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Seattle

John Grade

Davidson Galleries

John Grade's fourth solo show in Seattle since 1998 shifted away from site-specific installation work to autonomous unitary objects. The results were varied and impressive. Twenty sculptures made of materials that included cast brass and rubber, resin and wood, cast iron, fur, and acrylic were on view. Several were the outcome of a 2003 residency at the Kohler Arts Center and Foundry in Sheboygan, Wisconsin.

Organic abstraction executed in quasi-industrial materials sums up the intriguing dichotomy at work in Grade's recent exhibition. Solid shapes are punctured; flat surfaces are perforated; soft materials like rubber are made to look

hard; and hard materials like iron manage to resemble curvy flesh. All this is just a step or two away from illusionism. Grade's sources date as far back as Noguchi and as recently as Louise Bourgeois.

While many of the objects allude to natural phenomena such as seed forms, body parts, beehives, or marine life, the viewer is never at ease in attempting to make links to particular plant forms or species. Grade's is a wholly imagined world, constructed as often as not from the standpoint of process determining appearance, materials dictating both shape and surface.

Despite such strict parameters, varied appearances and configurations abounded. The sphere, the truncated mound, the shell or husk, and the mysterious inner cavity were some of the repeated shapes, each distinguished by a different material execution. Thus, *Siamese Tinaja* (*Waterholes*) [all works are 2003] may have two conjoined breast forms, but its

cellular, segmented surface precludes direct anatomical analogies due to the rigid iron structure. *Bumal Seed* is a triple breast-form (à la Bourgeois) centered on a flat wall-mounted background and drenched in frothy white enamel. Similarly, *Rind* (*Flood Route*), also wall-mounted, forms a bulging hemisphere of dividing cells, halted in its growth pattern by its chrome-electroplated covering of cast brass.

Besides these modestly scaled works, larger works, such as *Rift*, *Silt*, *Swell*, and *Pared Cicatrice*, offered opportunities for more adventurous surface treatments and unexpected positioning. *Rift* hung from the ceiling, a pair of legs inverted to expose their hollow and perforated, husk-like character. *Pared Cicatrice* was the largest work and, perhaps, the most problematic. A steel-legged table with a white acrylic top, *Pared Cicatrice*

inserts a torso-like form (with four breasts or perhaps a pair of conjoined female twins) through the plastic tabletop. Neither fully figurative nor abstract, neither free-standing nor pedestaled, this work may be the largest of the Kohler pieces, but it fails to convince due to its awkward presentation.

Costa and *Cuffs* strike the right balance between unexpected materials and unconventional placement. The former resembles an armored breastplate mounted on a single steel rod. Dozens of holes are filled with pale yellow plastic inserts allowing light to seep through. Steel and fur serve as the outer and inner linings of *Cuffs*, an irregularly shaped work that plays off the interior animal fur by spotting the exterior steel as if it were leopard or jaguar skin. Grade's world fetishizes the natural into the manmade and vice versa: industrial surfaces are rendered uncannily natural-looking. Building on this, his future projects should be of great interest.

—Matthew Kangas

John Grade, *Cuffs*, 2003. Cast iron, resin, and fur, 8 x 9 x 4 in.

