

# Impermanence, in Concrete

By MICHAEL O'SULLIVAN  
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Ledelle Moe's sculpture seems to hover in an in-between state.

Which may sound like a funny thing to say about things made of concrete and steel. Things that look like boulders, not clouds. And yet hover they do.

Two of them are on view in the outdoor sculpture garden of the American University Museum, along with a selection of preparatory drawings and prints. Another piece can be seen at the nearby Kreeger Museum, which has just honored the South African-born, Baltimore-based artist with the 2008 Kreeger Artist Award. The \$20,000 check that comes with it should buy the 37-year-old a lot of concrete.

Now, when I say they hover, I don't mean visually. If anything, some of Moe's sculptures look as though they've been pulled down from pedestals by army tanks. They're dirty, rough-looking, heavy things, lying on their sides. They have the patina of some-

thing dead, or at least very old.

But if something's dead, wasn't it once alive? That implicit contradiction — between the past and the present, between the animate and the inanimate — is central to Moe's work. What is it about? It can be summed up in a single word: loss.

"Erosion I," at the Kreeger, is a kind of figure. That's clear. Inspired by weather-worn graveyard statuary, it has a head, an arm and skirt. But is it male or female? Or even human? It could be a giant stone angel knocked off its perch, its gossamer robe still billowing in an evocation of what Moe calls the "sculpted wind" found in so much funerary art.

But it also suggests the Statue of Liberty. Not as she proudly stands in New York Harbor, but something closer in spirit to the ruined version in the climactic beach scene from "Planet of the Apes." The political subtext doesn't hit you right away (the erosion of liberty, get it?), but it's there all the same. Nearly filling the gallery at the Kreeger in which it is installed, the work is both aggressively in your face and strangely intimate.

The two sculptures in the AU museum's "Ledelle Moe: Disasters" have a bit more breathing room. You can walk around them easily or gaze at them from a distance. But they exist in the same uneasy space as "Erosion I."

Again, they're suggestive of figures. Intertwined limbs can be glimpsed. But are they human or animal? Embracing or fighting? And are the shapeless sacks that seem to hide their forms bed sheets or body bags?

Moe's fascinated, she says, by impermanence. Mortality, materiality, upheavals both sociological and geological. In fact, she builds it into her work: Moe rubs used motor oil into the surface of her sculptures to create a distressed, hide-like "skin." This also has the side effect of weakening its structure.

Things fall apart. Erosion is natural, as are disasters. In Moe's own words, her art is a "tangible way of dealing with those intangibles." Halfway between the solid and the insubstantial, her melting, monumental forms remind us of the sadness, and the beauty, of decay.

## LEDELLE MOE: DISASTERS

Through Oct. 26 at the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center, 4400 Massachusetts Ave. NW. 202-885-1300. [www.american.edu/museum](http://www.american.edu/museum). Open Tuesday-Sunday 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.; also open one hour before performing arts events in the Katzen. Free.

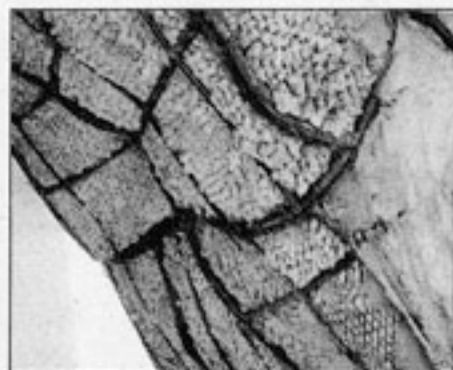
## LEDELLE MOE

Through Nov. 29 at the Kreeger Museum, 2401 Foxhall Rd. NW. 202-337-3050. [www.kreegermuseum.org](http://www.kreegermuseum.org). The special exhibition may be viewed Tuesday-Friday by reservation only during a 10:30 a.m. or 1:30 p.m. guided tour. Reservations are not needed Saturdays from 10 to 4. For tours, call 202-338-3552. \$10; \$7 for students and seniors.

## ARTIST TALK

The artist will talk about her work Nov. 19 from 1:30 to 3 p.m. at the Kreeger Museum. \$10. For reservations, call 202-338-3552.

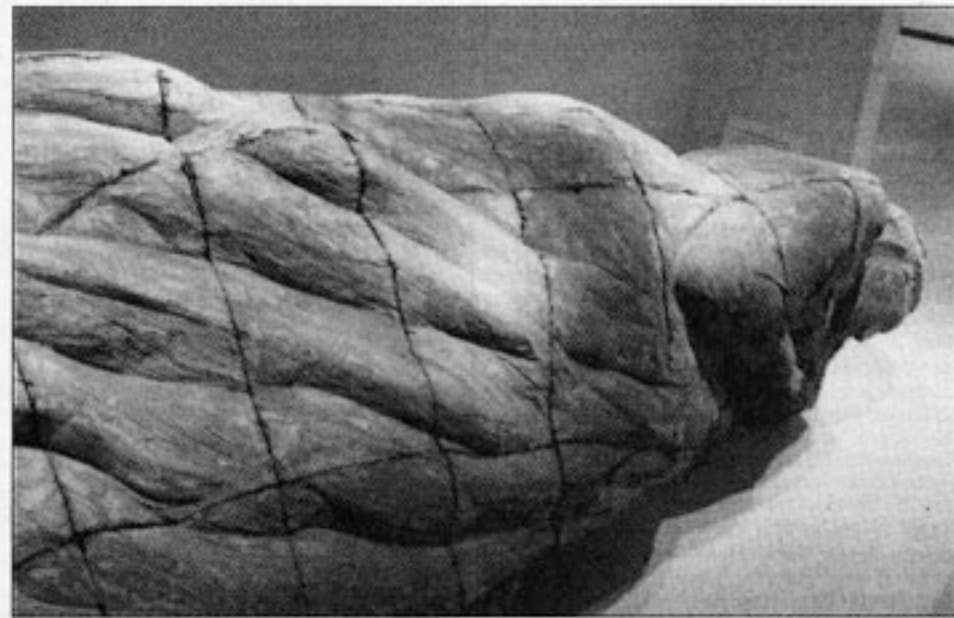
## The Story Behind the Work



Ledelle Moe uses cast concrete fortified with fly ash, a waste product of coal combustion, for her sculptures.

The industrial use of cast concrete has a rich history in South Africa. As Ledelle Moe notes with pride, it was in her homeland that a widely used form of concrete breakwater was invented in the early 1960s. Called *dolosse*, after the Afrikaans name for toys resembling jacks, the heavy, interlocking bone-shaped chunks of concrete today are used around the world to protect harbors and shore lines from the destructive force of ocean waves.

The irony isn't lost on Moe that her material of choice — a metaphor for impermanence — has proved to be such a durable defense against Mother Nature. Nor is the fact that the concrete she's now using is fortified with fly ash, a waste product of coal combustion whose reclamation as a building material has been hailed by environmentalists. She's saving the planet, you see, even as she makes art about its disintegration.



BY ERICH KEEL — KREEGER MUSEUM

Moe's "Erosion I" nearly fills the Kreeger Museum gallery in which it is installed.