{Collecting EXPERIENCE}

A Conversation with Steven Oliver

by Donna Brookman

Entering the Oliver Ranch on a narrow climbing road, one suddenly encounters hundreds of white concrete steps cascading down the hill, crossing the road, and continuing below. Bruce Nauman's site-specific sculpture is one of many commissioned works scattered throughout the grounds of Steven Oliver's Alexander Valley ranch. A Fontana sound sculpture rumbles in the hills; wind instruments by Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel glint in the trees. Roger Berry's two large steel arcs precisely track the sun at the summer and winter solstice. Other works include sculptures by Martin Puryear, Richard Serra, Ursula von Rydingsvard, and Terry Allen. David Rabinowitch's incised concrete walls for new artists' residences and a planned tower sculpture/performance space by Ann Hamilton are currently in progress.

Oliver's unusual approach to collecting has evolved over time, partly through his fascination with artistic process. The owner of a large construction company, he is able to observe, and in many cases facilitate, the realization of each project. Above all, he wants to allow artists time and space to engage intimately with the land. Each artist has found a different relationship to the landscape. Oliver, who is the recipient of the ISC's 2002 Patron's Recognition Award, is committed to making all this possible.

Donna Brookman: *After collecting art for a decade, you commissioned your first site-specific work from Judith Shea in 1985. What got you started?*
Steven Oliver: In 1985 I was really disgusted with the art world. I was tired of reading about art on the financial pages. It was one auction record after another. The world had suddenly discovered contemporary art as commodity. When my wife and I first started out we collected prints because it was what we could afford. One time I was talking to a friend over dinner, complaining about an insurance issue—insuring a work of art going to a museum. A grin came over this guy's face, who up until that time just thought I was crazy. He said "You're collecting art as an investment! You're making money on this stuff!" And I said "No, no, I've never sold anything. It's not that at all."

After that we decided to commission something. The ranch had then been underway five years as a working sheep ranch, we were starting to build this house, and I said to my wife, let's do something site-specific, the purest form—I can't sell it, I can't give it away. The truth is, until Richard Serra came, I had a heck of a time getting artists. It was the go-go '80s. Galleries wanted artists in their studios producing

Bruce Nauman, *Untitled*, 1998–99. Cast concrete, 30 in. wide; .5 miles long.

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stuff to sell. They didn't want them out here mucking around. So we struggled. It all happened by chance. We learned a lot about ourselves and about the process during Judith Shea's project. She had been here a lot, and we found that we missed that, so we said let's do one more.

DB: *What got you hooked?*

SO: I give Judith all the credit. Our first try could have been a stinker. But she sensed our transition from buying an existing object, when we knew the exact color, shape, and form, to the commissioning process, when it's like a child. If it turns out bad you can't give it back—you're stuck with it. She talked through a lot of issues with us, because she was going through a big transition in her work. Finally she said, "You just have to trust me." And then, we learned where she was headed, and it was a magical process. Ellen Driscoll and Roger Berry followed; they both did terrific projects too.

DB: *Could you say something about how the process begins and your insistence on it being a dialogue with this place?*

SO: Each artist we invite has to come here three times before making a proposal. They have to come in different times of the year—summer and winter for sure, and they can pick either spring or fall. Early on we tried to do two works a year, which lasted until 1994. Then, with Dennis Leon and Richard Serra working at the same time, it just became overwhelming.

DB: *So that was the last time you did two in the same year. I was wondering how the process evolved over time, and that's one of the elements, obviously.*

SO: Right. I felt as though I missed something. There was too much going on, and I'm still working in my own career, so it's hard. We decided to do just one at a time. Over the last five years, some projects became drawn out, in some cases a year and a half, and I've become less concerned about it. I always want the next thing cooking. But I don't worry about whether a project takes a year or longer.

DB: *How has your involvement changed over the years? Does it vary dramatically depending on the specific artist?*

SO: Yes, and the materials. It's been the same from the beginning. It's almost directly proportional to the amount of time they're here or the activity that is here. I was very involved with the Rabinowitch because all the carving was done here, but in Judith's case the bronze and the cast head were done in New York. I went there often and saw them in process. With some it's just the installation, with others it's the fabrication. For instance, all of Ursula von Rydingsvard's work was done here.

DB: *I was struck by the number of women artists who have completed works here.*

SO: Of the first 10, it's about half. We were even with men and women until last year. The reason is

Ellen Driscoll, *Untitled*, 2001. Steel rings with bronze overlay and copper infill, 4 pieces: 8–14 ft. long.

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Miroslaw Balka, *43 x 30 x 2, 43 x 30 x 2, 1554 x 688 x 10,* 1995–96. Cast concrete.

that the women's movement in the '60s freed women to do non-traditional things. I think the outgrowth we saw in the late '70s and early '80s benefited from people such as Eva Hesse who were doing different things. von Rydingsvard was carving with a chain saw, and Shea was casting iron. Ellen Driscoll is the single best welder I've ever seen. I'd have my people [construction workers] come up and I'd say, "I don't know what she's doing, but she's doing it a hell of a lot better than you guys are. Sit here, watch, and learn something."

DB: *There is such a variety of work here. Serra and Nauman responded to physical contours; Judith Shea and Ellen Driscoll, to the Arcadian traditions of shepherding and growing grapes. Others, such as Miroslaw Balka and Ursula von Rydingsvard, take it as an opportunity to do something very personal. Somehow this place frees them. The von Rydingsvard is a big project, an important project.*

SO: Yes, and it took the longest—13 months of carving, gluing, picking: she was here throughout that time. If an artist is given a supportive environment and essentially no limitations, if they need more time it's no problem, there's no pressure, no deadline. Generally artists who do commissions work in a public process. The public process is agonizing.

DB: *Another piece that I found very moving was the Balka installation, the footprint of his childhood home in Poland.*

SO: It's fascinating—two Polish artists, two hundred yards apart, the same sort of angst in their work.

DB: *How did you find him?*

SO: He's a real anomaly. In 1993 and 1995 we didn't go to the Venice Biennale. I called three friends who did, none of whom knew each other, and I asked what they thought. They all said that one artist knocked them out: Balka. In 1995 we started tracking him down. He'd had shows at the Renaissance Society in Chicago and in L.A. We met the dealer in L.A., who helped us find him. He came several times, picked the site, and did the project.

DB: *You gave him an amazing level of technical support.*

SO: It helps when you're in the business. The piece is a single casting of white sand and white cement, so everything came down to one four-hour period. The concrete had to be mixed, moved here, and placed within 40 minutes, and it had to be cured properly, so it was a real logistical problem. We worked about three months to get the schedule right. A local concrete batch plant allowed us to shut it down for three days while we washed out their bunkers and brought in sand from the Del Monte beaches on 17 Mile Drive, which is the purest white sand, and white cement. If you're doing something serious and interesting, people will go out of their way to help you. They get into it.

DB: *That comes across in your documentary video about the Serra piece, too. You can feel the seriousness of the people involved.*

SO: The fascinating thing was that about a third of the way through the forge master realized that his work—crushing and smashing the blocks together—was the finished product. He had never been the last one to touch something before it left the plant. All of a sudden you could see the seriousness in his face. And this came out because we did a couple of test blocks that were rejected. He'd never had to be that careful because somebody was always going to do something with it after he was done. His was ordinarily an industrial process. When he caught on that

this was a finish process, he took it very seriously.

DB: *You were quoted as saying that working with Serra on* Snake Eyes and Boxcars *was "a life-altering experience."*

SO: He's such an electric personality, not always easy; he can be prickly at times. We've had our conflicts, but we've crossed the line into friendship—so he doesn't have any compunction about yelling at me, which is okay because the relationship is so open. He has a difficult reputation, but I think he got comfortable with my commitment to his work, which is genuine. Being around somebody so creative made me understand that this is the reason I'm working—to invest in these relationships. I first heard about the torqued ellipses here, when Serra drew them for me.

DB: *The decision to work with an artist for such an extended period is a big commitment, and you seem to have maintained ongoing relationships with many of them.*

SO: Yes. I have a real continuing interest in their work. A couple of artists who've worked here have asked to do another project, but I'm trying not to do that. I'm trying to have new experiences. I still buy some of their work; I buy drawings. I try to be at their openings, be supportive of the work.

DB: *What has surprised you about being so closely involved with an artist's process?*

SO: I'm constantly surprised. I remember one situation in particular. Roger Berry was talking about the approach to the arch. The road was in a different spot then, and he said, "I really don't like the perspective approaching it this way. I'd rather approach it from over here." And I said, "Well, let's just dig this thing down. We'll get the bulldozers over here." But he said, "No, why don't we just change the path?" That was 15 years ago, and I think in some ways the interaction with artists has changed how I think. It's made me a better person for my clients. I think more creatively. It seems that artists, who are often forced to do more with less, tend to be better problem-solvers because they can't commit unlimited resources.

Having this involvement in art as a life pursuit gives me a reason for my own work and it enriches my own work ethic. This is the only reason I'm still working. I have a lot of wonderful clients and we do a lot of interesting projects, but the brightest people I've ever worked with are artists. They happened to choose this venue for expressing themselves, rather than writing or mixing chemicals in a laboratory.

Someone asked me recently about beauty in sculpture. I don't think beauty has anything to do with it anymore. It's intellect. The intellect may be expressed in a beautiful manner, but I've come to the conclusion that the difference between the very good and the very best artists is this incredible intellect. And I'm not sure that's always recognized. That doesn't mean that the artist has necessarily had financial success. Clearly some of the people who've worked here are more renowned than others. But the ones I find intriguing as personalities agonize over the work, twisting and turning within themselves, and I look over their shoulders while they're doing it, which is what's fun. That's why I said that I found myself addicted to the process. And when it ends, it's gut-wrenching in some ways. For instance, when Serra's project ended we talked on the phone once a week for three or four months afterward to try to wean ourselves off the process. We still talk with some frequency, and I love talking to him. That project was a very intense thing to do.

DB: *I'm wondering how seeing the artists respond to*

Richard Serra, *Snake Eyes and Boxcars*, 1990–93. Forged Cor-ten steel, 12 blocks: (small) 41 x 41 x 48 in.; (large) 41 x 41 x 7 ft.

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Roger Berry, *Darwin*, 1988–89. Rolled Cor-ten steel, 22 x 55 ft.

the landscape has changed your own perception of the place.

SO: Immensely. They see things I'd never seen before. My favorite time of year is winter, when there's a grayness, sometimes fog from the valley. You can see the shape and form of the trees. Serra, and Roger Berry too, talked a lot about the shape of the oaks when they're denuded of leaves. You learn from each artist. Each has a different look at it.

DB: *Has it changed your sense of what art can be or what art does compared to your years as a collector?*

SO: Yes, it intensifies the relationship. I know a lot of collectors who have no interest in meeting the artist, and I can understand that they don't want to personalize or change their relationship with what the artist does. I never minded that. But you don't want to be persuaded one way or the other by the artist's personality. So, the only rule we have is that we want to make a decision about the work before we meet the artist. Know it for a while, see it in some kind of context, then make the decision to invite them.

DB: *You've talked about the excesses of the '80s as the driving force that led you to commission site-specific work. Yet these projects come across as incredibly expensive. It's a paradox. Do you think it's possible to escape commodification, or do you think it's inherent in making an object?*

SO: It's a fair question. I think the only difference is that we never talk about what they cost and they have no value after they are done. That's my answer. Some are more modestly scaled, others are enormously expensive. I just commit to do it and give up something else.

DB: *What about making ephemeral work? Andy Goldsworthy worked here in 1991. How did you feel about having it all disappear?*

SO: It doesn't bother me at all. It's another experience. In some ways I'm not collecting art, I'm collecting experiences now. I find life much more enriching.

DB: *What do you feel is the most vital area of contemporary art right now? What really excites you?*

SO: Well, we're going through an awkward time right now. The '90s saw a lot of technological innovation. I got a little lost in film, media, video, and Web developments, because I lost the hand of the artist. I've become more interested in art as craft, although that word sometimes gets misused.

I see Serra's hand even in the big cast blocks. I'm interested in the mark that the artist makes. Look at William Kentridge's work: he makes films by doing drawings and then erasing them. He animates erasings and cut-out pieces of paper. The work is brilliant, and it's film, which five years ago I would have said I didn't like. But now I see within it the hand of the artist.

DB: *What about your project with Ann Hamilton?*

picnic tables and garbage cans, but to have some controlled access for visitors to come in groups. The rest of the time it would be a residence or retreat center. There will be three residence facilities when the guest house project is done, and we bought another building in town.

DB: *You have worked with a variety of arts organizations, from small alternative spaces such as Capp Street Project to the NEA. Where do you feel particularly engaged at the moment?*

SO: It's really a personal thing. I feel engaged with SFMOMA because of Neal Benezra, who is a friend. I'm engaged in the California College of Arts and Crafts. The new president, Michael Roth, came from the Getty Institute. CCAC is on the edge of one of those magic moments art schools have, when things come together.

I chaired some things for the NEA, but I lost interest when they took away the artist fellowships. Those $15,000 grants change people's lives—they stop waiting tables and get in the studio. I'm also chairing the American Arts Alliance, which is an amalgam of ballets, opera, dance, and theater groups. My job is raising money to support political candidates who support the arts. It's never been done before. Judy Rubin in New York is my co-chair, a real powerhouse. We started this two years ago, and we've raised a fair amount of money. People say, "Where have you been for the last 50 years?"

I like the idea that there is a healthy variety of alternative spaces. I encourage my fellow citizens to support them, which is one of the reasons we have visitors at the ranch. The rules are that visitors have to pay $50 per person to the visual arts organization of their choice, so we've raised a half million dollars here for arts organizations. We're open to organizations that support the visual arts [not individual visitors]. It needs to be scheduled in advance, but we're interested in encouraging citizens who are curious about the ranch to support their local arts organizations.

Donna Brookman is a Bay Area artist and writer.

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