

Art Review Revue

In the long line of men making art in the wilderness, John Grade represents a break. He is not like the artists who compete with nature, the ones who

make mountains in the desert using bulldozers (Michael Heizer) or outdo the woods with tricks of light and composition (the Hudson River School), or like the ones who just tinkle nature and let it shiver beautifully (Andy Goldsworthy). He labors on obsessively refined sculptures that look like nests or hives—gridded, postminimalist,

John Grade: Disintegration

Bellevue Arts
Museum
Through Nov 30.

human versions of animal creations—and then he sinks them to the bottom of a bog to lie with the rotting bones of people frozen there decades

ago, or he submerges them in an oyster bay, or he posts them to the front of his pickup truck and drives through clouds of bugs. He signs up for decay and lets go of form, but he keeps the old dream of form alive in the meticulous structures that persist under the pockmarked surfaces.

Bellevue Arts Museum has done Seattle a favor by mounting an exhibition on the front end of what is shaping up to be this significant Seattle artist's middle period. He didn't *have* to have a middle period. For a while there he was making sculptures and drawings that sold well and were plenty good enough. He possesses Leonardo-like—demigod-like—reproductive powers of the hand and eye, especially on paper. Some of his semiastract pencil drawings, often nothing more than fuzzy gray fields with bright spots, are so soft and atmospheric that they seem to introduce new zones into the world. They don't have to be of anything; they *are* things, without playing head games or touting theories. Their attitude is something like the art of Cris Bruch's: Do whatever you like; I'll just be over here *working*.

A few drawings are on display at BAM, in the exhibition *Disintegration: Sculpture Through Landscape* (which was curated by Stefano Catalani and has a very nice catalog to go with it), but for the most part the show comprises sculptures that have been subjected to, or are about to be subjected to, the out of doors. The four major works are *Fold*, *Collector*, *Host*, and *Meridian*. Their dates are all given as either 2007 or 2008, but the truth is that they undermine the idea of dating a work of art, fixing it in time. *Meridian*, for instance, is a giant, carefully lit spectacle that looks a little embarrassing all tarted up and given its own darkened room. You can stand inside the giant hollowed-out hive, which is somewhat fun because of the way its translucent rubber surface traps and changes light, but in the gallery it is like a costume waiting for an actor.

The point of these sculptures is that they migrate from indoors to outdoors and back. They are always in transition. Anything might happen to them, and I'm not sure Grade knows yet exactly what he wants to happen to them. What is their end point?

When does he decide to stop moving them, to freeze them in time? Or will their destruction be forever deferred? Eventually, will the photographs and the itineraries of the sculptures stand in for the sculptures? I get the feeling that the answer to this question is no, that the bodies themselves have to persist.

The reason why is their physical majesty. Take *Fold*, a seven-and-a-half-foot-tall object that looks like a slice of a tunnel, its surfaces all crumpled and irregular as if it were made of foil. But it's made of hard wood and even harder resin, and its surface is like honeycomb, all rectangular holes. These are chambers where termites will be able to crawl inside and make themselves at home when the sculpture is sunk into the sand in the Great Basin Desert in Nevada, like a great, curvy, Zaha Hadid-inspired insect apartment complex jutting up out of the earth only slightly. After the termites eat through the wood, they—and we—will still have the resin. Right? JEN GRAVES



ACTIVE PERSISTENCE *The sculptures of John Grade.*