

Art in America

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John Grade at the Boise Art Museum

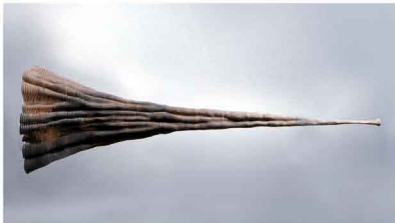
After completing BFA studies at Pratt Institute in 1992, John Grade (pronounced grah-dee) took advantage of a generous travel grant and headed for Mexico, beginning an extended period of travel abroad, visiting Central and South America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Hiking to remote, little-known sites, he photographed and sketched, soaking in the sights and sounds of unfamiliar cultures. The imprint of his sojourn was everywhere in a captivating show of sculpture and drawings dating from 2002 to 2004.

This was Grade's first solo museum exhibition, its 39 predominantly abstract works ranging from small scale to larger than life and evoking environments that seem to dwell both in the imagination and the physical world. Landscape and geography are clearly inspirational forces in his art, which seems to reference the lush forests and teeming marine life of the Pacific Northwest, Grade's home for the last decade.

To come into this exhibition was to enter a world of suspended animation. The museum's indoor sculpture court and adjacent gallery were inhabited by organic, biomorphic and anthropomorphic abstractions with a strong architectural component. Some hung suspended in space, while others seemed to propa-

gate from the very floors and walls. Precision-crafted from mostly wood, metal and resins, these pieces reveal a Post-Minimalist sensibility, with antecedents in the perverse, process-preoccupied works of Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis and Bruce Nauman. While betraying a fascination with patterns and designs that occur in nature, Grade's sculptures are ambiguous composites that imply a vague functionality without completing the association. In many instances, the work suggests decay, as if the subjects were undergoing the physical changes that occur with death and organic decomposition. A number of works embodied this transformation, evoking an active degenerative or regenerative process caught on pause. Grade's is a sculpture of life forms in flux.

Burial practices of ancient cultures hold a particular fascination for this artist. Pre-Inca Peruvian funerary towers inspired the 5-foot-high unfamiliar architecture of *Tower Sillustani* (resin, wood, steel and lead) and *Tower Amantani* (wood), while the hefty cast-iron-and-steel *Pared Cicatrice* (certainly the darkest piece in



John Grade: *Caudex*, 2004, resin and wood, 23 by 82 by 19 inches; at the Boise Art Museum.

the show) is based on a Vietnamese practice of entombing the deceased in the trunks of old-growth trees. The piece carries this association in its surface texture, bulk and empty sockets. In these and other works, the concept of empty vessels that formerly held something of value comes into play, another metaphor for the body and its status after death.

Yet, an exuberance is present as well. Large wall sculptures like *Shoal* simulate the geometric abstraction of encrustations and life forms that thrive in tidal pools, giving a sense of rampant organic growth. *Swell*'s puffy, cottony surface (actually resin and fur) suggests a blown-up image of microscopic mold gone wild, while the rubbery tentacles of the hubcap-size *Shoal Interior* give the impression of responding to our approach. At times the line between art and natural science gets blurred in these works, but in the end, poetry prevails.

—Christopher Schnoor