

Oregon

John Grade at Laura Russo Gallery

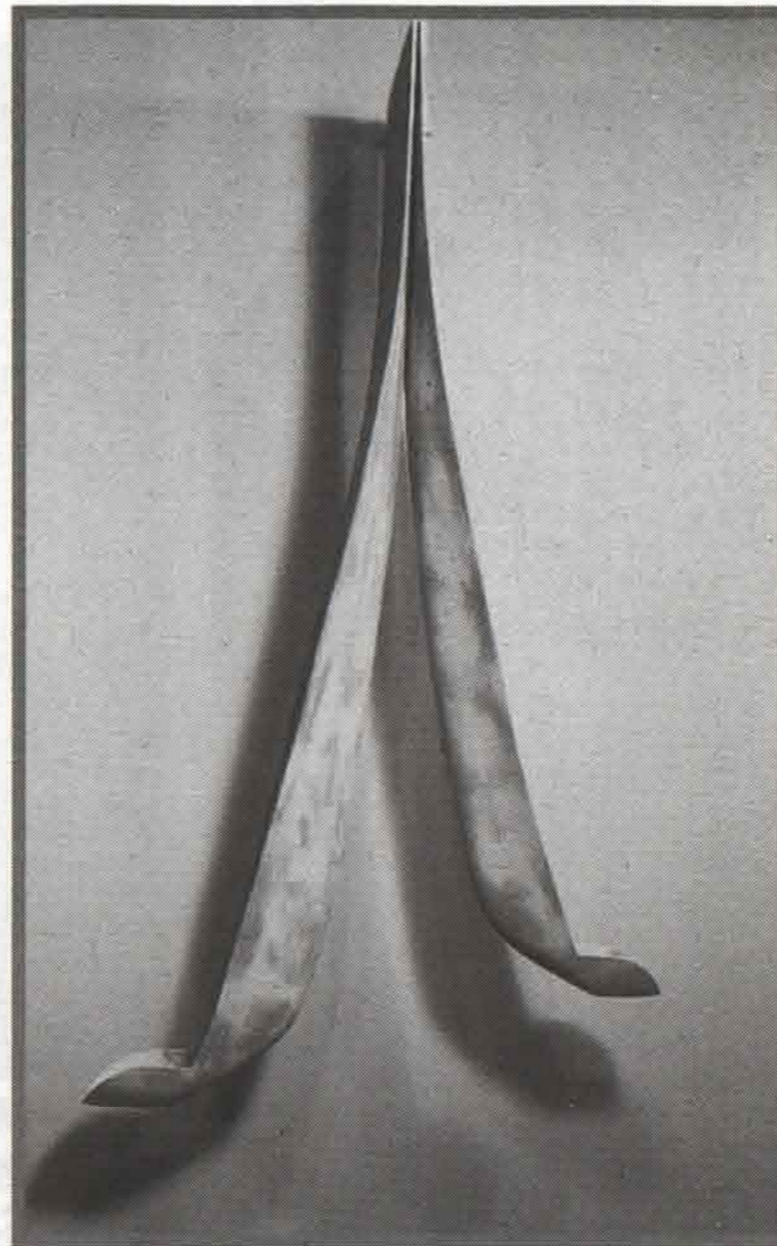
In his Portland debut at Laura Russo Gallery, Seattle-based sculptor John Grade creates work in which absence weighs in as a distinct presence. Grade's travels through the Egyptian desert and Peru have provoked an investigation into the relationship between the human body and the various structures prehistoric cultures devised to entomb it. Favoring simple forms with strong contours that encase or scoop up space, he produces objects that harbor the mystery of forgotten use.

Tower, Amantani is a ghostlike silhouette not quite six feet tall. Its title refers to an island off the coast of Sillustani in the highlands of Peru where Grade made drawings of pre-Inca funerary towers. This tower encircles space with a ring of long vertical spokes resembling machined metal meticulously soldered together,

giving the first impression of a heavy chain somehow held rigid. Up close, however, one sees the material is weathered wood, almost as thin as match sticks and surely as light. It is hard not to imagine the coolness of this dark interior pierced by sunlight, the latticed shadows creating irregular patterns where some slats have broken and fallen away. Grade has pieced the slats together to form gradually lengthening windows descending from the covered cap. Upon reaching the floor, the spokes shoot back up and out, creating at once a sense of stillness and of animation.

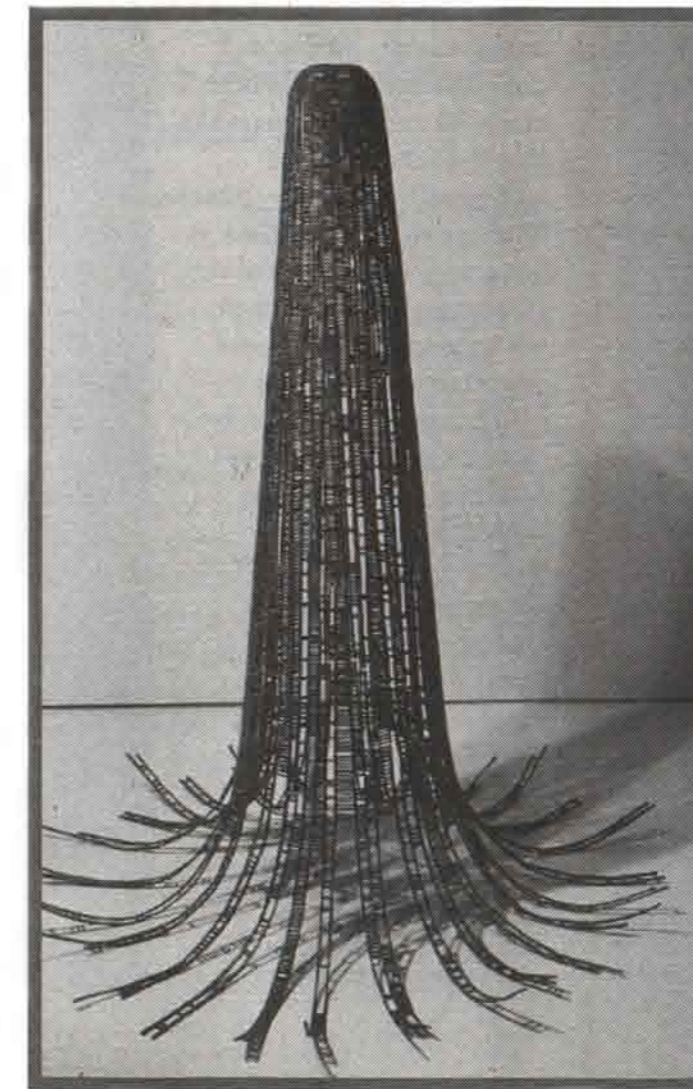
The smaller *Confessional* is a white resin horn enclosed in a made-to-measure carrying case of richly hued mahogany. The case, fashioned to follow the horn's curve, has a hinged lid that opens in two sections setting off a collection of contrasts: the opacity of the wood against the milky translucence of the horn; the "natural" found quality of the horn against the finely crafted case; the sturdy, rectilinear case against its delicate, irregular contents. Here, especially, there is a

sense of arcane function. This is an object for ritual use, complete with handles to carry it from location to location. The elaborately protected horn houses its own treasure. Small black bits of wood, like the dried hulls of insects, are scattered on its bottom. These first appear as



John Grade, *Two, Nazca*, 1999, wood, 54" x 28" x 16", at Laura Russo Gallery, Portland.

John Grade, *Tower, Amantani*, 1999, wood, 68" x 56" x 56", at Laura Russo Gallery, Portland.



with modern, industrial materials and his habit of articulating his shapes from the inside out in most instances keeps a delicate balance in play. Some pieces, such as *Bundle, Nazca*, which resembles a primitive mask, or *Funnel, Siwa* and *Opening Sphere*, both large vessel-type forms that tip the scale toward the decorative, do not measure up to the others. At its strongest, Grade's work depends upon a clear eloquence of form and that hint of secret purpose. With so many solid pieces, the show could have been more tightly edited to still retain its impact.

—Pat Boas

Sculpture by John Grade closed in May at Laura Russo Gallery, Portland.

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hints of darkness through the horn's top surface, prompting one to peer through the grate at the case's end. There the light filtering through the cloudy resin creates another world.

Roughly half of the eleven pieces on exhibit share the curious authority of *Tower* and *Confessional*. The best bear their ancient references lightly. *Hanging Sphere, Siwa* is a large, egg-shaped globe suspended from the ceiling on a tube of coarse netting. Cobbled together from chunks of sand-colored wood, this piece resembles a giant hive, part of which has been lost to time and the elements. *Two, Nazca*, a graceful, double swoop of whitened birch, is cupped at the ends as if to receive an offering. It presents the kind of gesture one expects more from fabric than from wood and elicits a reading that includes both landscape and sacramental vestments.

Grade's practice of mixing traditional substances