



Host, 2007. Cellulose, rice pulp, ground seed, and capsaicin, view of installation at the Kaibab National Forest, AZ, before the work was eaten by birds.

JOHN GRADE

Lived History in Sculpture

BY SUZANNE BEAL

Northwest artist John Grade first made a name for himself with small, finely executed drawings and mid-size sculptures that subtly evoked the aesthetics and workings of organic matter. His current sculptural work and large-scale installations tend to reference phenomena from different geographical locations and point to a continued interest in the natural world. In addition, these pieces often push toward a deeply interactive experience, requiring viewers to pass through, under, or into their spaces.

Seeps of Winter, shown at Suyama Space in Seattle, was no exception. The former automotive garage is home to the offices of Suyama Deguchi Architects, as well as a vast central gallery. Exhibiting artists are obliged to address the architecture of the building's interior. Since Suyama Space's inauguration in 1998, few, if any, have explored the uppermost heights of the space. *Seeps of Winter*, however, pendulously floated from the rafters—in effect creating a low-hanging ceiling. At an artist talk in the gallery, Grade, standing before a rapt

audience, stretched out his arm and with a gentle push caused it to sway slowly from side to side.

Grade is a master at transforming experience of place into material manifestation. His earlier work involved travel to far-flung places to see how different cultures celebrated and preserved life forms: the Egyptian pyramids, Peruvian funerary towers, and Jordanian burial mounds near Petra. The resulting works captured mood without resorting to the representation of actual objects. Grade's current explorations still require travel, but his works have begun to get in on the act too, as he exhibits, displaces, and re-positions them in new, often radically different territory.

Collector, one of these works-in-process, was made to conform to a specific contour within Little Death Hollow, a slot canyon in Utah. First shown on the walls of the Davidson Gallery in Seattle, it was then submerged in Washington's Willapa Bay, where the pair of hollow, tusk-like forms acted as an oyster bed. Later the artist and a select group of friends harvested and ate these same oysters before Grade transported the work to Little Death Hollow on the grill of his pick-up truck. With each tusk measuring more than six feet in length, the work framed Grade's view as he passed from the Northwest to the Southwest. The journey significantly altered the work's appearance, as insects crashed into it and the elements affected its surface. Once in Utah, Grade fitted *Collector* into its designated site to await the results of flash flooding: the impact of the water had the potential to destroy (which it didn't), but it did wash the sculpture clean, erasing the physical traces of its journey.

Grade created *Host*, only to have it picked apart by birds, digested, and deposited as waste. The approximately 13-foot-wide telescoping sculpture of cast cellulose covered in ground seeds was twice situated in the Kaibab National Forest in Arizona. The first placement, within the charred remains of a recent forest fire, attracted insects, but no birds. A second site, wedged among the branches in a fresh stand of aspen, proved attractive to mammals, so Grade coated *Host* with jalapeño pepper, which, while not a problem for desert wrens, acted as a deterrent for other creatures. *Collector* and *Host* are good indicators of Grade's genuine interest in how objects play out, are reborn, and given a new lease on life in various landscapes.

Seeps of Winter was created during Grade's time as a resident artist at the Ballinglen Foundation in County Mayo in Ireland in 2005. The project was directly inspired by walks through the county's peat bogs, as well as by the poems of Seamus Heaney, whose work has referenced the "bog people" preserved within the soil. *Seeps of Winter* invites viewers to imagine themselves as lying face-up below ground—in other words, as being buried alive.

In spite of the somewhat macabre motivation behind its creation, *Seeps of Winter* is anything but sinister in appearance.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

Sculpture December 2008

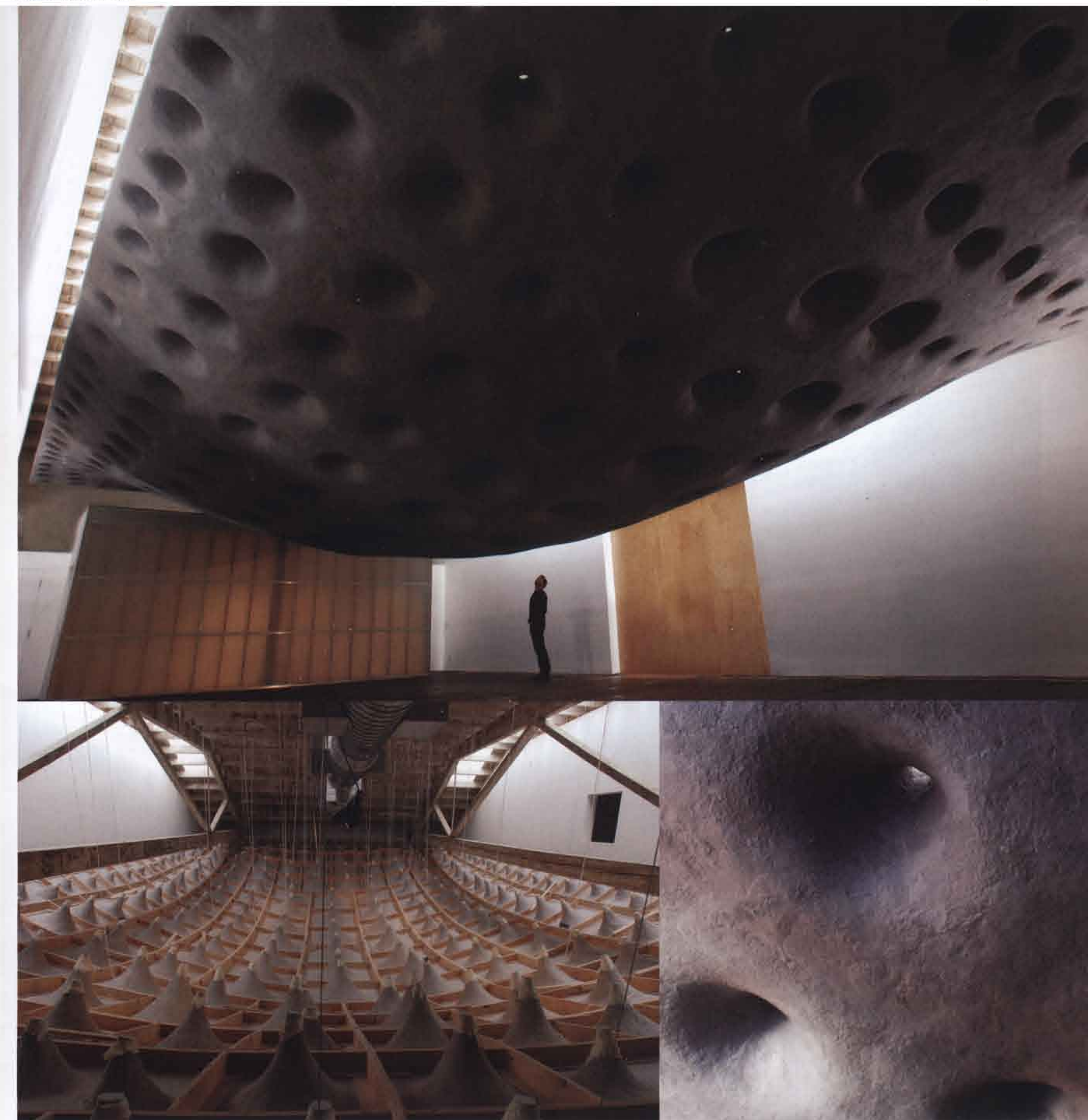
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Top and bottom: *Collector*, 2007. Mixed media, two stages in the work's evolution, including its submersion in Willapa Bay, Washington coast.

Although it completely covered Suyama Space's vast and airy ceiling, obscuring the exposed rafters and skylights that normally provide illumination, the space was far from claustrophobic. Light filtered in through evenly spaced, latex-covered craters in the slightly globular, suspended body. The work's pitted surface resembles nothing so much as a moonscape—especially as it appears in black and white images from the 1960s. At its lowest point, *Seeps of Winter* almost grazed visitors' heads, but the craters punctuating its surface, each approximately twice as large as a human head, offered relief—inverted airborne islands suited for contemplation.

Grade says that the scale and surface of *Seeps of Winter* presented themselves to him a year after he first conceived the project. Walking along the Washington coast during a residency at the Espy Foundation in Oysterville, he stumbled across a 50-foot, dead humpback whale. Grade read the scars and superficial scrapes in the whale's deteriorating skin as a "map" of its life and sought to re-create the variation and texture of its surface for *Seeps of Winter*. He crafted the body of the work from cast paper pulp, cellulose, and glassine in interlocking sections, subsequently "pulping" them together to create a seamless whale-scale mass. Pre-positioned wire ripcords allow Grade to identify the different segments for breakdown.

Suyama Space was just the beginning for *Seeps of Winter*. After the show ended, Grade moved the work to a glacier on Mount Baker, where it was inverted and raised on six-foot-high stakes. It will be left long enough to be covered by a blanket of snow. The latex that originally covered each round portal was removed to allow ice to form. Grade acknowledges that his processes can be potentially messy and unstable, but he welcomes the lack of control. He estimated that *Seeps of Winter* would become six times heavier once wet, making it exponentially more difficult to disassemble and transport back to the city. To aid in the moving process, he



Seeps of Winter, 2008. Paper pulp, cellulose, fumed silica, and glassine, 10 x 30 x 50 ft. 3 views of installation at Suyama Space, Seattle.

commissioned a chemist from California to alter a compound traditionally used in the protection of horse hooves as a hardening agent.

In 2004, the Boise Art Museum presented Grade's first solo museum exhibition, "Grade: Sculpture and Drawings," as part of the series Northwest Perspectives. The majority of the three-dimensional works in the show were mid-sized sculptures hung from the wall or raised on pedestals. Only four years later, Grade's work has expanded significantly, both physically and in the geographical terrain that it covers. The Bellevue Art Museum recently hosted Grade's installations and objects with a lived history—works like *Collector* and *Host*

that don't offer obvious points of completion. The museum hopes to exhibit the transformed *Seeps of Winter* once it returns from the glacier. But nothing guarantees that the work will survive. If it falls apart, the museum will exhibit the fragments of its former glory, perhaps the most fitting of all displays for work by an artist who creates lasting impressions of transmutation.

Suzanne Beal is a writer living in Seattle.

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