

BLOOM : THE ELEPHANT BED

A site-specific art installation by
John Grade



Saturday April 10th, 2010.

2:30 p.m.: The closing procession of sculptures into Bellingham Bay begins in front of the Lightcatcher building and will proceed through Maritime Heritage Park to Central Avenue.

WHAT'S A COCCOLITHOPHORE?

Floating inches below the surface of the sea are tiny microorganisms called coccolithophores. Individually, they are too small to see, but grouped together they form such large masses that they can be seen from satellites blanketing hundreds of miles of ocean, coloring the water a bright turquoise.

John Grade, *Shoal (Shoal Somers)*, 2003
Cast resin, fabric, cloth, 35 x 30 x 30 in.
Collection of Dink and Michael Zirnicky



CURATOR'S NOTE



Bloom: The Elephant Bed at the Lightcatcher

Unlike any other type of phytoplankton, each coccolithophore surrounds itself with a microscopic plating made of limestone (calcite). When a coccolithophore dies (they have a life span of a few weeks), this outer shell slowly sinks down to the ocean floor. Hundreds of thousands of years ago these shells accumulated and formed a sedimentary layer that can be seen today as the white cliffs of Dover along England's southern coast. Geologists named this exposed accumulation of calcium made from the casings of coccolithophores, the "Elephant" bed.

IN THE LONG-TERM, coccolithophores appear to be a positive force in the reduction of green house gasses.

When I first imagined masses of coccolithophore shells slowly sinking to the seabed, I wondered what witnessing that journey might sound like. I pictured thin casings softly colliding under water and piling together at the bottom, currents shifting them together into locked clusters. In 2003, I made a sculpture called Shoal based on this interest. Thin wedges of wood form small acoustic enclaves that radiate together away from the wall. I gave each hollow form a puckered opening where lips might blow sound through and hung the whole assemblage on a ring so that one might imagine a person wearing this "instrument" on his or her body.

Over the past decade there has been controversy over the role of coccolithophores as they relate to the health of the world's oceans and global warming. They thrive in areas of the sea that are otherwise largely lifeless, primarily in sub polar regions. Generally, when coccolithophores inhabit an area, they dominate and supplant other forms of phytoplankton. In the past two years, coccolithophores have begun to cover large areas of the Bering Sea. This has caught scientists by surprise because the Bering Sea is usually a very nutrient-rich body of water.

In the long-term, coccolithophores appear to be a positive force in the reduction of green house gasses. With the formation of each calcium shell, a tiny bit of carbon is removed from the environment to become part of the shell that will eventually sink harmlessly to the ocean floor. But an immediate concern arises when a coccolithophore takes carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere (for sustenance) because it simultaneously releases a small portion of it into the sea. This can cause the upper layers of the ocean to become warmer and stagnant – essentially creating a "dead zone" in the ocean suitable only for sustaining more coccolithophores. Over the past ten years, coccolithophores have been a growing presence in the world's oceans as they cyclically bloom in greater numbers.

One of my goals with the installation of Bloom is to employ scale so that we can tangibly encase ourselves within a form inspired by the shell of a coccolithophore (by walking under and inside one of the sculptures). I am interested in impermanence, at directing our attention to what is compelling within a state of decay or disintegration.

John Grade, *September 2009*

"IN A SUBTLE and elegant way, *Bloom* draws public attention to this century's most pressing issue."

John Grade's abstract sculptures reference the formation and erosion of landscape. *Bloom: The Elephant Bed* reflects the artist's fascination with microscopic marine organisms whose shells account for the limestone sediments along the ocean floor and stretches of chalky shoreline.

Walking through *Bloom's* forest of organic forms, visitors can explore a unique environment that will change over time. During the course of the exhibition, several sculptures will be lowered into a pool of inky-black water where they will slowly dissolve. The remaining pieces will be cast into the Bellingham Bay during a public procession on Saturday, April 10, 2010.

Grade's interest in these tiny creatures intersects with his concern about global warming. The artist has researched both their negative and positive effects on climate change scenarios. In a subtle and elegant way, *Bloom* draws public attention to this century's most pressing issue.

The artist's passion for the environment extends to the sustainable materials that he uses for his installations. *Bloom's* ten suspended compositions, made from a paper-like product, breaks down into harmless particles upon contact with water. The works' thin structural ribs, created from a corn-based plastic, also dissolve in liquid. Materials, forms, process, and subject converge here in a celebration of nature's awesome beauty and the artist's fertile imagination.

Barbara Matilsky, *Curator of Art*

"I AM INTERESTED in impermanence, at directing our attention to what is compelling within a state of decay or disintegration."



John Grade, *Shoal (Shoal Somers)*, 2003
Wood, 40 x 24 x 14 in, Collection of Dink and Michael Zirnicky

