

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.

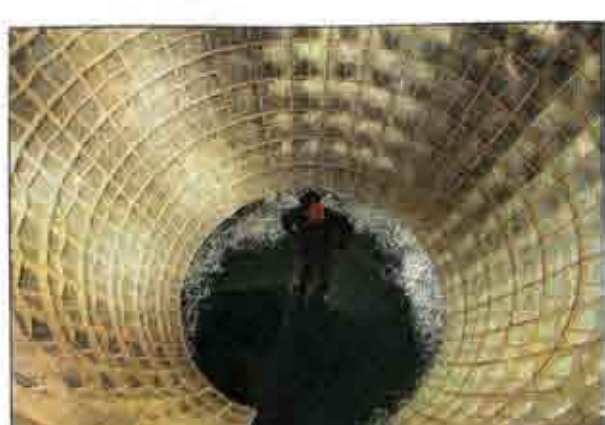


Sculptor John Grade feels the texture of his latest project, part of the "Fold" triptych. Below, Grade stands inside his work "Meridian," and a docent introduces the spires of Grade's "Bloom: The Elephant Bed" at the Whatcom Museum in Bellingham.

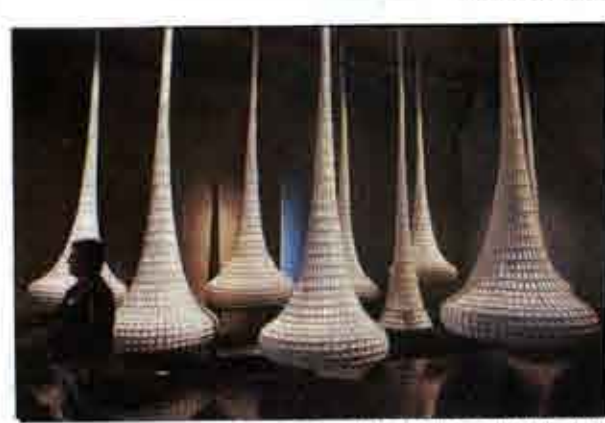


The Restless Native by Ron Judd Seattle Times staff columnist

John Grade really might want to think about charging admission. Couple reasons. One, an afternoon spent watching the Seattle artist sawing, gluing, scheming and dreaming in his clandestine laboratory...



RICHARD NICOLO

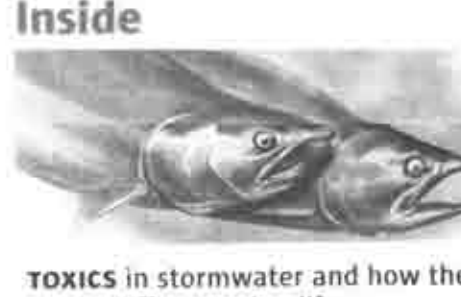


KEN LAMBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES, 2009

Pollution lower, risks remain for marine life

RUNOFF LESS THAN FEARED, BUT EFFECT ON SOUND IS TROUBLING Copper, retardants hinder navigation, immune systems

It can happen almost immediately. Copper dust from car brakes gets flushed into a stream by storms. Inside half an hour, the ability of nearby baby salmon to intercept smelly can get thrown out of whack...



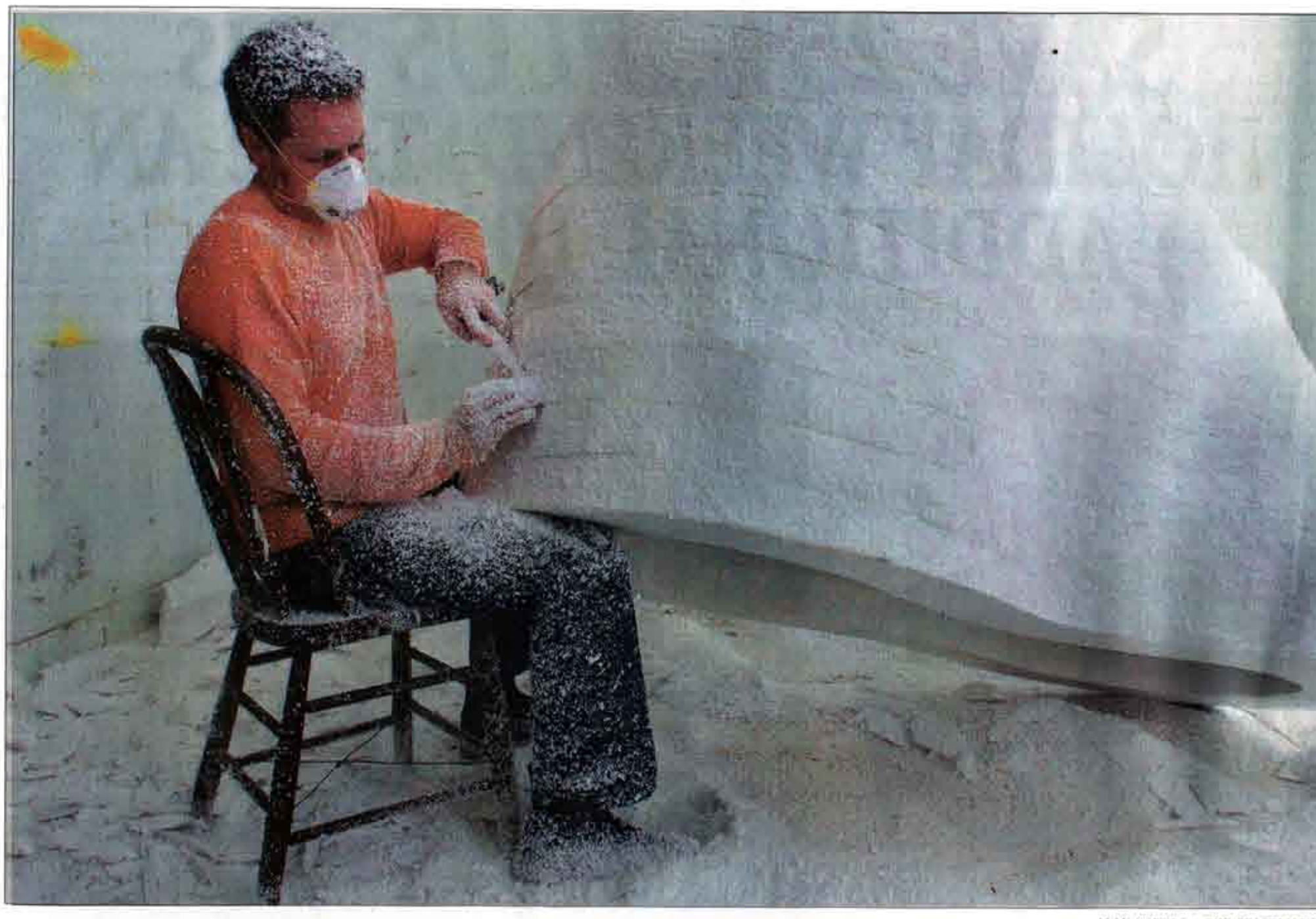
TOXICS in stormwater and how they affect marine life > A9

Soldier of many talents expected to head military

WASHINGTON — Gen. Martin Dempsey's peers call him a "pentathlete," the kind of post-Sept. 11 commander who knows the art of combat and is adept at marshaling the power of diplomacy, money, allied cooperation and information.



Gen. Martin Dempsey is in line to chair 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 installed in the public library in Duval.

Harnessing the thrill of serendipity

EARLY GRADE "My stuff was too controlled. I simply had too much control. Something had to give."

CURRENT GRADE "The element of losing control ultimately gets me involved in the process of how it's going to break down. If I can sort of be there, and nudge it, and push it in and get to see it happen ... that's more interesting to me."

contemporary landscape sculptors — although Grade (pronounced "Grah-day") is stretching the bounds of that term. Two: This is a see-it-while-you-can situation. Most of the brilliant stuff that gets created here won't be around forever...



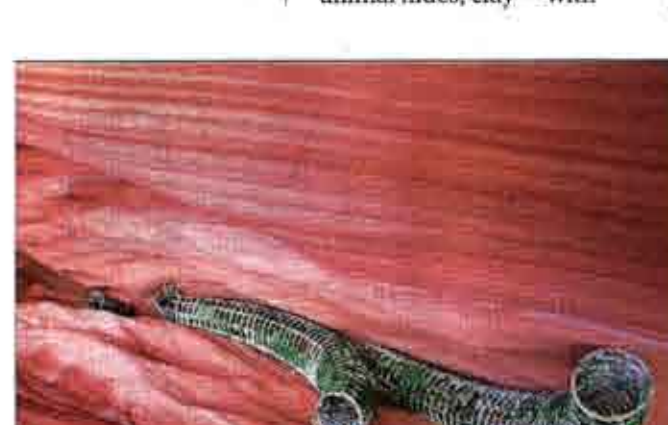
Sculptor John Grade and assistant Helen Stoner remove backing material from part of the triptych "Fold." An 8-foot tall resin piece of "Fold," at right, is currently buried somewhere in Idaho. Grade and Stoner wear respirator hoods to protect from potentially dangerous airborne particles.



JOHN GRADE

space-age materials to form structures designed to spend as much as a decade outdoors, being eaten by bugs, pecked by birds, bashed by the sun. Grade's best-known works, the award-winning "Fold," a 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.

If you will — at this point the Styrofoam blob with undulating surface contours, some modeled after shapes of his own body. (Grade, who has viewed many landscapes around the globe for inspiration, professes a fascination with funerary practices, or how cultures present bodies back to the earth.) On its surface, Grade is affixing another row of tiny hollowed-out cubes of African heartwood with a mix of dark and light grains.



From left: Grade's "Collector" on a canyon floor in Utah, 2008; the installation "Seeps of Winter" at Suyama Gallery in Belltown, 2008; and "Circuit," Grade's installation of glazed ceramic bonded with gypsum polymer to corn-based resin embedded with marine netting, at the Davidson Galleries, 2010.



JOHN GRADE

< Continued from previous page now holding together the wood.

But it's just an idea. The unknowns are driving the bus. He can predict how the termites will dine, but can't account for a change in appetite, other diners, or other environmental conditions, such as drainage or lack of it.

"I have a little bit of say in terms of where and when they're going to eat," he says, his eyes lighting up. "But it's really more anarchy than that."

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 near Roslyn this winter was put on hold when the peak was pulled into a federal land swap.

And last year, another major Grade work, "Bloom: The Elephant Bed," met an un-

timely end in Bellingham. The installation's two-story biodegradable cones were being removed from Whatcom Museum, on their way to what Grade hoped would be a spectacular slow dissolve in Bellingham Bay. Literally at the last moment, the mayor got cold feet and

With a moving truck loaded with art that had to go somewhere, the city sheepishly lent a hand — a fire-truck. The cones were dumped in a nearby field and blasted apart by fire hoses, the runoff oozing — where else? — into the bay.

Different problems, same end. No problem. All this disintegration makes Grade's current major work — likely to be his most visible yet — rather ironic, because it also will be his most enduring to date.

It is a massive, 60-foot-tall wooden sculpture that will hang suspended from the high ceiling in the new Museum of History & Industry at South Lake Union Park. The wood is Douglas fir — gruffly 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, which was being stored in pieces at Magnuson Park. Today, the timber is tidily stacked, floor to ceiling, in Grade's studio, drying.

The wood will be cut into

smaller pieces, the surface of each mechanically sculpted to emit light through concave or convex holes — not unlike the worm holes that sent rotted portions of Wawona, one of the largest three-masted schooners built in North America, to a landfill.

The pieces then will be assembled into a massive, vertical structure, which, from the rear, evokes the shape of a ship's spine. From the front, it will look more like a hollowed-out Douglas fir — perhaps a Douglas fir, 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.

This hanging, Jenga-on-steroids piece will be held to-

WEB EXTRA

More to see Watch a video of John Grade at work, and view a gallery of additional photos at seattletimes.com

gathering webbing by unseen climbing larchly — tethered on to the floor, but not resting on it. Visitors who push on it will see the wood subtly move, like a wad on a water bed.

"It will animate," Grade says. "I want to give a sense of it being a living, breathing thing."

Assuming necessary permits come through, the sculpture when finished in summer 2012 will appear to project through the building's roof, and below its floor.

Clear acrylic panels will separate the piece, and viewers, from the sky above and Lake Union below.

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 preserved indefinitely.

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: Here it is, after all, trying in this instance to preserve material that already was well along a path to disintegration 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."

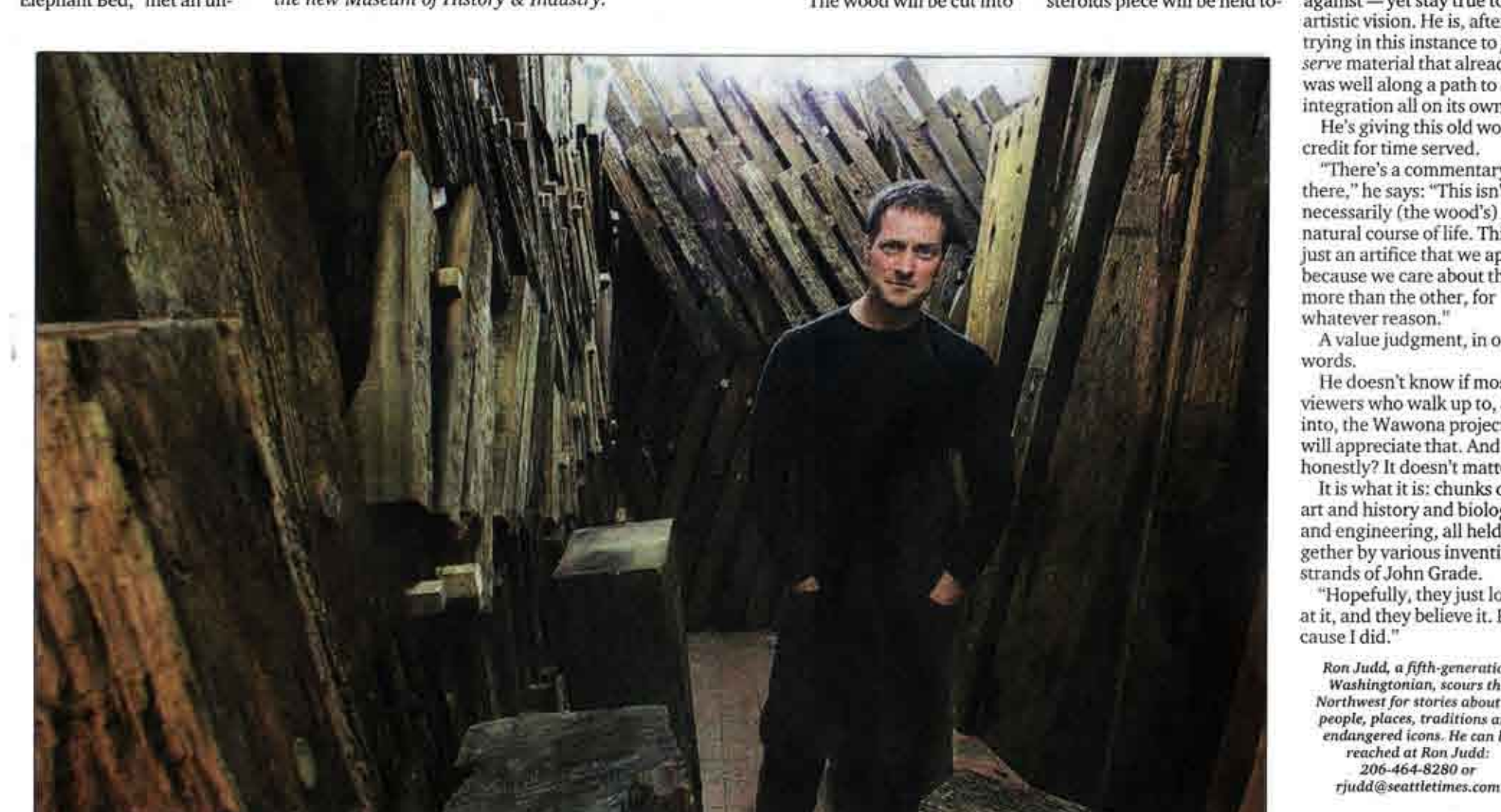
A value judgment, in other words.

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 issues. He can be reached at Ron.Judd@seattletimes.com or 206-464-8280 or rjudd@seattletimes.com



John Grade stands among the saltwater-seasoned old-growth planks and beams salvaged from the Wawona, the 1897 schooner that spent its later years berthed at South Lake Union Park waiting for a restoration that never came.

Information SEE JOHN GRADE'S photo archive of previous projects, plus other articles about the artist and a schedule of upcoming exhibits at www.johngrade.com/archive