture is another characteristic that ties his art to the aesthetics of postminimalism.

Grade's interest in having a dialogue with the human form in his imagery goes hand-in-

hand with his fascination with the notions of decay and impermanence that run through this body of work. The transformation of the biological organism after death and the formal issues it raises is something he has explored in depth. To get it right he has, in the past, taken the scientific approach, experimenting with prolonged exposure of wood to insects, as well as burying wood in the ground, and observing the dissolution of organic structures wrought by such natural agents of change. Grade's discovery of the ritualistic burial practices of certain ancient cultures in which the decomposition of the body is facilitated by exposure to the elements (such as the charnel grounds of some Asian societies) led the artist to consider this concept in his own work.

In *Paced Cicatrice*, certainly the darkest and spookiest piece in the exhibit, many of these themes come together: the idea of decay and the transformation of form; allusions to the human body and the cultural practices

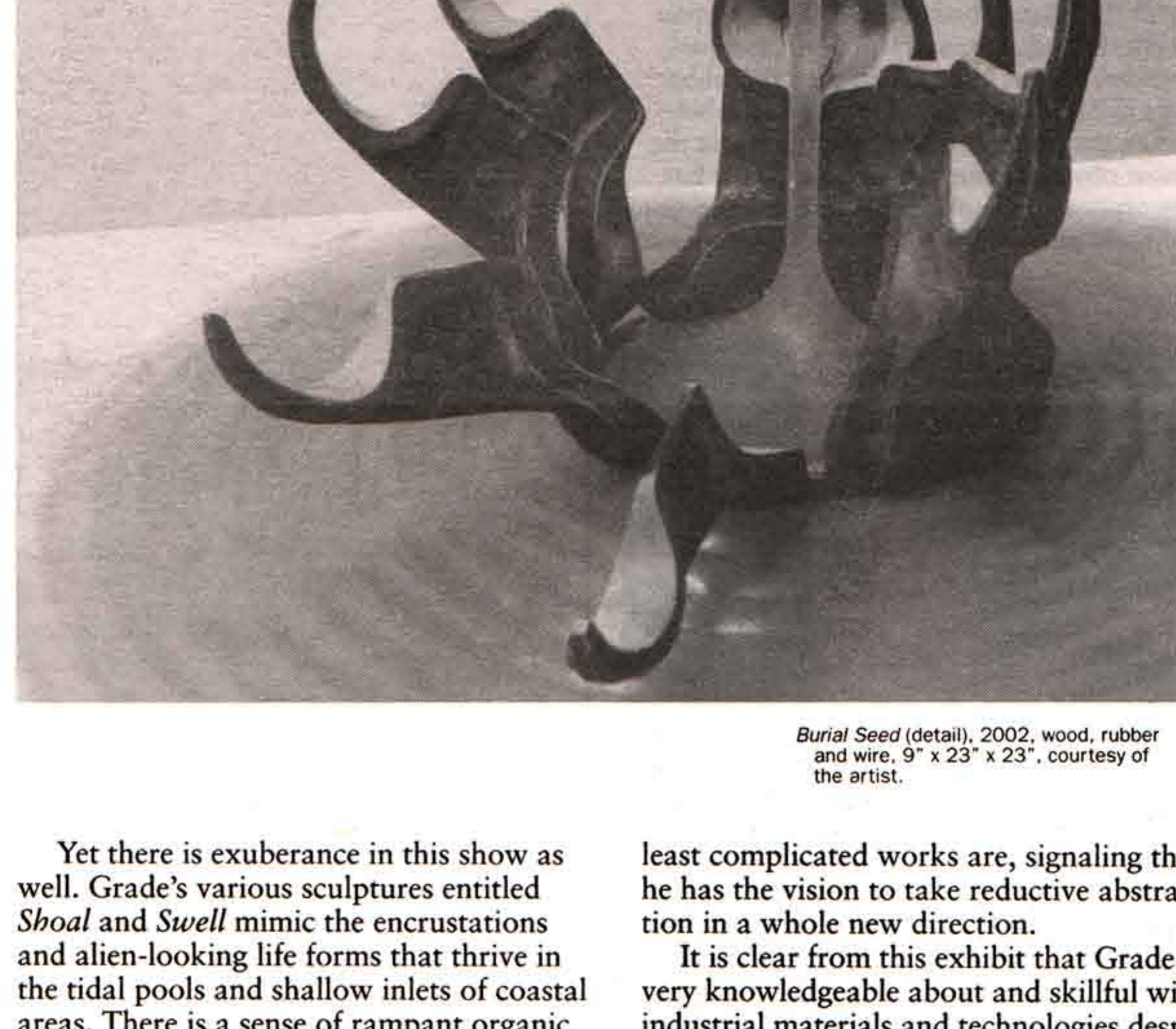
least complicated works are, signaling that he has the vision to take reductive abstraction in a whole new direction.

It is clear from this exhibit that Grade is very knowledgeable about and skillful with industrial materials and technologies despite the overall organic ambience of his art. His residency in the Art & Industry program at the Kohler Arts Center in Wisconsin in 2003 taught him a great deal about working with a range of technical processes which has expanded his vocabulary considerably, allowing him to experiment further in matters of design and presentation. That Grade is drawn to unconventional materials of both natural and manufactured origins is clear from this show. Look closely at his manipulations of wood and hard-to-handle resins and you will recognize a hand-to-hand craftsman.

Much more could be said about this body of work, including the drawings in which Grade sorts out his memories in preparation for formulating his sculptural projects. So many influences and ideas flow through each piece that some of these works cry out for an essay all their own. Formally innovative, Grade's art can be both visually stunning and intellectually challenging. He is a thinking person's artist whose work alerts the viewer to the wider world of which we are a part but never really see. **BW**

Yet there is exuberance in this show as well. Grade's various sculptures entitled *Shoal* and *Swell* mimic the encrustations and alien-looking life forms that thrive in the tidal pools and shallow inlets of coastal areas. There is a sense of rampant organic growth in these pieces, which seem to have propagated out of the walls that support them. In *Swell* and *Rind* (*Flood Route*), puffy networks of hexagonal shapes almost seem to multiply in front of us—*Swell*'s furry surface suggesting a blown-up image of microscopic mold or bacteria, while *Rind*'s forms have an almost gaseous appearance despite being made of heavy brass and chrome. The rubbery tentacles of the marine organism in *Shoal Interior* seem to be checking us out as we approach. Sometimes in these the line between art and science gets blurred, but we can only marvel at the craftsmanship and ingenuity that pulls it off.

Along the south wall of the Sculpture Court are a series of works that together represent Grade's closest encounter with minimalism in this exhibit. Although one must insert the caveat that Grade's is a minimalism informed by an organic rather than industrial sensibility, there is nevertheless something of a machined look to these. Starting with the freestanding *Stem*, whose cross-section view reveals the fragile architecture of a plant stem in a series of voids and repeating oval



*Burial Seed* (detail), 2002, wood, rubber and wire, 9" x 23" x 23", courtesy of the artist.