

Art of the open air

Showing sculpture in a natural setting is an ancient tradition whose year-round rewards are being rediscovered today

BY JEFF BOOK

The English sculptor Henry Moore

believed that "there is no background to sculpture better than sky because you are contrasting solid form with its opposite—space." Two art dealers who subscribe to Moore's view of sculpture as "an art of the open air" are Deborah Schneider and Susan Brandt of California's Napa Valley. They have installed more than forty contemporary pieces on a wooded slope below the Auberge du Soleil, a luxurious wine-country inn near Rutherford. A couple of years ago, when Schneider and Brandt were mounting art exhibits at such untraditional places as wineries and barns, the manager of Auberge, George Goeggel, asked if they would like to create a sculpture garden in the olive grove below the tennis courts.

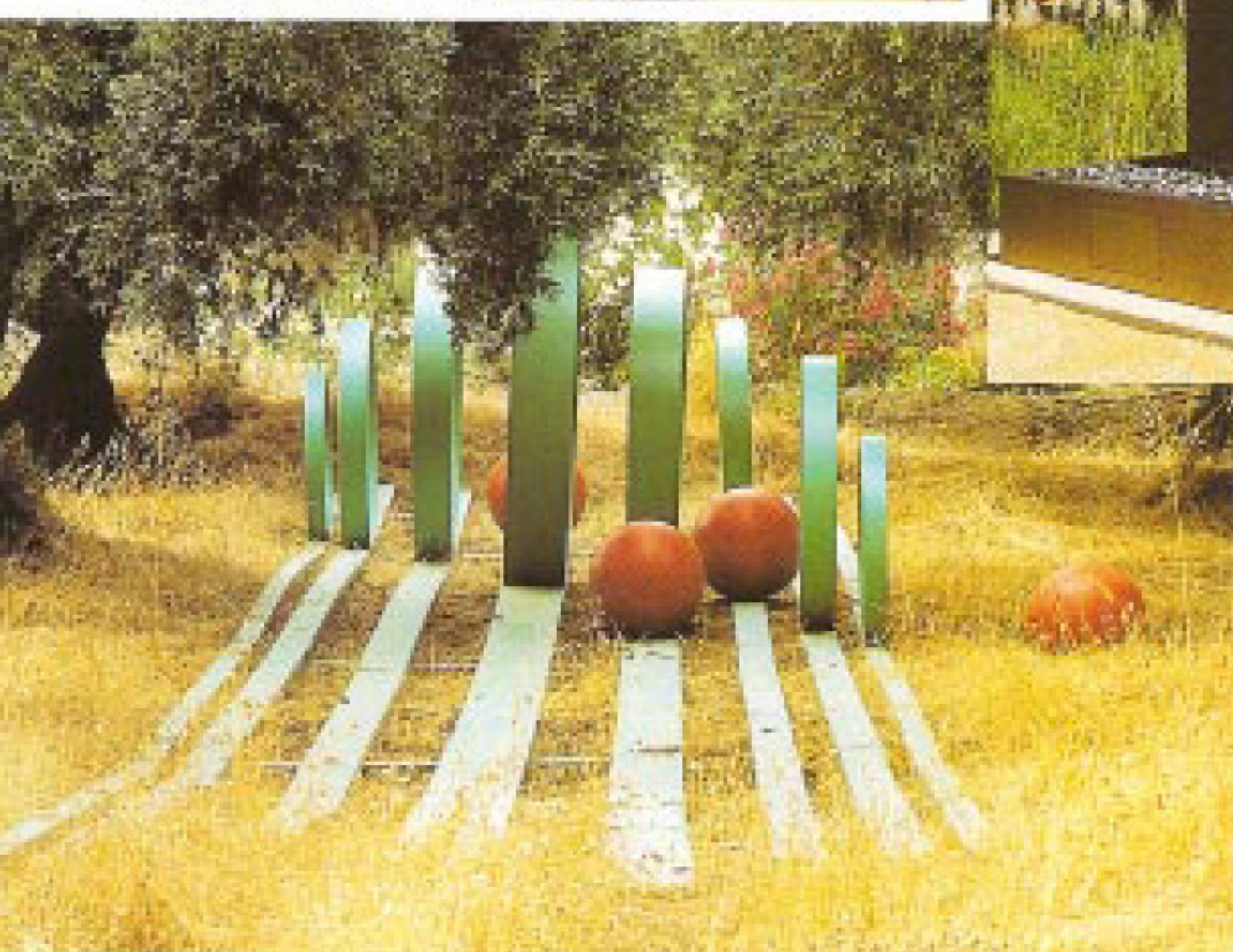
The idea of a woodland gallery appealed to the dealers for many reasons. An outdoor setting allows each work to be savored in its entirety, while the sun reveals nuances of color, texture, and form as it moves through the day and the seasons. Then, too, the untamed olive trees and gnarled oaks of the site serve as organic foils for the sculptures. Schneider and Brandt know that the contrast between enduring art and ever-changing nature intensifies our appreciation of both. "We traveled around the country looking at sculpture in outdoor settings," Brandt says, "but we were most inspired by northern California artists and collectors, and by the site itself."

Few of the pieces are visible from outside the grove: To see them, visitors must follow a meandering half-mile path, a free-form figure eight with a wooden footbridge at its center. Despite their number, the sculptures never seem to crowd >



A popular sculpture garden is installed in a four-acre olive grove at the Auberge du Soleil in California's Napa Valley. Among the forty works of art are, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Entropy Series #26* by Riis Burwell; *Lovers* by Archie Held; *Negative* by Archie Held; *Downhill Play* by Jack Chandler.

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An outdoor gallery has echoes of a sacred grove in Athens where Socrates and Plato met amid statues of woodland deities

each other. From the path, they appear among the trees like discrete characters on a sun-dappled stage. The dense foliage and the hillside's changes in level permit each work a place of distinction.

"Winding your way around the path, you are able to see the sculptures from many angles," says Schneider, pointing out a few: T. Barny's sleek *Pyramus*, a modernist marble abstraction; Alan Shepp's *Poetry House #3*, an elemental slate structure; the steel lines of Riis Burwell's *Dymaxion for Buckminster Fuller*; and the intricacy of Bryan Tedrick's towering *Shiva IV*, incorporating machine parts, wood, bone, and tools.

Siting the art took months and because this is a commercial gallery, the sculptures will continue to rotate as Schneider and Brandt sell individual pieces. "We placed most of the works by walking through the grove with the artists, who chose from available spots," explains Schneider. Some works were even created for a specific location, among them the large faux-rusted ceramic nails of Alan Peirson's *Recurring Dream* series and the white aluminum rays of Roslyn Mazzilli's *Sophia, Goddess of Wisdom*, catching the sunlight in a clearing. On a sloping site Jack Chandler's *Downhill Play*, an array of red balls and looping tracks, suggests suspended animation.

Occasionally, nature contributes more to the sculpture than its creator could have imagined. Bay Area artist Archie Held points to his own *Negative*, a trio of ten-foot-high steel panels that stand beneath an oak in the Auberge grove. Cut out of each is a pair of lines—parallel in the first panel, veering together and apart in the next two. When a large limb fell from the oak and lodged in one of the cutouts, Held was delighted: "It was nature adding a flourish to the piece."

The outdoor gallery at Auberge has echoes of sacred groves like the one in Athens where Socrates and Plato carried on their dialogues amid statues of woodland deities. But the sculpture garden at Clos Pegase winery, a short drive north of Auberge, evokes ancient Roman villas like Emperor Hadrian's, a parklike setting for numerous works of sculpture. At Clos Pegase sculptures by such modern masters as Anthony Caro, Jean Dubuffet, and Richard Deacon are set against architect Michael Graves's postmodern "temple to wine" and the surrounding lawns and vineyards. At the foot of a verdant hill, Richard Serra's *Twins*, a pair of triangular steel plates, trisects a patch of grass. Nearby is Mark di Suvero's poignant *Whale's Cry*, a Leviathan steel trap so delicately balanced on its pedestal that it turns with the wind.

Auberge du Soleil and Clos Pegase are two fine examples of sculpture exhibited under the sky. According to the International Sculpture Center in Washington, D.C., they are among a growing number of outdoor sculpture installations in this country. Some of the best known can be found at museums including New York's Museum of Modern Art, Washington's Hirshhorn Museum, and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Others are associated with universities such as UCLA and Princeton and with corporations such as PepsiCo

in Purchase, New York, and General Mills in Minneapolis. One of the grandest is Storm King Art Center, where striking large-scale works occupy 200 pastoral acres in New York's Hudson Valley. Increasingly, outdoor venues like Laumeier Sculpture Park in St. Louis are inviting artists to respond to a chosen site, with results that often evoke a poetic sense of place.

And according to Deborah Schneider and Susan Brandt, more private collectors are acquiring art to display in the open air. Galleries and occasionally the artists themselves will consult on the placement of each work. Schneider says, "Sometimes the sculptor of a piece will make a video to help with its installation, or oversee it personally." A structural engineer may be needed to install larger, heavier works, which must withstand wind, lightning, and freezing temperatures.

"Sculpture can enhance any garden, regardless of size," says Brandt. "Someone might prefer a figurative work for a formal landscape or something more abstract for a Japanese-style garden, but a sculpture should succeed on its own merit."

California collectors Glenn and Gabriella Isaacson have installed a half-dozen sculptures around their Marin County house, which overlooks a lagoon. "The sculptures are abstract and not very large, roughly person-size," explains Glenn Isaacson. "In our English-style garden they are placed to mark key points—on the axis to the front door, at the edge of the deck, framing a view of the water."

In small private gardens as in large public ones, notes Elyn Zimmerman, codesigner of the sculpture gardens at the Birmingham Museum of Art in Alabama, "Sculptures need individual spaces, especially a group of works of contrasting style and scale. Human-scale pieces don't have a chance against some brightly colored work that shoots thirty feet up in the air."

Milwaukee interior designer William Manly has placed four contemporary sculptures in his garden, which measures 60 by 60 feet. "The sculptures are not by the same artist but they all echo the form of the garden's two circular walks," explains Manly. "Each is in a different quadrant of the garden and they act as focal points for views from certain rooms by day or by night, when they're illuminated by special lighting." The garden fence, garage wall, and a painted panel are backdrops for the sculptures' vivid colors and shapes. Manly planted peonies around one piece, circled another with Siberian irises, but he appreciates the sculptures as much when nothing is blooming. "In winter the sculptures take on a whole new quality—they stand out against the snow and relieve the bleakness," he says. After all, sculpture in a garden setting is no hothouse specimen but an evergreen asset that, planted with care, provides year-round rewards. ■

Jeff Book writes on design and other topics from Los Angeles.

To visit Auberge du Soleil, call Brandt Schneider for an appointment: 707-963-7095. For Clos Pegase, write 1060 Dunaweal Lane, Calistoga, CA 94515; or call 707-942-4981.