

SEEPS OF WINTER

Frances DeVuono

Over the course of the next 18 months, I will complete a three-part project in three phases. I will build sculptural installations designed to devolve in desert, forest and alpine landscapes.

—John Grade, February 2008

Seeps of Winter is a graceful, if enormous, gray mass suspended from the 20-foot ceiling of Suyama Space. Spreading corner to corner over the room's 1500 square feet, its surface is covered with gray paper pulp. It appears to billow in the center of the space, dipping ominously as low as the height of a short adult. Hundreds of small openings at odd intervals diffuse any illumination cast from the skylight above so that walking underneath the piece is disorienting, as visceral an experience as walking inside the spiral center of one of Richard Serra's torqued ellipses. While *Seeps of Winter* was based on the bogs of western Ireland, its scale and formal beauty is stripped of any association but its own formidable presence.

John Grade has worked on this installation for over two years. After graduating from the Pratt Institute in 1992, he spent several years traveling throughout Southeast Asia, Turkey, Jordan and parts of Africa. Currently residing in Seattle, the stories he tells are inevitably about the out-of-doors. When he talks about his work he consistently refers to geologic and ecological histories of place and his language is spiked with words from hiking, rock climbing and running, all activities that he does. When he speaks about the environment, it is with the easy familiarity of one who sees his body as part of that system.

In the catalogue for John Grade's 2004 exhibition at the Boise Art Museum, critic Mathew Kangas termed the artist's work as "post minimalist," comparing it to Jackie Windsor, Lynda Benglis and others. The comparisons are apt; one might add Martin Puryear or Eva Hesse to the list, as Grade's eclectic use of materials and his sweeping abstract shapes have similar suggestive power. His sculptures typically start to recall something that might exist in the material world but then just as carefully they elide the limitations of exactness. Grade was 34 years old at the time of the Boise exhibition and he claims that when it was over, he wanted to change what he did; he wanted to experiment with scale: "I was tired of people projecting themselves into my work—using it as a metaphor for what they thought." Two years later for a show at the Davidson Gallery, he created *Cleave*, a meandering 16-foot installation based on the sensations he had had while falling into a narrow fissure while hiking on a glacier. *Cleave* was an enormous jump in scale, but even more significant than its size, it led Grade to other conceptually complex projects such as this one.



Cut peat on the bog



Whale found on the Long Beach Peninsula, Washington Coast

There is a moment when talking with John Grade when you wish you knew more—or he knew less. Listening to him describe the genesis for his projects, one is rushed from ideas as disparate as mathematician René Thom's theories of catastrophe, to bits from a Cormac McCarthy novel, to the remains of human bodies found in bogs, to the wildlife that live in the canopies of California redwoods. It's a dizzying array of information that never becomes pedantic because Grade's knowledge of biological and geological science is matched by a maverick imagination. The artist describes how the initial inspiration for *Seeps of Winter* came to him while running on the bogs of County Mayo during a Ballenglen Art Foundation residency where he found himself thinking (preposterously enough), "What would it be like to be underneath a bog looking up through magnified pores and layers of soaked peat?"

Chronicling the exact number of ideas that led to the completed project that is *Seeps of Winter* is circuitous. It involves a beached humpback whale Grade saw while on yet another residency on the Washington coast and how he was impressed with the magnificent beast's skin, "scratched and scared by its own history." It involves the epiphany Grade had while at the MacDowell Art Colony during a New Hampshire winter when it occurred to him to link his idea of bogs with glaciers. Serendipity also plays a significant part in Grade's process. He explains that he initially planned to use phone books for the paper pulp that makes up the exterior surface of the piece, but when presented with fifteen, 5-foot stacks of the weekly magazine *The Stranger* that needed recycling, he ended up using that material instead, cheerfully adding another (albeit unplanned for) layer of meaning to his piece. In addition to all of the above, at the conclusion of the exhibit, Grade plans to ferry *Seeps of Winter* to the top of some mountain in the Cascades so that it can "continue its history up on a natural glacier." If he can, the artist will use helicopters, otherwise he will haul it up one section at a time on sleds. This last gesture or activity is key to Grade's view of the natural world, the man-made object and their connected histories. As he explains, *Seeps of Winter* is "an interior architectural space that is inspired by one natural landscape, and then is placed in another actual (but different) landscape."

This idea of linking disparate landscapes characterizes several of the artist's other current projects. *Collector* is a piece that has been underneath the Willapa Bay for over a year now and Grade approaches it in a similarly labyrinthine

and intuitive manner. When describing *Collector*, Grade talks about how its form was based on an a 7-foot arc taken from a slot canyon in the southwest, but cedes the piece's new life in the Northwest by stating, "Yes, when we remove it from the bay, the first thing we'll do is eat all the oysters and crustaceans that have attached themselves to it, then we'll put it on my truck and take it back to the same slot canyon in Utah and let the flash floods scour it."

While Grade's verbal ideas build upon one another in a nearly non-stop frenetic fashion, the material presence of *Seeps of Winter*, like his sculptures, is refined and quiet. It does both more and less than he says. His approach to earth and art is marked by a willingness to marry spontaneously with careful planning. For all Grade's flights of imagination, the actual construction of the piece was a small feat of engineering that tied together over 400 molded forms attached to 30 panels that when suspended fit all together within a rare variance of no more than one-sixteenth of an inch. And yet for all the sheer beauty of Grade's finished work, he seems willing to relinquish control in ways that may be consistent with his generation, or our times, or both. He doesn't seem interested in the spectacle of manipulating huge areas of earth a la Michael Heizer or even James Turrell. Nor does he seem interested in enshrining it, as Andy Goldsworthy's beautiful evocations brought back into galleries do. He simply wants to be part of it; making it, moving it around, and if the occasion arrives, eating bits of it, too.

A few years ago, contemporary author Jonathan Franzen wrote in defense of fiction's ability to simply *be*—to exist in a complex space without specific agency. In his essay "Why Bother," he compares good fiction to religion in "that answers aren't there; there isn't closure." What Franzen claims for writing is equally valid for contemporary art and this refusal to see closure is what marks Grade's current work. In times as fast moving and multivalent as ours there are artists who actively question static notions of art and its objects, not, one suspects, as a fully conscious choice, but simply because they don't perceive the world that way. Grade is one of these and what he creates are beautiful physical reminders of how very true that is.

Frances DeVuono is an artist and contributing editor to *Artweek*.

*Jonathan Franzen quoting Shirley Rice Heath, MacArthur Fellow, Professor of Linguistics at Stanford in his essay "Why Bother" in *How to Be Alone*. NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2002, p. 82