

John Grade at the Bellevue Art Museum

John Grade's exhibition, *Disintegration, Sculpture through Landscape*, is part of the Bellevue Art Museum's *Material Evidence*, a series of exhibitions concerned with the exchanges between material, idea, form and meaning. Informed by the narratives of nature, Grade's work is an interesting exploration of these ideas; each work included in this exhibition arrived in a different stage in its material process, where no single stage could be considered complete and final. For example, *Collector* (2007), a wooden arch, was placed in Washington's Willapa Bay, bejeweled with clusters of seaweed and barnacles and removed after a year to be installed for this exhibition. *Fold* (2008), a spectacular, honeycomb-shaped free-standing sculpture, will be partially buried for two years, an upper edge left exposed to allow light to penetrate down through the resin; the light and dark woods that make up the work will guide its own "re-shaping" by termites.

Integral to his process are Grade's experiences in various bold landscapes; he sojourns to a range of places with varying conditions, such as the glacial fields in the Northwest Cascade Mountains, the Western bog lands in County Mayo, Ireland and the Northeastern desert of Uganda. Recent trips include the coastlines and mountains of Washington State and the deserts and slot canyons of the Southwest. One of the most arresting images in the exhibition features a traveler (Grade) in an iridescent, nearly featureless landscape carrying the two arcing, conical frames that make up *Collector* on his back, easily imagined as the wings of a wayward archangel.

Conflating the formal language of

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natural shapes, or qualities found in different environmental milieu, the artist and the field become collaborators: Designed to interact with the landscape, weathering and wildlife of the site, changes to the condition of the works suppress the typical parameters of object and site into what the artist Agnes Denes described as, "a triangulation in search of truth." In these ongoing works, the medium is change or shift. Writing indeterminacy into the process is intriguing against the fiction of the institution or context, as the object also enters into a dialogue with itself, where the form it takes in the exhibition, and the final form it takes after exposure to the field, produce interesting turns.

As striking as they are, it's discomfiting that both *Meridian* and *Fold* aren't finished projects, there's no way to account for their final form and there's a sharp poetry in that which is very intriguing. It's easy to see why some viewers were uncomfortable with the idea of these works being installed in remote sites. Grade's practice can easily be seen to be equally about making and ideas—it's nearly heartbreaking to stand in front of *Fold* and imagine this piece left buried for two years. The luminous, voluptuous surface of

Meridian (2008) casts the same doubt on the project; assembled for the first time in this exhibition, its translucent, gridded sheath is open on one side so that viewers can stand inside the room-sized sculpture, a profoundly affecting experience. Following this installation, it will be taken to two different sites, a slot canyon, where it will be installed horizontally as a kind of catch, collapsing from exposure to water, and then to the redwood forest to accumulate material from the canopy. The changes to both *Meridian* and *Fold* should be more radical than those that prevailed on *Collector*, which retained its overall shape, even as it provided a surface for the sea to engrave. *Meridian* was constructed in such a way that its cords will cause it to collapse and then, treated with cellulose and casein and exposed to the weathering, damp conditions, become a monolithic *informe* record of its passages in the

canyon and then the forest.

How does one think about site here? There are similarities to Robert Smithson in terms of scale, time, destruction (and a perceived indifference to humanity due to the interest in geologic time). This passage of time can be written into the work by the field or fields within which it is placed, and applies some of the concerns of the "retrieval of obsolescence," Arte Povera's denial of technology. But that is the very point of the work—that he can analyze the type of break he is making, complicating the critical perspectives of site, process and object. It's less the idea that the landscape itself might be a sculptural medium, as explored by Smithson or Michael Heizer. It proposes a break with possible precursors in that the art object is re-inscribed by the field, building upon the influences that first generated it, such as the outlines of ancient gravesites in the North African desert that inspired *Fold*.

These transcendent shades in Grade's works circulate around the proposal of a journey as an art object. Elaborate, striking works that neutralize the over-deter-



John Grade, *Collector*, 2007, wood, 6' x 6-1/2' x 8", (installed in Willapa Bay, WA), at the Bellevue Art Museum.

mination of the exhibition space or the art object are developed from an organic motif and then returned to the originating context as a participating, decaying object, with a level of design that treats the conditions in which it is to function. While not denying the object, Grade finds different terms for it. The poetics of integration with the natural architecture, and the ensuing disintegration, form generous relationships between art, life and site.

—Elizabeth Pence

John Grade: *Disintegration, Sculpture through Landscape* closed November 30 at the Bellevue Art Museum.

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