

**M1** Artist finds  
inspiration inside  
a crevasse



The

# Mountaineer

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## Canyons, crevasses catalyze climbing student's artwork

By Brad Stracener

Goat's fur is not ice, nor is it sandstone, but it is both in John Grade's art world. It is a world where light



Artist in climb mode.

and its origin can dictate whether claustrophobia or a sense of freedom takes hold. It is a world that was inspired by Grade's own predicament in a glacier crevasse nearly four years ago.

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## Crevasse exercise results in 'wonderful fluke of inspiration'

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In the upper level of his studio in the International District of Seattle, the current intermediate climbing student recounted his "inspiration" for a project that will soon be exhibited at Davidson Gallery in Seattle.

"We were practicing crevasse rescue and using the Z-pulley. I ended up in the crevasse longer than planned. As I watched people in the crevasse going back up, I was continuing to go down," said Grade (pronounced Grah-dee). He explained that a bit of fear and displeasure first gripped him but that a comfort from "the recognition that there is nowhere to go" soon embraced him during the hour and 15 minutes he spent in the crevasse.

He still isn't sure what had happened above the crevasse, but he suspected that something had gotten tangled in the line arrangement and the other climbers were in the process of untangling it. Regardless, it resulted in "a wonderful fluke of inspiration" for the sculptor and climber. It was so inspiring that he decided to recapture that feeling of "comfort and displeasure" in a completely different geological environment, that of a slot canyon in the Southwest.

He spent days at a time in slot canyons of various sizes. "On one trip in Escalante (Utah), I was alone in the canyons for a week without encountering any other people. The closest sense of human contact I had was when finding Anasazi ruins clustered within the canyons," he recounted.

He also revisited many glacier fields on Rainier and in the Cascades. "So after that initial hour and a quarter of inspiration, there's been collectively speaking months I've spent in the slot canyons and Glacier fields."

He said a series of sensations ensued for him during these enclosed experiences. "First, I went through a claustrophobic feeling, then fear, then recognition and then (the place) became a cathedral of silence – worth seeking instead of fearing."

Once he documented these feelings, the artist's labor began. It takes place on the lower floor of his studio where the wooden skeletons of future works, experimental piles of clay, a workbench, sawdust and myriad tools

John Grade photo



Grade works in his studio on an experiential piece for a future exhibit.

convey the genesis of transformation – from the ideal to the material.

Grade's work in general is one of transformation. His sculpture and drawings over the years have often found their conception in the processes of life and death, both culturally and biologically. Lately, he has moved these concepts to "our connection to landscapes as they relate to water," thus his pursuit of glacier and canyon environments in his "Cleave" exhibition.

He first planned to visit the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to seek out the water and ice environment, but then realized he didn't have the skills or knowledge for the harshness of being entirely alone in the Arctic. So, instead, he opted to first take the basic climbing course at The Mountaineers.

He said he wants to "humanize" the water-created environments. "I want to see what our responses are and if they are similar," he noted of his sensorial creations.

His Davidson Gallery piece combines lamps, a light projector, goat's hair, polyester resin and lots of wood – among many other devices – in an attempt to convey the sensations of being inside a slot canyon or a glacier crevasse for an extended period. He does not necessarily want this work to attract the climbing or adventure community. Indeed, he first exhibited it at a King County Performance Network event in Enumclaw. He wanted people of all stripes to participate and relate their experience. "I want to know if people have a strong response," he stated. For instance, he noted, during the exhibit of a different piece of work,

someone came out of it with a strong impression of the Holocaust, "but that was not part of my design."

Though the common climber may want to limit their experience to glaciers or canyons, Grade is taking his proclivity all over the map, physically and artistically. He visited Ireland for most of five months, returning just weeks ago, to study the bogs. He has visited ancient funerary sites in Southeast Asia and Inca ruins in Peru as well. He visited the bristlecone pine stands of Nevada and California, spurring his attempt to convey the sensation of being inside the tree and looking laterally through it. He is currently in the throes of creating his bog world (imagine seeing up through the ground from beneath a bog) at his studio, housed in the remains of a condemned hotel adjacent to the old Uwajimaya grocery store.

Part of his challenge obviously rests in the sentient quality of the experience, he explained. For example, he wants to give his ice-and-rock time capsule a sense that it is alive, "of the body." He hopes the goat's hair helps to achieve this. One article called Grade's sculptures "life forms in flux."

Grade indicated that his artistic pursuit has opened his own eyes to a world he wouldn't have otherwise gotten to know, that of The Mountaineers climbing community. "There are a lot of really neat and fascinating people in the climbing program," he stated.

**John Grade** was born in 1970 in Minneapolis, Minn., and received a bachelor's degree in fine arts at the Pratt Institute, School of Art and Design, in 1992. Since then, he has been working in the mediums of sculpture and drawing.

His group and solo work has been extensively exhibited over the years in galleries such as Seattle's Davidson, the Boise Art Museum, the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisc., the Laura Russo Gallery in Portland, Ore., and the International Art Exhibition at Fort Mason in San Francisco, Calif.

John Grade's exhibition opens at Davidson Galleries on May 11. An opening event is planned for May 18. It continues through June 24.

Brad Stracener is managing editor of The Mountaineer.