

By Anca Colbert

OSA at 33

Keeps Re-Imagining Itself

Stephen Edwards grinding "Betty's Glasses" from cast glass and steel, collection of Triton Museum, Santa Clara.
Photo: Stephen Edwards

CHANGE is one thing we know for sure is gonna happen. Right now it's happening all around us, faster and faster.

Ojai is no exception. In recent years the *New York Times*, *Sunset Magazine*, and other national publications have regularly covered Ojai. An influx of newcomers has discovered Ojai and decided to make it home: families with children fleeing the big cities, retirees, creative professionals (musicians, chefs, wine makers, designers, writers...) with experience and sometimes-brilliant careers (or hoping for one), and hipsters galore.

Many have eagerly embraced this idyllic valley and some have taken it by storm in their desire to enter this magical world. Fresh ideas and strong energies, that the usually slower pace of Ojai is not accustomed to, have been pouring in, sometimes too fast for the "old-timers" taste.

The Ojai Studio Artists (OSA) has also experienced these new winds of change. The legendary artists group, started in 1983 by three determined artists (Alberta "Bert" Collins, Gayel Childress and Marta Nelson) currently numbers 67 artists.

The group plays an important role as a place of community for individual artists. Artists work in isolation. That's part of the creative process. So it matters greatly to find a community in which to safely share your thoughts, experiences (good and bad) and find comfort and support in dealing with the various uncertainties at the core of an artist's life.

To learn more about the long, rich history of OSA, check out "OSA: 3 Decades," an informative and lavishly illustrated book published in 2013 and available at the Ojai Valley Museum's bookstore.

But wait! Much more has happened in the past three years. The group has grown and been invigorated by new and younger members. A different dynamic is evidently at play. It

has changed the composition and shifted the energy of the venerable organization.

As OSA's president, Soni Wright, reports seven new artists joined in 2015: Iris Williams, Carol Shaw-Sutton, Ingrid Boulting, Gail Hercher, Vera Long, James Petrucci, and Amy Lynn Stevenson.

Four more joined this year: Jeff Mann, Joanne Pavlak, Duane Eells, and Steve Edwards.

It's also interesting to note that four past members came back into the OSA family in 2016: Susan Stinsmuehlen-Amend, Tom Hardcastle, Jeff Sojka, and Katie Van Horne.

OSA's annual Studio Tour started modestly in 1984. Spurred on again by its indefatigable three founders, it was called "A Day in the Country," and 18 local artists participated in the new adventure. By now the prestigious "Ojai Studio Tour" (one of the oldest in California and the country) attracts hundreds of visitors every year to the studios of an ever-growing and more diverse group of artists who open their doors to visitors on the second weekend of October. It's a real big deal for art lovers. It's also a real big event for the whole town. This year the Tour takes place October 8-10.

Painter Karen Lewis, well-versed in the history of OSA as one of its most active participants and staunch supporters, said, "In the last few years, a number of young emerging artists, as well as those retiring from successful careers in academia's art departments and Hollywood's entertainment industry, have joined the Ojai Studio Artists, contributing their inspiration, professionalism and diversity to the group."

Let's take a closer look at three of the "newbies."

After teaching art for 25 years at Alfred University, glass sculptor **Stephen Edwards** relocated his home and studio last year from Alfred, New York to Ojai. "And... boom!" He immediately joined OSA. "Within one year I got to know more than 100 people, because of OSA. There is no

small community you can move into where that would happen." Steve (also a passionate musician) "hooked up with the California Old Time Fiddlers in Oak View, and now has 100 more friends. I love these guys!"

He and his wife Pat are California natives, and so happy to be a part of Ojai.

"My new studio in Oak View overlooks the empty Ventura River gorge. Birds of prey perch atop power poles in the morning and spread their wings in the early sun. My first major glass sculpture since moving here is titled "I'll Fly Away." This 24-inch solid glass pair of golden wings speaks of fragility and ascension to me."

Steve's works are part of major private and public collections around the world. More recently, his 15-foot pair of cat's-eye glasses titled "Betty's Glasses" (a cast-glass and steel sculpture) was added to the permanent collection of the Triton Museum of Art in Santa Clara.

Steve is working on smaller pieces for the upcoming OSA Tour, the first in which he will be a participant. Well aware that most people can't afford his rather pricy glass sculptures, he's producing a series of tiny cars that will be available for \$25. I liked them. And I liked his thinking: so many visitors indeed cannot afford the works of the artists whose studios they visit. But it sure feels good for an art lover to take home even a small work after the exciting experience of meeting the artist.

Carol Shaw-Sutton is an internationally recognized sculptor and installation artist specializing in "poetic fiber and textile work, inspired by natural cycles of growth and decay." A Professor Emeritus of Art, the recipient of prestigious awards, with works represented in numerous museums, she joined OSA last year. Her work "stems from a deep reverence for the traditions of the world's peoples, the delicate ecology of our natural environment and our collective longing for



**EVERYTHING
you can IMAGINE
is REAL.
– Pablo Picasso**

human happiness.” She uses the natural elements surrounding her home in Ojai to create sensitive, yet powerful, wall pieces, sculpture and one-of-a-kind wearable art. She has always maintained “a commitment to sustainable practices by using natural dyes with repurposed organic materials,” having passed on these values to a number of generations of her students at CSULB (Long Beach) where she headed their Fiber Program for 30 years.

Jeff Mann joined OSA in 2015. Jeff and his wife Liz Blackwell, also an artist and a native of Ojai, moved to Ojai after Jeff retired from his stellar career in the movie industry, working for 25 years with George Lucas and his Industrial Light & Magic team, the production studio of the legendary Skywalker Ranch. Given his “obsessive problem solving” background of working with thousands of professionals “in an environment where time equals money,” it took some undoing for him to shift to doing his work as an artist, alone, in his tiny studio

in the very quiet East End.

In a recent conversation, he stressed his need for engaging in communication, in a dialogue with the visitors to the studio. That exchange is what excites him and gives him pleasure. “I am here to share what I do.” He is craving the connection with his fellow artists and with all visitors, including children, coming through his studio and who are interested in art.

“Drawn to Drawing(s)” the article in the Fall 2015 issue of *Ojai Quarterly*, offered an introduction to this complex man and his “phantasmagorical drawings.” In 2015 the Porch Gallery gave Jeff his first solo show in Ojai. This year’s October tour will be the first in which he participates. Jeff feels, as others do, that “a lot of the recent changes are due to the ideas and actions of Pam Grau and Jeff Crussell, which benefit the whole group. Their efforts have somewhat empowered the artists in OSA to better promote themselves.”

Works by OSA artists are exhibited in Ojai’s art galleries; at the Ojai Valley Museum, the Ojai Art Center and the Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts; also in Santa Paula, Ventura, Camarillo, Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, and beyond. Martha Moran, the “Ojai Rock Stacker,” has just installed one of her stone fountains at the fabled Lotusland botanical garden in Montecito. Pamela Grau’s large, mixed media assemblages can be viewed at the Ojai Valley Inn, and she is currently working on a commission for another hotel in Northern California. Susan Stinsmuehlen Amend’s six leaded-glass panels, “Blessings,” have just been installed as windows at the Jewish Community Center in Meiners Oaks and will be open to visitors starting this October.

The Santa Paula Museum’s keen interest in Ojai artists has led to beautifully curated shows on the other side of the Topa Topa mountains: a “Bert Collins Retrospective” in 2011; “Dos del Sur: Two from the South” (Carlos Grasso and Sylvia Raz) in 2015; “John Nava: Selected Paintings and Tapestries” in 2016; and “Nature Inspired: The Paintings of Sherry Loehr” in 2016.

But OSA would not be the strong group it is without the continuing dedication to serve of many of its long-time members who volunteer their time and contribute their talents by performing the myriad menial, boring, thankless organizational tasks, alone or in committees: Bernadette DiPietro, Richard Amend, Linda Taylor, David Reeser, Brian Berman, Shahastra, Soni Wright, Martha Moran, Tom Hardcastle, Sylvia Raz,



Jennifer Moses, Carlos Grasso, and so many more. Visit OSA’s newly redesigned website to get a glimpse into who they are.

One of the programs that distinguishes OSA from other art groups is their dedication to encourage education through the arts. Many of the members were, and still are, teachers. Their influence has been significant on younger generations.

This year OSA has awarded a record \$10,300 in scholarships. Since the inception of the program in 1993, more than \$200,000 has been awarded to local students to help them pursue their arts education. Richard Amend thinks, “this program is the glue that holds OSA together.”

A number of activities held year round have increased the visibility of OSA in Ojai and beyond. Dozens of people show up for their “Museum Talks” on Saturday mornings, eager to listen to and interact with the three or four participating artists. Each artist shows their art and tells their story about their life, inspiration, and techniques. It’s a cozy atmosphere, yet the presentations can get quite emotional and intense. And that’s a good thing.

The OSA exhibition at the Ojai Valley Museum in the Spring (now in its 13th year) has also become an important annual event. It offers a kaleidoscopic view of recent activity and new directions by OSA’s artists.

The “Second Saturday Open Studios” is a new initiative started by Pam Grau this year. Five to 10 artists participate by opening their studios for a few hours. The program is free to visitors, and has been drawing enthusiastic response from the attendees. These mini-

tours are more intimate and relaxed than the annual event, and other artists get a chance to discover their colleagues, something that cannot occur during the October tour, since each artist has to tend to visitors in their own studio.

As a long-standing member of OSA, photographer Cindy Pitou Burton has been able to observe the group up close. Her portraits of artists and her candid shots at parties and openings have been a de facto, precious documentation of OSA’s history. “I’ve been photographing OSA events since the mid-90s. My photojournalism experience made me a natural to cover anything I was around for. Eventually that job became my committee of one. Pam Grau and Jeff Crussell have transformed OSA. I was ready to quit, but it’s now so vibrant and such fun that I am staying in and am more active.”

With new players appearing on the scene and new plots developing, the storybook of OSA and its annual October tour continues writing itself in a predictably unpredictable manner. It’s a rather beautiful organic process to witness, observe and enjoy. Let’s support the people whose lives are an integral part of Ojai’s creative fabric. They keep re-inventing, re-creating, and boldly re-imagining themselves, as individuals and as a group, in this “Paradise for Artists” we treasure as our art town. Their lives enrich our lives. Their lives enrich and define the creative life of this entire valley. There is little doubt about that.

... 31, 32, 33 and counting.

And much more in the pipeline...

Stay tuned. ☺

Opposite Page: Top – Carol Shaw-Sutton in her living room, an extension of her studio, with her dog Hopi. (Photo by Liz Kuball) Bottom – Cindy Pitou Burton photographing an umbrella tulip. (Photo by Kristen Altimus)

This Page: Pam Grau and Jeff Crussell, an artists couple and proverbial “dynamic duo,” have been widely credited with energizing their peers with new ideas and putting the Ojai Studio Artists on a new trajectory. Photos courtesy of Grau/Crussell Studios.