



Elisse Pogofsy-Harris' studio.
Photo by Donna Granata, Focus
on the Masters Series (2010)

THREE DECADES of Ojai Studio Artists ... and the growing local art scene

By Anca Colbert

In 1984 three Ojai artists had a vision which, like most visions, seemed an improbable dream at the time. Thirty years later, with imagination, perseverance, and many twists and turns along the road, that vision has evolved into a reality that makes a tangible difference in the artistic life of this valley, and in the perception that most people have of Ojai as a rich, thriving art heaven.

Ojai is a small place, really just a big village stretched along a fertile, agricultural mountain valley of stunning beauty, but when it comes to art... its importance is far greater than its modest size. Come the second weekend in October, the Ojai Studio Artists Tour brings crowds of avid art lovers on their yearly pilgrimage, up the winding mountain road, to a small town that has become renowned for its active art scene.

The tour itself is an experience cherished by visitors and locals, as artists open their doors for that one weekend a year to welcome them into their private world.

Marta Nelson, Gayel Childress and Bert Collins, the three painters founders of OSA called the first tour "A Day in Art Country," a clear homage to French Impressionists and their love of landscape. Every year OSA organizes an exhibit and sale of artworks by participating artists at the Ojai Art Center (built in 1939 by Austin Pierpont, and presumably the oldest art center in continuous use in California.) There is a reception, a fundraiser raffle and silent auction, and much merriment as artists and visitors mingle and celebrate. The ticket price for the two-days self-guided studios tour is \$20.

Armed with sketchy, hand-drawn maps in the early days, now with sophisticated, well-designed brochures in print and online, visitors embark on a treasure hunt, looking for old favorites and newcomers. Their reward? An artwork or two to bring home and treasure, some memorable conversations with the artists and some fellow art lovers, ultimately: the joy of an experience which deepens their appreciation of art and

expands their perception of creativity.

The Tour, one of the longest running studio art tours in the country and the second longest running in Southern California, takes place this year on October 12-13 and celebrates thirty years of its existence.

OSA marks the occasion with the publication of a museum-quality book documenting the 60 member artists on the 2013 tour and offering insights into OSA's history along with critical essays and rare archival photographs. (I have been part of the planning and production committee for this project.)

"Ojai Studio Artists - 3 Decades" also celebrates the four greats of the Ojai Valley who have passed away but left their imprint on this artistic community: Beatrice Wood, the "Mama of Dada"

ceramic artist famous for her iridescent glazes and her whimsical figurative sculptures; Vivika and Otto Heino, the couple famous for their pottery inspired by Japanese aesthetics and then for Otto's world-sought-after "yellow glaze"; and Horace Bristol, the photographer whose importance as a powerful visual and social commentator has recently been rediscovered through his images of wartime stories and "The Grapes of Wrath."

The limited-edition book will be released just before the Tour and available at the bookstores of the Ojai Valley Museum and the Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts. While there have been monographs published over the years about a few of Ojai's luminaries, it is noteworthy that this book offers a historical survey

of the largest group of Ojai artists to date.

How many professional artists live in the Ojai Valley?

Probably over two hundred people consider art making their main occupation, livelihood and purpose in life.

Why have so many visual artists settled here? Ojai is a rare oasis combining natural beauty, quiet spaces, a sophisticated cultural life, and proximity to important art centers.

While all artists in the OSA Tour live in Ojai, not all artists living in Ojai belong to OSA. For some who live and work here, their careers may have a more international reach, and they often prefer to keep their life in Ojai somewhat private. Others are not keen on the organizational structure that OSA requires of its membership, including meetings,

Vision is the art
of seeing things
invisible."

— Jonathan Swift



Sculptor Ted Gall and studio visitors.
Photo by Donna Granata,
Focus on the Masters Series (2009)



“Creativity takes courage.”
 – Henri Matisse

Otto Heino throwing pots.
 Photo by Donna Granata, Focus on the Masters Series (2009)

group communications, committees, etc. Yet others, in earlier stages of their artistic development, are not ready to be exhibiting or belonging to an association with strict professional standards. An artist's life is not easy: their work isolates them, - and they cherish that protected space-, yet they need to belong with others and share their creative joys and doubts with their peers. Being alone and together is a tough balancing act.

Yes, I believe artists are like cats: hard to herd.

While the Tour started in 1984, another group of artists, often sharing studios or exhibiting in assorted venues around town, formed an ad-hoc tour of their own in 1995 and held their event free of charge on the same weekend as the already established OSA tour: Carmen Abelleira, the founding artist, appropriately enough named it the Ojai Art Detour. They were and remain a rather loosely connected group of independent artists at various stages of professional achievement, without an organized structure, a non-profit status, nor a social purpose of raising funds to promote and support art education. One might liken the OSA Tour to an established Broadway production, and the Detour to an off-Broadway show.

Meanwhile, off-off-Broadway, Meiners Oaks has been developing a decidedly more independent cachet in the art life of the valley, with some adventuresome shows, edgy performances

and cultural events. Particularly noteworthy is the recently opened Gallery 525, an artists cooperative offering group shows of substantial interest, with original perspectives.

Most recently announced is a juried art exhibition, “DISCARTED,” set for November to coincide with the Ojai Film Festival. The organizers intend to showcase artists who “raise questions and ideas, aesthetic and moral, about the life of the planet our wasteful society threatens.”

Meanwhile, the established artists of OSA continue on their mission of supporting the arts education through outreach programs in the valley. According to their website, “OSA has funded almost \$150,000 in scholarships and other ArtReach programs to date.” Proceeds from OSA's Annual Studio Tour fund the ArtReach initiatives. They make a difference, and inspire future generations to follow their calling on their own creative path.

Anchored by the Ojai Valley Museum as one enters town and by the Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts in the Upper Valley, the art life of Ojai spreads along the magnificent east-west valley, in the midst of its abundant nature and illuminated by its legendary beauty.

The activity radiates from the downtown area (Ojai Art Center, galleries in the Arcade, with Primavera's stellar presence)

and its immediate vicinity into nearby Meiners Oaks, where we see more spaces and cooperative venues opening up.

As OSA turns 30, we salute the founders' vision and their tenacity in keeping the group together. They are indeed the foundation upon which the OSA architecture was built. Over the years numerous other artists became key in carrying the group forward and expanding its activities. They all are part of the living fabric of OSA and of the Ojai Valley's mystique as a paradise for artists.

All photographs used with permission from Donna Granata and the Focus on the Masters Archive and Library. Donna Granata is founder and executive director of Focus on the Masters (FOTM), a nonprofit arts organization established in 1994 in Ventura. Their mission of documenting contemporary artists has played a significant role in the growing awareness about the importance of the Ojai art scene. ☺

“Pyramid of Ojai” 1997
 OSA founders Marta Nelson, Gayel Childress and Bert Collins, at the Ojai Art Center with a painting of Art Center founder Dr. Charles Butler in the background.
 Photo by Donna Granata,
 Focus on the Masters Series (1997)

