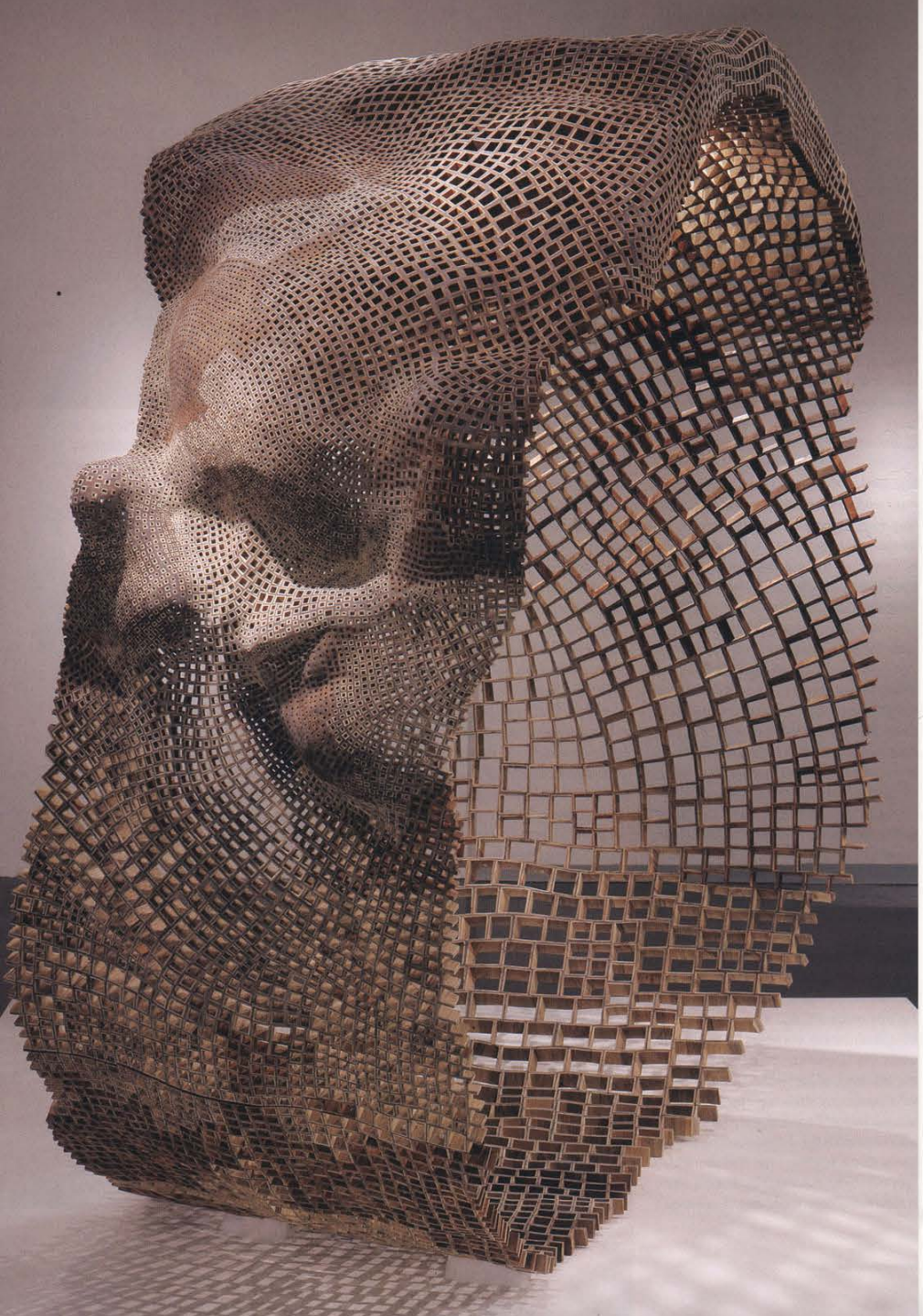


ANTICIPATING AND LETTING GO

John Grade

BY JANET KOPLOS

John Grade's spring show at Cynthia-Reeves Gallery gave a good sense of the scope of his thinking, especially following his introduction to New York audiences a few weeks earlier, when he won the $10,000 Willard L. Metcalf Award in Art (for a "young artist of great promise") at the American Academy of Arts and Letters invitational exhibition. *Fold* (2008), the sculpture shown at the American Academy, consists of an irregular freestanding wooden circle about 2.5 feet wide and 7.5 feet in diameter, a lattice structure striking for its workmanship and its visually seductive yet almost indescribably complex constructive detail. Grade also showed two photographs of pieces placed in natural settings—not groomed sites, but the wild. The gallery show expanded on that latter aspect with more photos. Grade's work needs site illustrations to be fully understood, for he is no longer simply a maker of sculptures. His recent work also involves time and performance, since it may be made with the aid of volunteers and trucked to one or more outdoor sites where weather and creatures take over the finishing. By the time this story is published, *Fold* will be offered to termites.

Circuit, the major work at Cynthia-Reeves, appeared as an elliptical arrangement of tall hooded niches about eight feet tall. They faced alternately in and out, giving the overall form a scalloped perimeter. Here, Grade uses glazed ceramic backed with gypsum polymer laminated to corn-based resin and marine netting (more on these odd constituents later). Entering the gallery, one encountered the work as an imperturbable wall. But following the wall's gradual curve—while noticing the variety in the surface—one came to an opening to the interior; another segment reclined on the floor. Each part was made of small panels cast by volunteers in a mold provided by Grade (pronounced, by the way, GRAH-dee) and textured with small round recesses (imagine a mold for industrial rubber floor tiles) to yield protrusions with differing degrees of relief, determined by each participant's process decisions. The dark glaze is split by white crackle that makes the surface look leathery or weathered. In the gallery, strings led from the top of each segment to a central point and draped onto the floor, as if they might be pulled to close

Opposite and above: *Fold*, 2008. Wood and resin, 8 x 8 x 5 ft.

Top, center, and detail: *Circuit*, 2010. Glazed ceramic, gypsum polymer, corn-based resin, and marine netting, 111 x 288 x 288 in.

the structure like a drawstring bag. In the next phase of *Circuit*'s existence, the parts will be carried by volunteers up to the peak of a mountain in Grade's home state of Washington, joined together, and left there to experience the elements for a year. A subsequent exhibition will reveal nature's contribution.

Grade considers this kind of project a success when there is a compelling balance between what he anticipates and the effects that chance works on the piece. He makes the work with an image in mind, and then he lets go and hands it over to fate.

He is certainly not the first to take this approach. The Japanese sculptor Masaaki Nishi, for example, put seven steel cylinders of his height and arm span into different environments in 1987—one in the ocean, one in an industrial yard, one in the ground, and so on—and after a year exhibited the retrieved objects. He spoke of them as being like his children; they were raised according to his intentions but moved into the world on their own. On a more modest scale, artists such as Dove Bradshaw have placed a receptive surface on a rooftop so that nature "paints" it.

Grade is a generation younger than either of those artists, and perhaps because expectations are different and there are more funding opportunities now, he is operating on a larger scale and on an increasingly public plane. For Fabrica Art Center in Brighton, England, last year, he created *The Elephant Bed*, consisting of a group of 24-foot-tall gridded paper cones with graceful curves faintly reminiscent of the conical pendant fans of 16th-century English cathedral ceilings. Grade brought his components with him in four suitcases; they were assembled by volunteers and hung in the Fabrica exhibition space (a deconsecrated church), a few of them wicking up India ink from a shallow pool below. At the end of the exhibition, the other cones were walked through the streets of Brighton to the sea, each worn by a volunteer guided by a "minder." Once immersed, they dissolved instantly in the waves. The project was inspired by blooms of microscopic coccolithophore, the ancient source of the nearby White Cliffs of Dover, whose casings drift to the bottom of the sea.

Because Grade is concerned by toxic substances in our lives, *The Elephant Bed* was designed to dissolve harmlessly. Likewise, the unusual materials in *Circuit* will degrade without injuring the environment. In such cases, the work itself is not for sale in whole or in fragment, although ownership of documentation or of an "artist's proof" or maquette is possible. Grade says that while he thinks we're too obsessed with preserving things, what interests him, and what he wants to capture in his work, is not disappearance per se but simply change. He now believes that his early works were too resolved, because he knew the entire physical dialogue at the beginning. The recent projects, by contrast, he considers much more direct, involving what he calls "authentic experience" beyond his control.

Grade was born in Minneapolis in 1970 and lived there until age nine, when his parents, who were professionally involved in entomology and in art therapy and creative writing, relocated to Seattle. He graduated from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn in 1992, winning a travel award that he stretched out for six months by choosing to go to Third World countries where living was inexpensive. With the aid of subsequent grants, he was on the move for six years, on five continents. It was a drastic change and an eye-opener for someone who hadn't previously been beyond the U.S. and Canada. His travel experiences involved using his imagination to put together things he didn't know about. He was interested in cultural structuring and found himself drawn to architecture, especially funerary architecture. He was most affected by sites such as the Forest of the Dead in Vietnam, where bodies were traditionally placed for a year in hollowed-out niches in old-growth trees; the trees, which were never re-used, eventually formed scar tissue over the wounds. That forest no longer exists because of war damage (the trees he saw were smaller), but he brought the stories back with him, along with drawings that he made on site. Taken to the studio, they led to finished works that grew from such impressions and recollections of landscape.

Those early pieces are both formally engaging and richly allusive, although they never describe a particular place. They are

The Elephant Bed, 2009. Dissolving paper and corn-based polymer, 24 x 6 ft.

most striking for their variety of materials, their container metaphor, and their repetitive structures. For example, *Confessional* (1999), of wood and resin, is a partly latticed, curving box that opens up in very irregular sections to reveal a translucent cylindrical object. (Early on, he made a number of works that unfolded in some way.) *Jaw* (2002) forms a plaster-and-soap spiraling band edged with teeth. *Siamese Tinaja (Waterholes)* (2003), a wall piece of cast iron, consists of a pair of barnacle or breast forms, open at the tips and featuring honeycombed texture. Another wall piece, *Silt* (2003) consists of a vessel-shaped, wooden outline filled with perforated clay

Jaw, 2002. Plaster and soap, 24 x 24 x 24 in.

and resin that continues past the neck of the vessel outline, like an overflow. *Shoal Interior* (2003), a wall-hung, wood-banded circle, bulges with hundreds of rubber finger (or penis) forms.

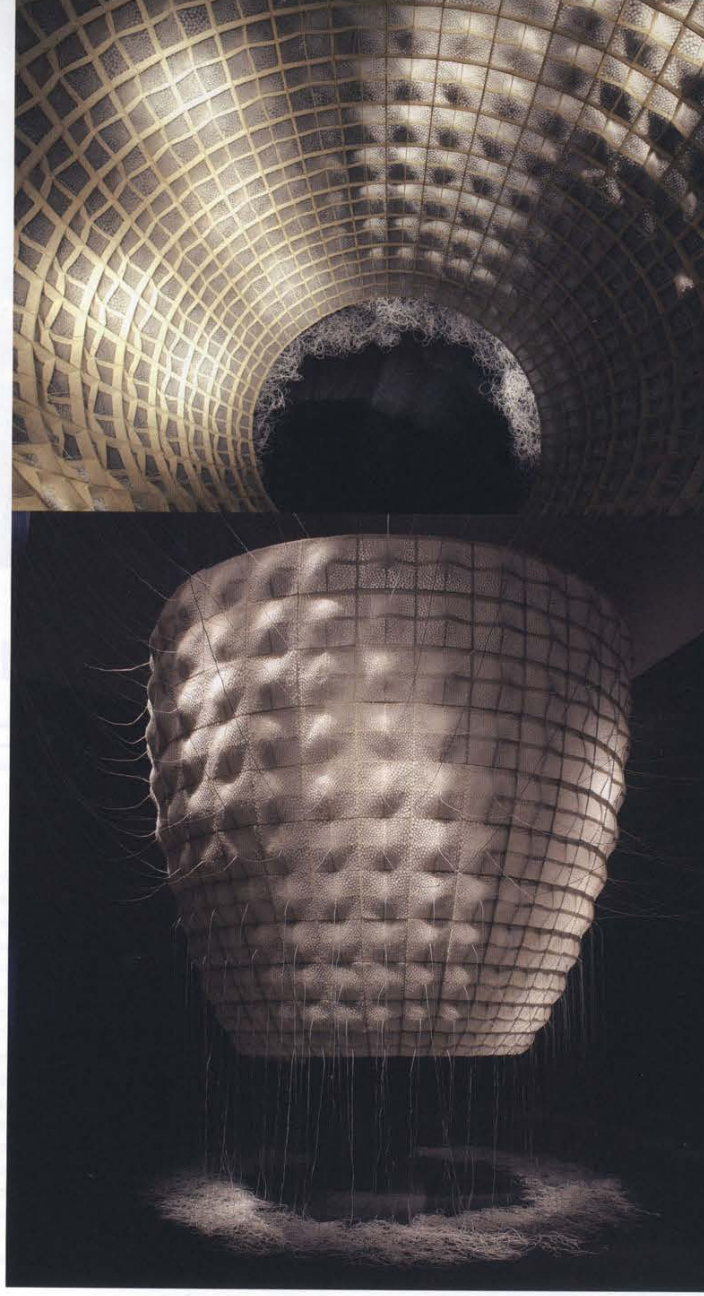
Dripper (1994), an outdoor work sited on the Olympic Peninsula west of Seattle that collected and channeled rainwater, was more predictive of Grade's current direction. Ceramic troughs on metal legs participated in environmental processes. A more fully developed realization of this approach can be seen in *Collector* (2007), a work that appeared in a photograph at the American Academy show and in person at Cynthia-Reeves. A wooden tubular construction in two curving parts that join to make a ring, it was first shown in a gallery, then submerged in water along the Washington coast, where it was unexpectedly subjected to a major storm. It survived and after a year was removed, along with the barnacles and seaweed that had attached or entangled themselves by then. Grade placed the two parts on the hood of his pickup truck, where they evoked tusks, and drove them to a site in Utah, intending for the encrustations to be scoured by periodic flooding in a slot canyon. But nature beat him to it: his chosen site was clogged with debris from a recent deluge. So, he reconsidered and suspended *Collector* on a plateau, where sun, wind, and birds worked on it. Subsequently reclaimed, it was included in his survey show at the Bellevue Art Museum near Seattle in 2008 and then at Cynthia-Reeves, where one could examine it up close, noting discolorations and gaps. It is still quite sound, considering.

***Collector*, 2007. Wood, 80 x 80 x 12 in.**

Here, then, we see Grade's current mindset: he makes a plan, and nature may or may not cooperate. He walked *Collector* into the landscape (actually seascape) in two pieces strapped to his back, but it was the first work that needed multiple participants to install. His scale and scope have only increased since then. Now he's committed to the idea that there should be many people participating both in making and in walking into nature, not just watching. He is also committed to the idea that there should be change. Death as an evolutionary stage was represented by dissolution in *The Elephant Bed*, and his openness to chance was put to the test when he recreated the work at the Whatcom Museum in Bellingham, Washington, last spring. He hoped to videotape the dissolution of the objects in still water, which had not been possible among the waves at Brighton. But life had another surprise for him: it could not be walked into the nearby bay because the permissions had not come through in time. Faced with finding an alternative ending, he dissolved the objects by turning fire hoses on them.

More than the typical sculpture, Grade's work has a deep backstory in its natural inspiration, its materials, and/or its placement. More than the typical installation, it has continuity, both literal and symbolic. More than the typical artwork, it accepts the fluidity of time and the possibility of death and rebirth. An exhibited work may be accompanied by a list of projected sites, giving a sense of the uncertainty of its future and playing against the strong presence of the substances that Grade chooses and the forms he skillfully constructs. His quasi-scientific procedures, along with the experience of isolated sites and meteorological events, take the work to a larger frame of reference that offsets its personal quality of handwork (whether or not his own). He achieves an extraordinary balance: physical immediacy against vulnerability. Grade's wanderings are still essential to the work. The photo documentation is beautiful and engrossing in itself, but even more powerful is the tenuous and meaningful duality of the projects themselves.

Janet Koplos is a writer living in New York.



***Meridian*, 2008. Rubber, rigid foam, cables, and filament, 14 x 16 x 16 ft.**