

# The Things He Carries

## John Grade Leaves His Sculptures Alone on Mountaintops

BY JEN GRAVES

It started with an image that came to John Grade at some point he cannot remember—he wasn't dreaming, or even particularly thinking. But before long, making the image real took over his life.

For the last three months, with five paid workers and 30 volunteers, he's been making a 10,000-pound ceramic sculpture that 150 people will strap to their backs (in pieces) and hike up a private mountain in the Cascades. That was the original image: a procession of black bits seen from above, snaking up a white mountain. That will happen

next winter, with a videographer recording the realization of the prophecy from a helicopter. But the prophecy is only a small part of the art.

Before *Circuit*—eight pairs of bumpy, nine-foot-tall, vaguely sarcophagus-like structures made of clay, plastic, and mesh—is considered finished, it will be shown in its pristine state in a New York gallery (Cynthia-Reeves, in May) and a Seattle gallery (Davidson, in September); it will be hiked up the Plum Creek Timber-owned mountain and attached in the form of an elliptical ring around the top of the mountain; it will spend more than a year there, where the elements will contort it unpredictably; it will be taken apart and marched back down to sea level; it will be reassembled and seen again in its weathered state.

The meat of its life—the part that makes it alive—will be spent utterly alone on a mountaintop, having experiences that can only be imagined. This is not the first time that Grade (pronounced “grotty”) has left his sculptures out in the wild to have their own secret lives, as if he's trying to remove the human from between nature and art and just let the two be together. He submerged a wood sculpture—it looked like two giant horns—in Willapa Bay for months. He dropped it off in an updrafty slot canyon in southern Utah (after attaching it to the front of his truck and driving it through the desert, gathering bugs and dust and whatever else flew up). That piece, called *Collector*, is featured in a romantic photograph that depicts Grade from behind, walking into the desert with the sculpture strapped to his back like two enormous horned wings: Following Grade's pattern, that was the original image that spawned the piece. *Collector*, 2006–2008, marked a breakthrough in Grade's career, which has been recognized by two impressive recent awards: the \$10,000 Willard L. Metcalf Award for “a young artist of great promise,” given by the American

Academy of Arts and Letters (with a judges panel headed by Martin Puryear, the great abstractionist, and an influence on Grade), and a \$25,000 Pollock-Krasner grant.

“Early on in my work, I'd go to these exotic places, to the pyramids or something—looking at these funerary sites—and then I'd make these objects that I thought represented them, that were meant to be a distillation of an environment,” Grade says. “That just became very staid for me, as

opposed to incorporating something that's messy, that I lose control of, that pushes me. Which I'm getting a lot of now.”

It's harder to say what Grade's work is than what it's not: It's not classic, tourism-driven earth art (à la Smithson, Heizer, or De Maria); it's not ephemeral performance art for the camera (à la Andy Goldsworthy). Grade is not a cowboy or a mystic or a transcendentalist. He is not Henry David Thoreau or Jean-Jacques Rousseau or John Wayne—though he's a tiny bit of each. He's

also a scientist: He wears a white lab coat in his studio, where he can often be found tinkering for months to develop a material that will withstand, or break down under, the specific environmental conditions of a certain location he's studied in detail.

The locations are selected for remoteness. “I just go to a place not in any guidebook, and not particularly beautiful, so there's nobody there that I'll run into,” he says. “I've run into somebody while installing my work one single time—and he was lost.” Sometimes Grade gets official permission, sometimes not. He's not a

guerrilla, but he'll quietly impersonate one if necessary.

He's other, humbler, things: a mule carting an artwork from one place to another. A parent letting an offspring out into the world. An

organizer and manager. He and his work crews are busy behind the scenes at his two International District studios and at Pottery Northwest, which is a major supporter of *Circuit*, the upcoming mountain project. (Pottery Northwest's involvement imbues *Circuit* with the ceramic tradition: workers eating around a table; huge kilns firing for hours, minded all night by a lonely, willing soul.)

This Saturday in Bellingham, a parade of people will don a series of sculptures that have been on display at the newly renovated Whatcom Museum. They'll walk the sculptures down the streets of town and into Bellingham Bay, where the sculptures—24-foot, Scussian-looking white cones that wobble and sway in the slightest wind, made of a corn-based polymer and paper—will dissolve in 30 seconds. A videographer will be waiting underwater to capture those Ophelian final moments—that was the image that inspired this piece, called *The Elephant Bed*. (Its actual shape was informed by the microscopic algae that formed the white cliffs of Dover, where the piece originated last year in a residency at Fabrica in Brighton, UK. The white cones Grade made for Fabrica are long dissolved in the English sea; new ones were fabricated, and will disintegrate, in Bellingham. Next fall, he'll create another, related, installation—as if this one swam all that way—across the English Channel, in a gallery in Normandy.)

Grade has only one hope for the Bellingham event.

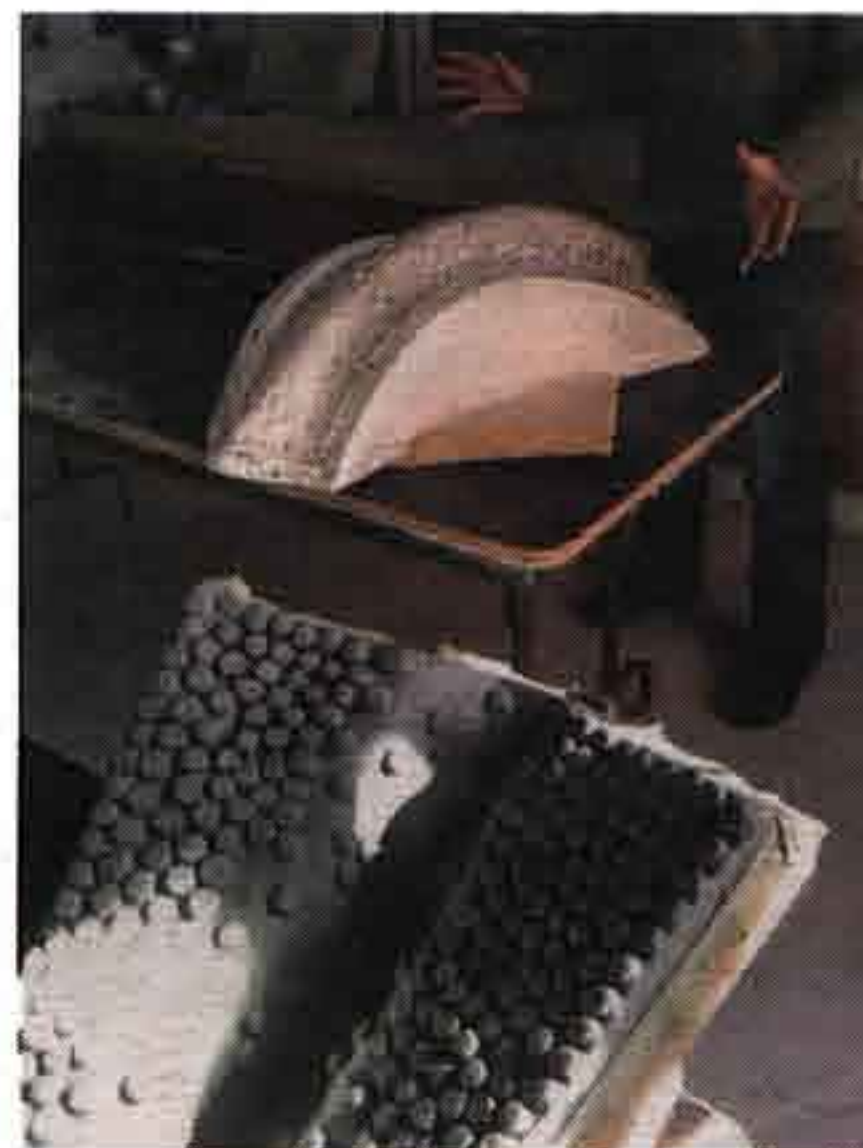
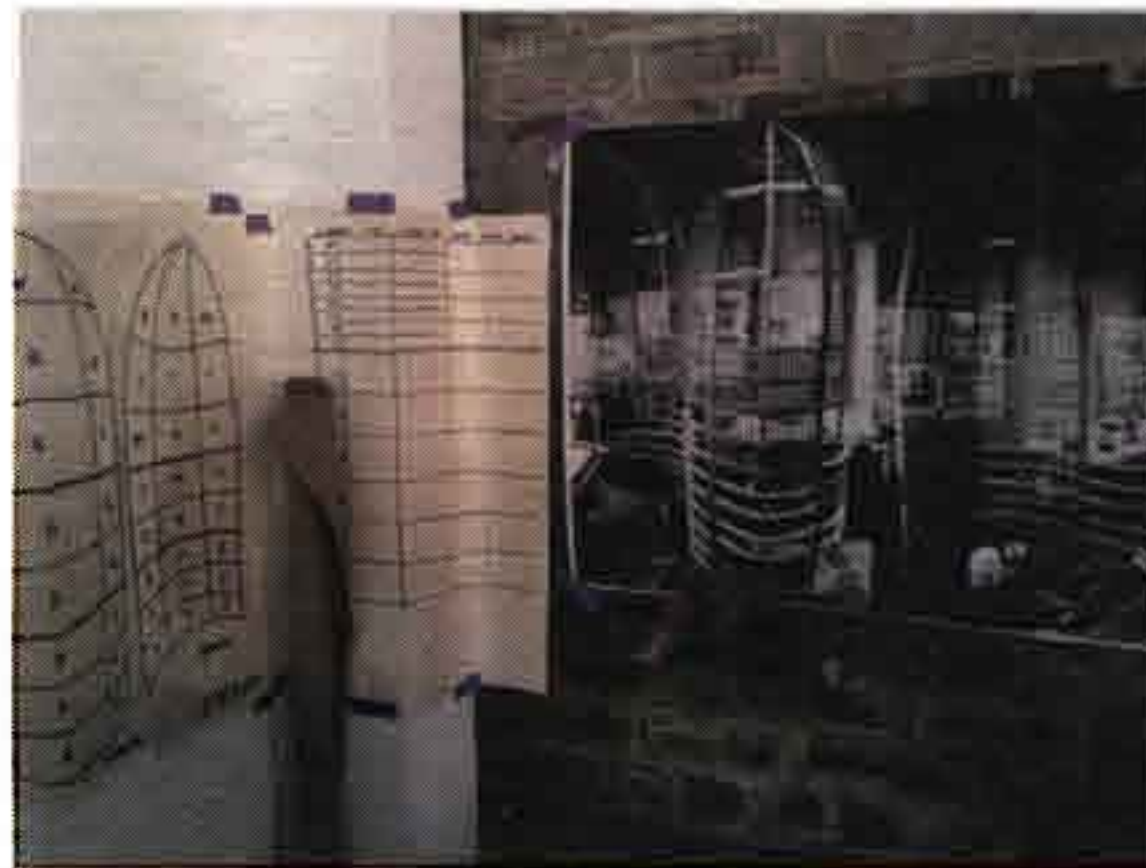
“I always want things to go wrong,” he says. “I just hope something happens that I don't expect.” ■

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**“I always want things to go wrong,” he says of the scheduled parade Saturday in Bellingham.**

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**The Elephant Bed procession**  
Sat April 10, Whatcom Museum, Bellingham, 2:30 pm, free



**UNDER CONSTRUCTION** John Grade (top right) and the making of 'Circuit.'