



CANVASING THE FIELD

by Joan Chatfield-Taylor

GEYSERVILLE RESIDENT STEVEN OLIVER HAS
TRANSFORMED HIS 90-ACRE SHEEP RANCH INTO
A PALETTE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART



Snake Eyes and Box Cars by Richard Serra



Iggy's Pride by Ursula Von Rydingsverd

Steven Oliver, one of the Bay Area's leading building contractors, started collecting art in the 1970s, but by the mid-1980s he was seriously disillusioned with the art world. Prices were soaring, record auction prices were reported reverently on the financial pages, and its creators were cashing in on celebrity and speculation. In short, art had become a commodity. When a friend casually said of Oliver's collecting habits, "Now I understand, you're doing it to make money," Oliver was horrified. "We had given things away, but we had never sold anything," he remembers.

At that moment, Steven Oliver decided to distance himself from the maelstrom of art fairs, auctions, and gallery openings, and "commission site-specific works that could not be moved and could not be sold." The site was his sheep ranch east of the tiny Sonoma County town of Geyserville, and the works were to be sculptures by some of the world's leading contemporary artists.

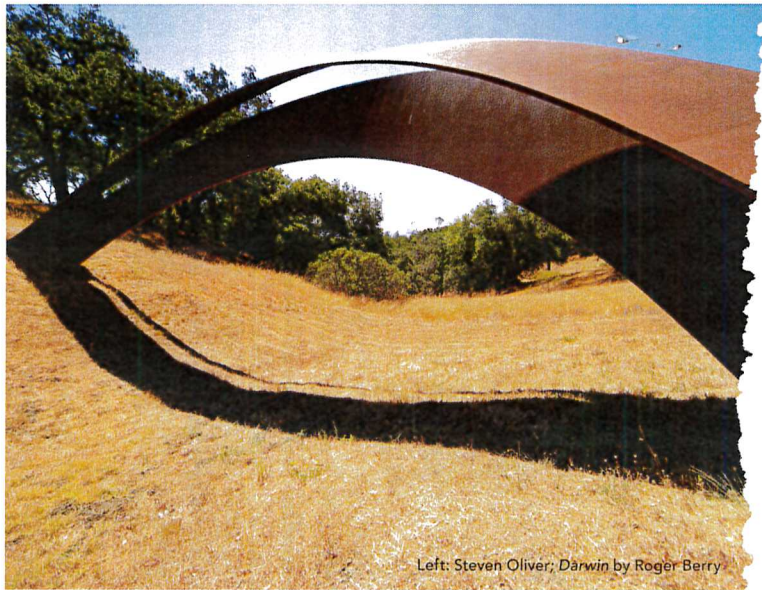
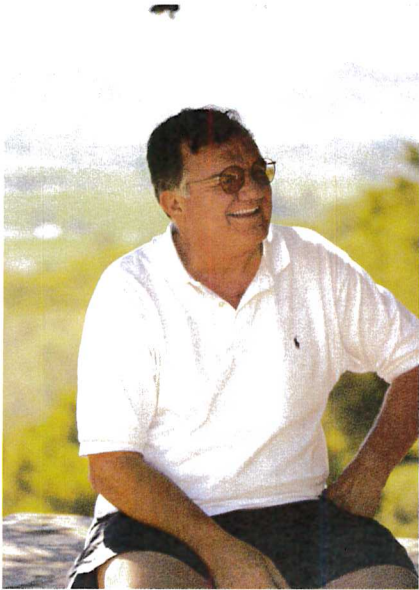
Fourteen years later, the sheep are gone and the ranch is home to one of the most ambitious, private site-specific sculpture collections in the country—some 18 major works in all, each created for a specific location chosen by the artist. "Every piece in his collection is the highest quality that that particular artist has put out. Each artist has been stimulated by being invited by someone who has not only the means but the expertise to make it happen," says Madeleine Grynsztejn, director of the Museum for Contemporary Art in Chicago, who worked with Oliver when she was senior curator for painting and sculpture at SFMOMA and he was chairman of the museum's board. "Nowhere else are the artist and the catalyst, as we might call Steve, working so closely. They're also stimulated by that particularly beautiful landscape and by the fact that each installation is permanent."

Early on, Oliver and his wife, Nancy, realized that commissioning work was a far more complicated matter than walking into a gallery and writing a check. When they commissioned the first work from sculptor Judith Shea, they expected a variation on the female figures she was known for. The artist, however, was on to a new style and explained to them firmly, "I'm not doing that kind of work anymore, and you just have to trust me." The work, cascading down a hillside, involves a contemplative male figure, a couple of fallen columns, and a massive sculpted head

"NOWHERE ELSE ARE THE ARTIST AND THE CATALYST, AS WE MIGHT CALL STEVE, WORKING SO CLOSELY. THEY'RE ALSO STIMULATED BY THAT PARTICULARLY BEAUTIFUL LANDSCAPE..." —MADELEINE GRYNSZTEJN



Ann Hamilton, *The Tower*



Left: Steven Oliver; *Darwin* by Roger Berry

lying in the grass. It wasn't what they had planned on, but they were delighted with the final result.

Each commission requires endless amounts of time and patience, and Steven Oliver refuses to rush the process, even asking each artist to visit the ranch in three different seasons before choosing a site. Richard Serra took a year and a half to choose the location for "Snake Eyes and Box Cars," six pairs of steel cubes placed in a mathematically precise arrangement on a hillside. Ursula von Rydingsvard spent 13 months piecing together 40,000 pieces of graphite-coated cedar into a series of looming forms that pay homage to her family members murdered in the Holocaust. Most recently, the building of Ann Hamilton's 10-story concrete tower with its double-helix interior stairway was the culmination of 13 years of discussion and three-and-a-half years of construction.

The logistics are complex, requiring all of Oliver's experience in the construction business. Paths have been cleared, roads built, topsoil and plants removed and then replaced. Serra's steel cubes, which weigh a total of 260 tons, were made in Seattle at Jorgensen Forge—one of the few facilities in the world that can compress steel to such density—and then driven down to Geyserville in a two-and-a-half-mile convoy of 100-foot trucks. Even a less obvious project like Bill Fontana's "Earthtones," six half-buried loudspeakers emitting low bass tones at random intervals, required laying miles of wiring. It's obvious, though, that Oliver thoroughly enjoys every step of the process—from the problem solving to the give-and-take with the artist. To spend more time at the ranch, he recently moved part of his construction office from Richmond to Geyserville. "Basically, our life circles around what's going on with the art," he says. "The unexpected consequence of all this is that my children grew up with all these great people at the dinner table. Bruce Nauman had not done a private job for years, but we hit it off right away because he raises cattle and horses on his ranch near the Texas–New Mexico border. When he arrived, I was having a problem with the sheep having blue tongue disease, so we spent the first three hours inoculating sheep."

Although the ranch is not open to the public, the Olivers allow nonprofit arts organizations to hold benefits and tours on-site during the spring and fall, helping raise some \$1.5 million for the arts. In one more instance of his hands-on approach, Oliver usually leads the tours. When he's not working with artists and running his contracting business, Oliver is usually thinking about the next installation. "I don't know if this one will be possible," he says about his next commission. "But we've said that before."

Tours of the collection are available in spring and fall only through nonprofit arts organizations; contact ranch management for more information, (510) 412-9090, Ext. 210.



The view from inside *The Tower* by Ann Hamilton