



# We Are the Landscape

A Conversation with

**Steven Siegel**

DOUGLAS BAZ

*Biography*, 2008–ongoing. Mixed-media project with no fixed endpoint or dimensions.

BY JOHN K. GRANDE





*Grass Paper Glass*, 2006. Grass, paper, and glass, 3 cubes, 8 x 8 x 8 ft. each. Work installed at Grounds For Sculpture, Hamilton, NJ.

Using pre-consumer and recycled materials—discarded newspapers, crushed soda cans, empty milk containers, and shredded rubber—Steven Siegel creates public art and site-specific installations in natural and urban contexts that reinvent the role of sculpture for an eco-conscious planet. Connecting art-making and environmental processes, he builds impressive trash sculptures that reflect the deposit-and-decay cycle that underlies the making of the land. His large boulders made of compressed cans and plastic bottles and multi-layered newspaper ridges awaken awareness of the sheer scale of consumer waste in a beautiful, integrative way. Installed across Europe and North America, as well as Asia, Siegel's works prompt dialogue about society, landscape, and form—all with an eye for nature's processes.

**John K. Grande:** *Your sculptural production has been considerable, with commissions in numerous public and private venues. Many of your projects approach sculpture through process, with a sensitivity to the specific environment. Can you give me a few examples?*

**Steven Siegel:** The suite of pieces for Grounds For Sculpture presented a challenge because it is a very manicured setting, not the sort of place where I normally work. I did manage to find an out-of-the-way place that was a little rough, and we enlisted many people—paid staff and volunteers—to help with the project. Typically, when I work on a site, the first thing I ask about is the kind of free material that might be available in large quantities. The staff found a huge quantity of glass from a nearby factory that was going out of business. That became the starting point for the work.

**JG:** *Grass Paper Glass, the piece at Grounds For Sculpture, presents cubes or containers that are, and contain, the raw product refuse materials that you used to make them. Do you consider this sculpture to be a comment on economies of scale?*

**SS:** Most things that we do as a species have an enormous impact on the environment. When I went to see what was available for the project, there were 10,000 pounds of glass waiting. It was a challenge to come up with a plan for materials that were foreign to me. The entire project was predicated on what I had to start with—the glass. Because the glass pieces were a foot square, the thing that came to suggest itself was a cube, and I decided that three would be more interesting than one. This glass was material that a manufacturer had overproduced and was going to throw out. Overruns and unusable material are normal. If you look at the work, you are looking at an infinitesimally thin slice of the solid waste stream. The other thing that Grounds For Sculpture does very well



*Xenia*, from "Wonderful Life," 2002–08. Mixed media, 57 x 81 x 25 in.



*Like a rock, from a tree?*, 2008. Newspaper, 8 x 40 x 12 ft. Work installed in Gongju, Korea.

is landscaping. The grass cube, for example, has both internal and external irrigation systems running through it.

Typically these projects require one or two paid skilled people, but then we also get a lot of volunteers. They can be students, or they can be retired. It all depends. It becomes a communal activity for several weeks, and the work is designed, in part, to meet the skills of the participants.

**JG:** *The configurations of your works come about as a result of getting to know a place, the land that you are using. Do you have a preconceived idea before you visit a site like Yattoo, in Gongju, Korea, before you start working?*

**SS:** I will have an idea, particularly if I have just learned something from a particular process that I want to continue. I recently did a paper piece near Mirabel in Quebec that had a flat top, and this seemed like a good starting point for the piece in Korea. It is about evolution and process versus concept—how things evolve over time.

**JG:** *A lot of the art that I see these days is extremely decorative. Much of it is really about product and not necessarily process.*

**SS:** It is being taught that way in the schools. Students think a critique is when an expert comes in and tells them whether their work is good or bad. Not so. When I visit, my job is merely to help guide them to their own conclusions. There is such an emphasis on concept and execution these days that students can't articulate what is actually in front of them. Typically they want to discuss what they thought, or what the assignment was, not what they see. They are not living in the visual realm. They are living in the conceptual realm.

**JG:** *So, how an artwork communicates visually becomes secondary to the thought processes that led to the final product.*

**SS:** By necessity, the artwork cannot communicate by those means because it is a freestanding object. Simply put, if your ideas are so great and can stand on their own, why bother making something visual? The point is that the expression can only be in the visual realm. And there are very few new ideas.



**JG:** *You recently made a piece in Wyoming. Does that use newspaper again?*

**SS:** No. It is a configuration of 30 cubic yards of wood mulch, representative of my interest in evolutionary biology. I call these works "container pieces" because their means of organizing materials is more akin to biology than geology. There is more complexity and more opportunity. Recently, my interest in science has moved toward life and evolutionary biology.

I have slowly been moving away from paper for 15 years, but the paper pieces are popular. I will continue to do them as long as there are interesting sites in new places. My discovery of paper as a medium 18 years ago grew out of an interest in sedimentary geology. I was thinking about how we reintroduce materials back into the landscape, specifically in landfills. What would geology look like in a few million years? I made the first newspaper piece near my home in New York State and referred to it as *New Geology*. I started with one newspaper and began stacking them. It was very labor intensive and involved tons of newspaper, and it was very much about accepting the process. *New Geology* was time-related if it was anything. Weather, climate, and the seasons all acted on the piece. The paper would freeze solid in winter, fade and expand with the effects of rain and forest light. The paper withstood a lot.

**JG:** *You recently exhibited a new series at the Turchin Center for the Visual Arts in North Carolina (2008) that addresses your interest in evolutionary biology.*





**SS:** I completed “Wonderful Life,” a group of 52 wall pieces, six years after I accidentally got into it. It is about the simple, cumulative changes that generate form, from generation to generation. There being no wolves, competition for mates, or climate change to force natural selection in the studio, the artist’s eye served as the determinant, what we used to call sensibility. The title is borrowed from Stephen Jay Gould. He described the matrix of life forms found in the fossil record of the Burgess Shale in British Columbia as containing a variety perhaps never surpassed in the history of our planet.

**JG:** *The layering of our landscape includes manufactured refuse, so what we call “natural” may, in fact, not be natural at all.*

**SS:** I don’t really believe in the word “natural,” because I believe that we are the landscape, not only by our physical presence, but also by the messes we leave and the way

*It goes under, 2008. Wood mulch, wood chips, and window screening, 250 ft. long. Work installed at the University of Wyoming.*

we reconfigure all of the material around us—from the roadway to the recycling of cans to nuclear waste. Our presence is there in every molecule. My interest in geology eventually evolved into the next step. Many of the raw chemicals found in the rocks eventually sparked life. Life as it evolved became increasingly complex. The first reproductive cell was infinitely more complicated than any stone you will find on the mountain. Life is more complex, so as a metaphor to work from, it enables one to organize materials in much more complex ways. It opens up whole new horizons. The generation of form is paramount for me. All of my interest in science, and the politics and social and ecological issues, is there, but aesthetic concerns are at the top.

**JG:** *So your work is quintessentially sculptural, with a sensitized understanding of the specific environmental context. Is the Wyoming piece more like a bioform?*

**SS:** If your organizing principle is layering, you limit the kinds of materials that you can use: newspaper, flat stone, and maybe some industrial materials. Life, unlike the landscape, is not about layering. Life is



*Zelig, from “Wonderful Life,” 2002–08. Mixed media, 68 x 84 x 24 in.*





*This one is flat*, 2008. Newspaper, 7 x 25 x 10 ft.  
Work installed in Mirabel, Canada.

about containers. Starting with the atom, the molecule, the cell, a tree, even humans—all of these elements are containers. This means that you can stand up and function, from your DNA right up to your eyeballs. It is all incredibly complex. Understanding how all this is built through the process of evolution serves as an over-arching metaphor. *It goes under* is part of a series that I have been working on for years.

I have come to believe that the evolution and refinement of a craft is very similar to the evolution of a species. Natural selection, environmental influence, mutation—these things are there. A craft evolves because it is easier this way, or that tree was in the way, or we needed the water to stay off this part. There are parallels to the natural world. Once a craft gets established, I get bored with it and want to invent another one.

**JG:** *The Wyoming sculpture partly disappears and gives a sense of flow into the landscape.*

**SS:** The original plan used a modular system, and the framework was prefabricated in the museum's woodshop. All of the sections were made in advance, to be assembled on site, where they could be put together in whatever configuration I wanted. We got about two-thirds of it framed, and the Laramie River flooded. For one week, the site was inundated with water. We couldn't work anymore, and I was ready to go home before it occurred to me that we could work on the other side of the water. The piece appears to dive down into the water and come up the hillside on the other bank. When the water receded, we went back and finished the first part. With no water there, it looks like it dives down into the ground and comes back up at another place, hence the title.

**JG:** *Nature intervened directly in the Wyoming piece, something that I find fascinating, particularly because it contributed to the process and final form of the work.*

**SS:** I have discovered that when the site generates the form, it is more interesting. These works are particular to the sites where they have been built.

**JG:** *You mentioned a piece in Quebec. Is that in a park near Mirabel, north of Montreal?*

**SS:** Yes. I was asked to do a newspaper piece. The people were so determined to make this work, they put themselves out there every day. The trees configured the piece as they did for my recent Korean work.

**JG:** *Were the trees part of the support structure?*

**SS:** No. I decided that a level top would contrast with the slope of the forest.

**JG:** *So that relates to the skyline or light.*

**SS:** It relates to horizon. If you walk through a landscape, you are vertical, or plumb. When you look at a slope, you are aware it is sloping because your eyes are level. The

flat top on this piece sets off the landscape and everything around it. At Yatoo in Gongju, south of Seoul, I did something similar. The sculpture is on the steep hillside of Mount Yeonmisan. There are huge boulders on the hillside that make the piece.

**JG:** *What are you working on now?*

**SS:** I am currently working on a new studio project, a single piece of indeterminate length that should keep me busy for a few years. It has the working title *Biography*, and it is very crazy and exciting. It represents the evolution of an object within the physical constraints of the object. It is a timeline, like a landscape, with references to many things that have interested me, and it involves many of the materials that I have used in the past.

**JG:** *What is it that makes a sculpture work?*

**SS:** I would like the visual arts to be appreciated in the same way as music. If it needs to be explained, it probably isn't very good. Let's get rid of the verbiage, let it stand on its own.

*John K. Grande is a Contributing Editor for Sculpture. He is Curator of Earth Art at Canada's Royal Botanical Gardens. His most recent book is Art Allsorts; Writings on Art & Artists (2008), available at <[www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com)>. His Web site is <[www.grandescritique.com](http://www.grandescritique.com)>.*