

High Praise

At a point when most careers peak, Sonoma arts philanthropist Steve Oliver is still building one. Bigger.

BY LAURA HILGERS • PHOTOGRAPHS BY LENNY GONZALEZ

STEVE OLIVER has made an art of solving problems. As the president of the award-winning Bay Area construction firm Oliver & Company, he's spent countless hours figuring out how to build buildings, work with architects and finish projects on time and on budget. But when he encountered a work by the installation artist Edward Kienholz while visiting SFMOMA with his wife, Nancy, in the early 1970s, he was vexed. "It pissed me off," says Oliver. "I thought, 'This guy's trying to tell me something and I'm not getting it.'"

Oliver was so disturbed he left his office the following day and returned to the museum to puzzle it out. Surveying the piece again, he experienced "this great line you cross," an intellectual engagement like nothing he'd known before. It ignited a passion for the arts that has consumed him and has had a profound impact on the Bay Area — and national — art scenes to this day.

After that initial Kienholz encounter, Oliver became a contemporary art collector and, eventually, philanthropist. He has served on the board of SFMOMA, including as its chair, and helped oversee the museum's move to its current South of Market location. He's been on the board of the California College of the Arts (CCA) since 1981, helping to turn the college around after it nearly went broke. He helped found the Community Arts Stabilization Trust (CAST), which purchases and leases spaces for Bay Area nonprofit arts organizations. And he currently serves as chairman of United States Artists, an organization that annually awards 50 fellowships worth \$50,000 each to the country's most innovative artists, including filmmakers like Barry Jenkins, who directed the 2017 Academy Award winner *Moonlight*.

Even Oliver's so-called "down" time is dominated by art. For the last 30 years, he and Nancy have invited prominent artists, including Richard Serra and Bruce Nauman, to their 100-acre Geyserville ranch to create art. In the process, the ranch — which was spared in October's fires — has been home to one of the most ambitious private collections of site-specific art in the nation.

"He's a legend," says Stephen Beal, president of CCA. "His commitment and dedication to the arts and art education are enormous."

He's also an unlikely legend. An Oakland native, Oliver grew up in a creative home, but did not catch the art bug himself. His father taught watercolor and pen-and-ink for three years at UC Berkeley, and his mother and sisters were both artists. Oliver preferred cars. In his late teens and early 20s, he raced Formula Junior race cars for a living, making enough money to put himself through Cal, where he studied business and engineering. But when the earnings started to dry up in his senior year, Nancy — whom he'd recently married — offered a deal.



"She said, 'I'm sick of seeing you try to kill yourself every weekend. One of us ought to have a real job. So I'm going to quit school and I'll go back to finish my degree when our youngest child goes to school,'" he says.

Oliver readily agreed to that, especially because Nancy wasn't even pregnant. He was less enthused when, eight years later, after their second child entered kindergarten, she handed him the paper he'd signed and told him, "You'll be getting the laundry on Tuesdays and Thursdays."

As part of earning her American Studies degree at San Francisco State University, Nancy was required to go to museums and performances. Oliver didn't like her going out alone at night, so he tagged along. He says his "jaw dropped" when he saw the Kirov Ballet for the first time. After seeing Kienholz's artwork, he was hooked for good.

Oliver & Company was thriving by then, so the Olivers decided to purchase their first piece of art, paying \$600 for a drawing by Jim Dine, which still hangs in the bedroom of their home in one of San Francisco's historic districts today. It was money they had set aside for a three-day weekend in Carmel. They canceled the trip and bought the drawing instead.

Oliver also decided to use his business to support the arts, constructing buildings for a number of nonprofit and arts spaces, such as the Berkeley Repertory Theatre and the Charles M. Schulz Museum in Santa Rosa (also spared in the October fires), as well as the new residence hall, currently under construction, for CCA's San Francisco campus. He felt so strongly about this mission that, 23 years ago, he turned 50 percent of Oliver & Company over to his employees — with the proviso that half their work be done for nonprofits, at a reduced fee.

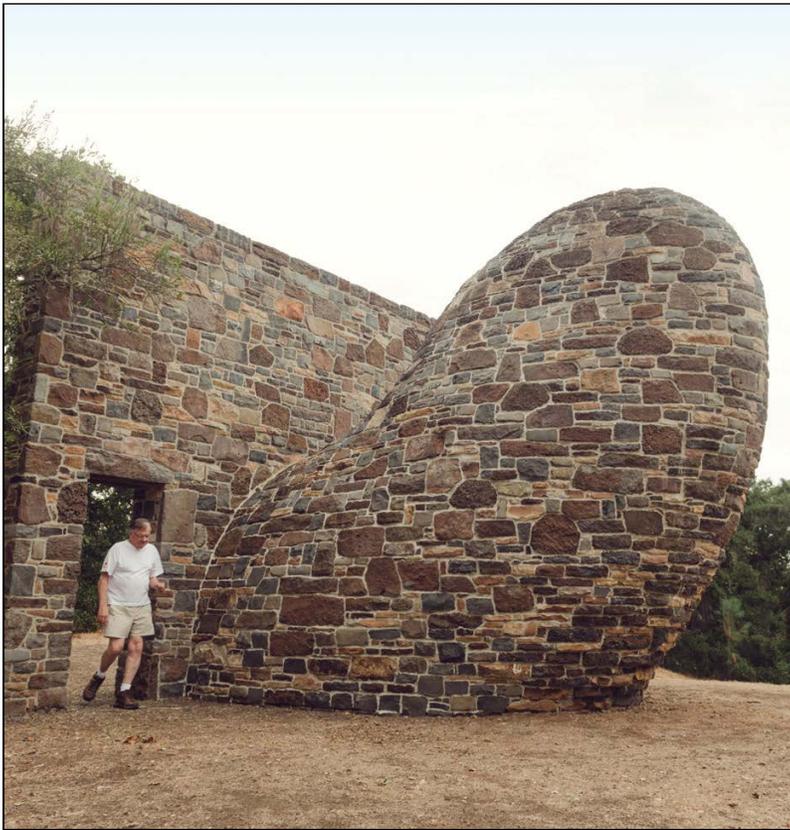
By all accounts, Oliver puts little stock in holding on to — or displaying — his wealth. When not at board meetings, he favors wellworn T-shirts. He drives a Volkswagen Tiguan. And he cares little about high-end vacations or golf, even though he and the extended Oliver family, which now includes grandchildren, own a house in Italy and take hiking trips in South America. "We've been lucky," Oliver says of his success, "and my father always said, 'If you do good, you have to do good with it.'"

For his generosity, Oliver has received much in return. "He is tireless and exuberant," says Moy Eng, executive director of CAST. "It's joyful for him."

His greatest joy comes from being a "studio assistant" to the artists who work at the ranch. It's something he's been doing since 1985, when he and Nancy commissioned their first piece of site-specific art as a rebuke to the go-go art world of the '80s, when paintings and sculptures were considered commodities. "Nancy said to me, 'If we commission work that's on site, it can't be moved or destroyed without losing its value.'" Artists could create only for the sake of creating.

Oliver loved the idea, and they invited their first artist, Judith Shea, to the ranch. The experiment got off to a rocky start, as Shea had different ideas about the project than the Olivers did. But they ultimately handed her the reins, resulting in "Shepherd's Muse" — an arresting sculpture arrangement that includes a bronze body-less overcoat situated in a lotus position. It sits in view of the patio where Oliver likes to read.





The experience was so exhilarating, the Olivers decided to do it again. The ranch — which was recently donated to the Community Foundation Sonoma County and offers private fundraising tours — now has 17 different pieces on site, including a performance tower by Ann Hamilton, a pasture full of steel blocks by Serra, and a stunning minimalist artists' residence, designed by architect Jim Jennings and artist David Rabinowitch. Doug Hall, a San Francisco artist, is currently working on a sculptural and audio installation, called "Wittgenstein's Garden," there.

As studio assistant to these artists, Oliver does what he likes best: solve problems. But he does it in ways that open his mind. He likes to tell the story of one artist who selected a site on the ranch and then realized that the spot where the art would be was five feet too high to be properly viewed from the dirt path that led up to it. Oliver crunched the numbers and determined they needed to remove 6,000 yards of dirt to fix the problem, requiring bulldozers and costing about \$30,000 to \$40,000. When he relayed this information, the artist replied, "What are you talking about? All we have to do is change the path."

"So," says Oliver, "for \$180, we moved the path up the hill."

He laughs as he tells the story. But what really comes across is how much he loves the opportunity to interact with these wildly creative minds. "Artists just think differently," he says. "They problem-solve differently."

From Steve Oliver, there could be no higher form of praise.