"The wintertime is my favorite, because it's the quietest time."
— STEVE OLIVER

Steve and Nancy Oliver relax in front of their 15-foot-wide fireplace, a focal point of the living room of their rustic Geyserville home, designed by San Francisco architect Robert Overstreet. The fireplace mantel is adorned with 20 bird nests.

HOME

It's where the art is

At Steve and Nancy Oliver's Geyserville ranch, creative genius, comfy relaxation converge

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If it all seems a little astonishing, blame it on Nancy.

Steve Oliver may be the front man for The Oliver Ranch, a renowned outdoor museum of contemporary works created by many of the leading artists of the age. But Oliver, one of the Bay Area's most respected arts patrons, with a wink fingers his petite wife, Nancy, as the instigator. It was she who set off what became a magnificently mutual obsession that eventually led the couple to turn their 100-acre property in Geyserville into a cradle for world-class art.

As a young mother and re-entry college student in the 1970s going on museum field trips, Nancy became intrigued by the edginess of contemporary art. She began dragging her race-car driving spouse to art galleries and ballets under protest. Eventually, her enthusiasm lit a fire under her reluctant mate, who went on to head the boards of both the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the California College of the Arts.

More than 30 years and some 350 acquisitions later, the Olivers have created one of the most ambitious and singular private collections of site-specific sculpture in the country, 18 completed installations — 16 visible — incongruously spread out among the meadows, knolls and trees of an old sheep ranch overlooking the Alexander Valley.

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A jigsaw puzzle is always under construction in the Oliver household, part of the uncomplicated lifestyle embraced by Steve and Nancy Oliver.

The Olivers' back patio, seen from inside the house where two glass walls meet in a point, opens to views of the Alexander Valley and many of their outdoor art pieces.

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"All this is her fault. There are days she regrets it, I'm sure," Oliver playfully needles.

It is an extraordinary accomplishment not just for the quality of the work but because each monumental piece was developed on site in a uniquely collaborative process with the Olivers that sometimes took years to design, locate and build. Many represent feats not just of artistic genius but of engineering might and ingenuity, not to mention good old tenacity.

But for Steve Oliver, who studied engineering and business at UC Berkeley and whose East Bay construction company, Oliver & Co., has built such high-profile projects as the Berkeley Repertory Theatre, the Schulz Museum in Santa Rosa, the Oxbow School in Napa and the Presidio Building 39 in San Francisco, a big part of the fun of each project is the planning and problem solving.

"I'm as addicted to the process as the product," concedes Oliver, who's still actively involved in Oliver & Co.

They frequently share this celebrated collection of commissioned art, with the cast of artists a Who's Who in contemporary art: Richard Serra, Robert Stackhouse, Ann Hamilton, Ursula Von Rydingsvard, Miroslaw Balka.

From April to June and September to November, busloads of visitors rumble up the steep hillside for tours the Olivers provide to nonprofits for charity fundraising. However many dozens of times he has done it, Oliver's delight in his ever-growing gallery never diminishes as he delivers an animated and rapid-fire narrative about each piece, its artist and the engineering and construction conundrums encountered in the process.

But when the ranch is quiet the couple, who have two adult children, two grandchildren, and a townhome South of Market in San Francisco, retreat to their country house, an architectural work of art in its own right, so conjoined to the land it literally rises up out of the rock.

"Neither of us has social aspirations," says Oliver, who sat for years on the SFMOMA board and headed the capital campaign to build the current museum, now a San Francisco landmark. "We don't collect art because we're going to have dinner with somebody. You can't be chairman of the board without having to go through some of that. But the more we go through it, the more we decide that's not what we're here to do."

The Olivers bought the ranch 30 years ago, first using it for sheep grazing in collaboration with Bruce Campbell of Healdsburg's CK Lamb. They lived out

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It took five years to build the Olivers' home, including three just to get plans for the stone-and-wood structure approved as seismically safe.

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of a trailer while they carefully plotted out where they wanted their permanent home to be and what they wanted it to look like.

They recruited San Francisco architect Robert Overstreet to design the house. Oliver, whose father had been an architect, had long been intrigued by the iconoclastic work of Bruce Goff, widely regarded as one of the 20th century's great architects, who drew inspiration from Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Sullivan and Antoni Gaudí.

"Goff's buildings were so quirky, with these odd radiuses," says Oliver. Sensitive to site and materials, Goff designed many of his buildings out of stone, an indigenous material the Olivers were determined to make a dominant theme in the house. Although Goff had died in 1982, they tracked down Overstreet, one of his nine surviving disciples.

It took five years to build the house — three simply to get the stonework approved as a structural element in earthquake country. They enlisted Henry Degenkolb, one of the world's leading structural engineers, to make the buildings seismically safe.

Although the county of Sonoma rejected the plans, Degenkolb ultimately prevailed with the state permit appeals board. All the timber is first-growth redwood cut a century ago and used as dunnage — the first layer upon which other timber is piled.

Nancy and Steve Oliver work together in their procelain kitchen, built like a pod within the larger interior of the house. The kitchen can be closed off for formal entertaining.

"We agreed with a lumber yard in Crescent City that if we moved all their piles, we could have these old timbers and cut them to size," remembers Oliver.

The interior is casual and rustic, with a living room dominated by a 15-foot-wide fireplace so formidable it requires two chimneys, its only adornment 20 brown bird nests propped along the blue metal mantle. Many of the sculptural furnishings were designed by Gary Hutton, an artist who studied under Wayne Thiebaud and Robert Arneson.

Propped within this earthy interior is a sleek, space-age, porcelain kitchen de-

signed by esteemed San Francisco architect Jim Jennings, a fraternity brother of Oliver's. Built like a pod, it can be closed off for formal entertaining. But truth be told, the Olivers rarely if ever do that.

Oliver does much of the ranch cooking, things like lamb shanks and stew that, like the art that defines the place, take time to prepare.

"He likes the process," his wife says. "The longer he's in the kitchen the better."

In good weather, guests gather outdoors for intimate meals on the lower lawn by the pool, a striking piece of functional art featuring the brightly colored ceramic tiles of Jim Melchert. A 150-seat curved amphitheater terraced in stone just beyond the pool provides a venue for small performances.

Jutting into the yard like the stern of a ship is a greenhouse where the couple start vegetables — 15 varieties of tomatoes — for the stone-terraced garden that feeds their kitchen in summer and fall.

The Olivers' life at the ranch can be uncomplicated. A place to read. A puzzle always in progress on the table.

"The wintertime is my favorite," says Oliver, "because it's the quietest time."

But probably the most significant part is the interaction with the great artists who come here.

They may live for several weeks to more than a year, settling in to the striking Visiting Artists Studio designed by David Rabinowitch and Jim Jennings. This free-standing guest house is a pair of studio apartments, appearing to face each other as mirror images. They are framed by two concrete walls intricately carved by Rabinowitch and cut into a hill. Although they appear parallel, in fact they diverge slightly to the north and converge at the south. In 2008 the widely acclaimed piece of architecture was named one of the five most influential and inspiring houses of the decade by a design jury assembled by the Wall Street Journal.

"It's a very rich life," Oliver says of the world of art he and Nancy inhabit on their hill above Geyserville. And much of it comes down to the company — some of the most ingenious, inventive minds of the age — who are invited to come here and engage in unfettered creativity.

"These people have added enormous interest to the conversation," Oliver says. "Some are shy and some are very gregarious. One of the best things happens around the dinner table here. It's just a place for conversation. It's rarely about art. It's about issues in the world.

"We realize people come here and they take a deep breath. They stop. They start to dream a little more." ◆