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# Art of decay

Pondering the transient nature of things, Seattle artist JOHN GRADE creates fascinating sculptures intended to be ruined by nature. Here is my art, he says, and here is how the world changes it.



ridian," and a docent introduces the spires of Grade's "Bloom: The Elephant Bed" at the Whatcom Museum in Bellingham.



ohn Grade really might want to think about charging

The Restless Native

Seattle Times staff columnist

by Ron Judd

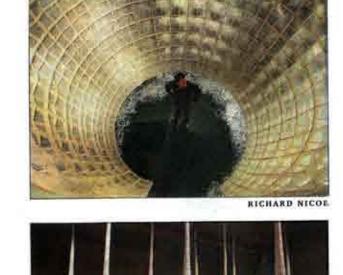
Couple reasons. One, an afternoon spent watching the Seattle artist sawing, gluing, scheming and dreaming in his clandestine laboratory - spread throughout various basement spaces of the old Publix Hotel in the Chinatown International District - is better than any conceivable

reality TV. It's like putting "Monster Garage," "Iron Chef" and "American Masters" together in a supercollider, throwing the switch and pulling up a lawn chair with a cold one to appreciate the splendid wreckage: Lots of chunks of big, cool stuff, interspersed with great ideas, everywhere you look. Gleefully in the center of it all is Grade, 41, a Minnesota-

on an alpine glacier, in a white lab coat, or on lists of notable

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born, Ravenna-raised artist who somehow fits in comfortably



KEN LAMBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES, 2009

#### **Pollution** lower, risks remain for marine life

RUNOFF LESS THAN FEARED, BUT EFFECT ON SOUND IS TROUBLING

Copper, retardants hinder navigation, immune systems

BY CRAIG WELCH

Seattle Times environment reporter It can happen almost immediately

Copper dust from car brakes gets flushed into a stream by storms, Inside half an bour, the ability of nearby baby salmon to interpret smells can get thrown out of whack. When a predator approaches, the fish don't flee, increasing the odds they'll be gobbled This potentially deadly change in fish be-

havior can happen at extremely low levels of pollution, the same levels washing into Puget Sound during heavy rain. It's one of the many ways stormwater runoff still presents trouble for Puget Sound. You don't have to have dead fish for

there to be impacts on aquatic life," said David Baldwin, a research biologist with NOAA's Northwest Fisheries Science Center.

The state Department of Ecology this month released a report that showed oil pollution in Puget Sound was a fraction of what some environmental regulators had suggested. Instead of an Exxon Valdez size See > POLLUTION, A9



affect marine life > A9

#### Soldier of many talents expected to head military BY THOM SHANKER The New York Times

WASHINGTON - Gen. Martin Dempsey's

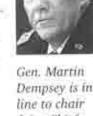
peers call him a "pentathlete," the kind of post-Sept. 11 commander who knows the art of com-

Inside

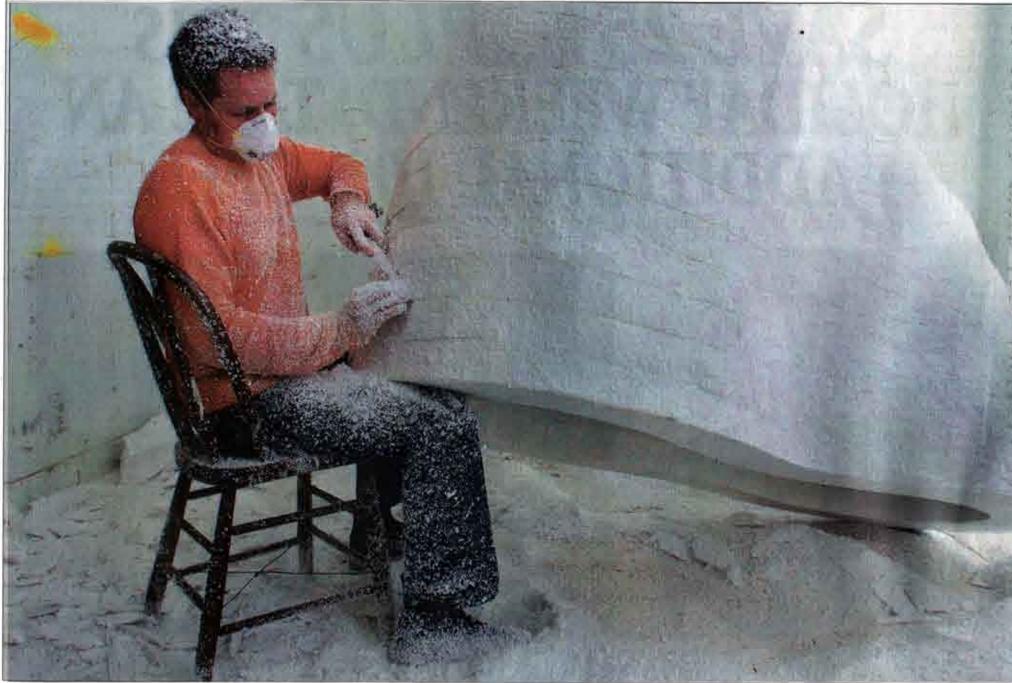
bat and is adept at marshaling the power of diplo macy, money, allied co-

operation and information He will need all those skills if, as expected, President Obama nominates him to be chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a move that could come as

early as Monday. As the military's highest-



Joint Chiefs.



John Grade uses the teeth of a saw to scrape away Styrofoam to create the shape he wants as he makes a form for the "Fold" triptych in his studio. The piece eventually will be in-

ALAN BERNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

## Harnessing the thrill of serendipity < Grade

#### contemporary landscape sculptors - although Grade (pronounced "Grah-day") is stretching the bounds of that

stalled in the public library in Duvall.

EARLY

GRADE

"My stuff was

too controlled.

I simply had

too much

Something

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CURRENT

"The element

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If I can sort of

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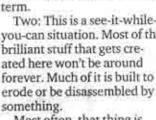
Two: This is a see-it-whileyou-can situation. Most of the brilliant stuff that gets created here won't be around

> something. Most often, that thing is Mother Nature, who, as many a floating-bridge designer might attest, can be a cruel rival when it comes to making things last, but a handy ally

> This is especially true in the Northwest, where the north side of anything left outside for more than 35 minutes will promptly begin to moss up, and shortly thereafter begin oozing into the surrounding landscape — if it is not first

reflect earthscapes, but become, for a while, part of "It grew out of a feeling I trolled," he says. "I simply had too much control. Something had to give." Control - a good thing, to the stevedores and engineers among us - is anathema to

endipity. His recent works combine old-world natural products wood, stone, leather, metals, animal hides, clay - with



entombed in blackberry vines. This alarming, but sometimes useful, phenomenon of Grade's homeland did not become a moving force in his work until about five years His earlier sculptures easily earned gallery and museum

space. But simply leaving it at

that quickly became too pe-

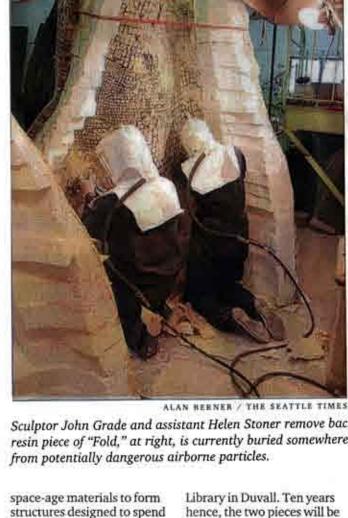
whose recent works not only



destrian for Grade, a Shoreline High School and Pratt Institute (New York) grad had that my stuff was too con-

the rush of freshly broken ground, the thrill of ser-

people like Grade, who crave



Here is what the artist doors, being eaten by bugs, pecked by birds, bashed by made, these works say. And here is how our world the tides or baked by the sun.

rejoined at the library.

large wood/resin structure displayed at the Bellevue Arts Museum in 2008, and now, by design, being slowly consumed by termites somewhere underground in Idaho. Once the bugs have had their fill, it will be exhumed for dis-A companion piece, just completed, will be displayed in its pristine state at a Portland Art Museum show beginning June 11. It then will be halved, with one portion buried in Arizona, the other displayed in a new King County

as much as a decade out-

est form. trol ultimately gets me in-

volved in the process of how it's going to break down," interesting to me." It is this nexus of art and

Grade's vision of art in its purlutionary cycle as "moments." "The element of losing con-As each work evolves, the moments add up to hours, years,

Grade says. "Because it's gonna break down. If I can sort of be there, and nudge it, and push it in a direction and get to see it happen ... that's more

engineering that makes the works of Grade, whose drive

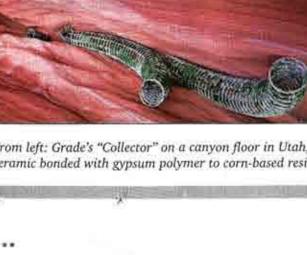
to be a full-time artist was fu-

eled by Centrum art work-

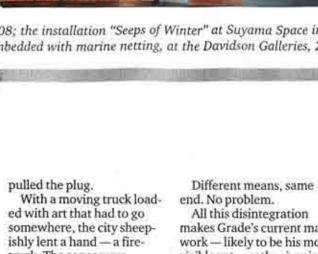


Styrofoam blob with undulating surface contours, some modeled after shapes of his own body. (Grade, who has-

around the globe for inspira-Such was the case with one of changed it. The process is as grade, but to what they will Grade's best-known works, succumb, and even when. tion, professes a fascination. artistic as the product; the Grade describes all these with funerary practices, or the award-winning "Fold," a lines in between blur. It is how cultures present bodies stops along a sculpture's evo-









else? - into the bay.

beautiful, saltwater-seasoned old-growth planks and beams salvaged from the Wawona, the 1897 schooner that spent its later years waiting in Seattle for a restoration that never came. Grade and helpers armed with long-bar chain saws and other heavy tools spent weeks this winter removing beams and planking from the skeleton of the old schooner,

wooden sculpture that will

high ceiling in the new Muse-

um of History & Industry at

South Lake Union Park. The

wood is Douglas fir - gruffly

hang suspended from the

which was being stored in pieces at Magnuson Park. To-

chowder line at Ivar's. His current pieces, he says, are "kind of like an interesting conversation" between what he has built, and the natural world's response to it. Grade at that moment is

standing next to "Fold," Part

The sculptor, bless him, is

able to summarize his intent

sense in art circles and in the

in terms that make equal

Port Townsend, so intriguing:

Each piece is designed with a

general plan not only for the

degree to which its chosen

and ultimately, a life.

materials ultimately will de-

back to the earth.) On its sur face, Grade is affixing row after row of tiny hollowed-outcubes of African heartwood, with a mix of dark and light He already knows, from testing, that this wood will be consumed by termites, and that they prefer the dark wood over the light. So he has at least a notion of how the sculpture will look when it is unearthed: Most of the structure then will be the resin Continued on next page>

viewed many landscapes





Anarchy also intrudes in less poetic forms; the "moments" of his works sometimes are frozen in time by human interference. A planned 5-ton ceramic sculpture that was to be carted in pieces by an army of backpacking volunteers and reassembled atop a Cascade mountaintop near Roslyn

environmental conditions,

terms of where and when

really more anarchy than

that."

such as drainage or lack of it.

they're going to eat," he says,

his eyes lighting up. "But it's

"I have a little bit of say in

when the peak was pulled into a federal land swap. And last year, another major Grade work, "Bloom: The Elephant Bed," met an un-

this winter was put on hold

the new Museum of History & Industry.

mayor got cold feet and

ALAN BERNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES John Grade shows the model for a massive sculpture he is sculpting with the remains of the schooner-Wawona for

in North America, to a land-The pieces then will be as-

day, the timber is tidily stacked, floor to ceiling, in Grade's studio, drying. The wood will be cut into

Those outer pieces will be left, in true Grade fashion, exposed to the elements, to slowly wither away, while the larger piece inside will be

each mechanically sculpted thing." to emit light through con-Assuming necessary permits come through, the cave or convex holes - not unlike the worm holes that sculpture when finished in sent rotted portions of Wasummer 2012 will appear to wona, one of the largest project through the buildthree-masted schooners built ing's roof, and below its floor.

of it being a living, breathing

Clear acrylic panels will

separate the piece, and view-

This was Grade's inventive solution to the puzzle of how to build a piece for permanent static display - something his current work rebels against - yet stay true to his artistic vision. He is, after all,

integration all on its own. He's giving this old wood credit for time served. "There's a commentary there," he says: "This isn't necessarily (the wood's) natural course of life. This is

just an artifice that we apply because we care about this more than the other, for whatever reason.' A value judgment, in other words. He doesn't know if most

viewers who walk up to, and into, the Wawona project will appreciate that. And honestly? It doesn't matter.

It is what it is: chunks of art and history and biology and engineering, all held together by various inventive strands of John Grade.

"Hopefully, they just look at it, and they believe it. Because I did.' Ron Judd, a fifth-generation Washingtonian, scours the Northwest for stories about its people, places, traditions and

endangered icons. He can be



SEE JOHN GRADE'S photo archive of previous projects, plus other ar-ALAN BERNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES ticles about the artist and a sched-John Grade stands among the saltwater-seasoned old-growth planks and beams salvaged from the Wawona, the 1897 schooner that spent its later ule of upcoming exhibits at years berthed at South Lake Union Park waiting for a restoration that never came. www.johngrade.com/archive

sembled into a massive, verers, from the sky above and tical structure, which, from Lake Union below. the rear, evokes the shape of

## a ship's spine. From the

smaller pieces, the surface of

whence all this wood came before it was forged into a ship that hauled other trees, fish and other goods up and down the West Coast.



