

Bolinas yard art draws complaint, vandals

by Justin Nobel

On December 28, two moving trucks dropped off five, long squiggly parcels at the Bolinas home of Riley Johndonnell. He received the delivery at the foot of his driveway, atop the winding lane that leads through the eucalyptus to the Big Mesa, and spent several hours assembling it with a group of workers. The chartreuse pieces were part of a sculpture created by a friend, German architect Jurgen Mayer H., for Art Basel, a flashy Miami art show. When connected, the arched sculpture stood about ten feet tall with numerous finger-like protrusions and looked like something from the mind of Dr. Seuss.

Mayer has designed pavilions in Barcelona and office buildings in Poland. Several of his sculptures are bound for San Francisco, where he will have a show at the Museum of Modern Art next year, but this sculpture, titled *beat.wave* and valued at \$300,000, was destined for artistic obscurity, a storage locker somewhere in the Mid-Atlantic, where it was to sit for months.

So Johndonnell told Mayer, a frequent visitor to his Bolinas home overlooking the lagoon, that the sculpture could stay at his place. Mayer was delighted, but as soon as the workers unloaded it, Johndonnell realized the people of Bolinas weren't.

"Is there an ordinance against ugly?" quipped one local artist, who drove by while it was being set up.

People pulled off the road to examine the piece. Some sat on it and posed for pictures. Within days, it was the talk of the town. Some wondered if aliens had put it there. Others questioned if it weren't part of a Verizon advertisement. The following day, Johndonnell received a voicemail from a friend warning him that he had overheard people in town slamming the sculpture, and that there was a plan afoot to bring it down.

Johndonnell's wanted to transfer *beat.wave* to a grassy knoll in his yard out of view from the road but on New Years Day, when he and some friends went outside to move it, they discovered the sculpture had been toppled.

"We thought it was the wind," said Johndonnell, "then we got a little it closer and we were like, 'Oh...'"

It was clear to him it had been vandalized. Empty beer bottles littered the ground, indecipherable comments were scrawled in the dirt and a sign placed atop one of the downed blocks read, "Free."

Happy to inspire a dialogue about art, Johndonnell decided to leave *beat.wave* at the foot of his driveway, a canvas for the town. He hopes to move it to the park downtown where it would be more accessible to anyone who wants to add their mark, be it praise or antagonism.

"That is part of the beauty of Bolinas," he said, "passionate opposition."

The secluded, verdant and misty Boli-



Riley Johndonnell reassembled the pieces of *beat.wave*, last Saturday. The Dr. Seuss-like sculpture was crafted by German architect Jurgen Mayer H. When Johndonnell placed it outside his Mesa Road home, locals, disgusted by its color, size and texture, promptly toppled it. Or was it the wind? Photo by Justin Nobel.

nas environment has long attracted artists. Some of their art blends with the natural environment to produce a creative statement, such as Sally Robertson's lush gardens above Agate beach or Bob Bransten's sculpture lawn. Some uses objects that conflict with the natural space, yet have come to represent Bolinas nonetheless, simply because they seem to embrace the spirit of the place. These include the neon green Buell Barn's peace sign, or the rag doll cut-outs commenting on the Bush administration nailed to a tree just below Johndonnell's home.

The question posed by *beat.wave* is, just what is the Bolinas aesthetic? Although residents seemed at a loss as to whether such a thing exists at all, many agreed on one thing: the humped lime-green sculpture was not it.

Talk of the town

"I thought it was really ugly," said Dolores Richards, former director of the Bolinas Museum and a town resident, "the sharp edges, the color, the non-entity of it."

"It didn't speak to me in any way, emotionally or aesthetically," she added.

Part of why it was so offensive, explained Richards, was that it stood out as a plastic creation in a natural setting.

Richards said that although the Bush dolls down the road didn't necessarily fit their natural surroundings, they were much smaller and represented ideas that most Bolinas residents probably agreed with.

"We're surrounded by natural forms and natural beauty," said Richards, "and our aesthetic takes on a certain task. May-

be if you live in a gray tower in a city with sunlight barely coming through, this big green piece with shiny edges and bright finish might appeal to you."

But not everyone was opposed to the piece.

"I'm always cautious to make a quick judgment call on art," said Dieter Tremp. For Tremp, curator at the Bolinas Museum, art covers broad ground and any artful addition to the world is welcome. He considers the buoys hanging from a tree in his neighbor's yard, art. Although loud, *beat.wave* wasn't necessarily that unnatural, he said.

"The bulbous things coming out of the side could be any old seafood in huge magnification," said Tremp.

But outdoor art still must meld with its surroundings, according to Tremp. *Beat.wave* doesn't do that, unless the curves were a statement on the curvy road, he said.

"It should never feel like it dropped out of the sky," said Tremp.

Just as the art-worthiness of *beat.wave* is in question, so too is what happened to it. The sheriff's office was never asked to investigate what toppled the statue, making all theories speculation. Some say it was vandals, some say it was the wind and some Bolinas residents have a tough time coming to grips with either turn of events.

"To destroy someone else's property doesn't seem very Bolinas-like," said resident Joanna Rosenfeld.

"When I first saw it pushed over I thought maybe it was kids," she hypoth-

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JULIE MILAS - 1945-2007

Julie Milas, a long-time resident of Marin County, passed away October 20, 2007 at the age of 62, after a long struggle with cancer. Born in Chicago, Illinois, Julie moved to California to teach school more than 40 years ago.

Nature had a strong and lasting pull on Julie. She was passionate about the outdoors and the mountains, hills, hiking trails and ocean have lost a true friend and devotee. She loved every aspect of it, whether she was running, hiking, camping in it, teaching about it or encouraging others to enjoy it. She was a Docent at Audubon Canyon Ranch, a Ranger at Pt. Reyes Visitor Center and

worked with Pt. Reyes Field Seminars eventually becoming the Director.

After meeting her future husband, Rick Ley, their love of the outdoors took them on wonderful adventures in and around the west. They settled in Roseburg, Oregon where they lived for five years. During a trip to New Mexico in 2007, Julie and Rick found a special house in the old mining town of Silver City, New Mexico, which epitomized the open space and light they both loved. Relocating this past fall, it was to be her last home.

Julie's infectious laugh and great sense of humor are just two of her endearing qualities that all her many friends will remember about her. A memorial celebration will be held at the Clem Miller Education Center at Pt. Reyes on February 10, 2008 at 11:00am. If you wish to make a contribution in Julie's name, these are some organizations that she felt were really making a difference: Doctor's Without Borders, St. Jude Children's Hospital and Heifer International.

Marian Morris, mother and mentor, 1917-2008

by Justin Nobel

Marian Morris, who knew Nicasio ranch life in the 1920s, rang the church bell each morning at Sacred Heart in Olema and bestowed trinkets on customers at the West Marin Thrift Shop, passed away last week. She was 90.

"She was my mentor," said Jackie Campigli, who worked with Marian at Sacred Heart. "She was spiritual and sincere and she had a wit about her. She raised six kids and she raised most of us."

Morris was born August 4, 1917 and spent her childhood on the Pierce Point Ranch and later the Gallagher Ranch in Nicasio. Her grandparents, Edward and Catherine, traveled to West Marin from Connecticut on a wagon in 1862. They settled on F Ranch, then called Post Office Ranch.

Morris was the eldest of eight brothers and sisters. She went to grammar school in the one room Pacheco Schoolhouse, located where the Nicasio reservoir now is. She attended St. Vincent's High School in Petaluma and wanted to go to college, but was drawn back to the ranch to help

raise her brothers and sisters.

"They worked daylight to dusk seven days a week at the ranch in those days" said Bill Morris, her eldest son.

At a dance hall in Nicasio, she met Tony Morris, who was an aircraft mechanic during World War II and on leave at the time. In 1944, the couple was married at Old Saint Mary's Church in Nicasio.

The Morris moved briefly to Ottumwa, Iowa where Tony was stationed at an air force base learning to fly new fighter planes. Morris gave birth to Bill there, her first of six children. Her mother traveled by train from Point Reyes Station to see the baby. It was the first time she had ever left the state.

After the war ended, the family moved into a home opposite the Green Bridge, in Point Reyes. Her husband worked for an appliance company in Petaluma and Morris took care of the family. The Morris later moved to Inverness.

Morris loved to travel, and on weekends the family would pack into a station wagon and drive to Sierraville and Yosemite, where Mr. Morris liked to hunt deer and duck.

"We would throw our sleeping bags in the car," said Bill Morris. "Dad would sleep outside because there wasn't room for him."

Later, they spent summers at a cabin in the foothills of the Elkhorn Mountains, in Montana. Even in recent years she visited family as far away as Arkansas and took a cruise in the Pacific.

Morris taught CCD classes at the Sacred Heart Church in Olema and volunteered with Helping Hands, a church group that helps gather money for food at funeral receptions.

She never missed a mass and would often stop priests in the middle of their sermons to correct them on matters regarding the community.

"She showed me that even though you may be stressed by your own life you always have time to help others," said Campigli. "When you walked into a room and didn't know anyone, she would smile at you and you could go sit with her and gossip."

During her eighties, Morris volunteered once a week at the West Marin Community Thrift Shop, where she engaged customers about local issues and

family matters.

"It seemed like every other person in town was related to her," said Babette Sange, who manages the shop.

In later years, an aid accompanied her but she was still very competent and sharp of mind, added Sange. "She didn't need a calculator."

"I would describe her as very, very alive," said Sange. "A lot of people get to that age and want to sit back, but she still had that zest for life."

Several years ago, she spoke about Nicasio history with Don McIsaac at the Druids Hall. "It was an unbelievable event," said Campigli.

"She said 'I want to make that ninetieth,' and she did," said Campigli. "I feel we have now lost part of our history."

Marian is survived by children William, Catherine, Antone Jr. and Donal, sister Rich and brother George, 16 grandchildren and numerous great grandchildren. Services were held this morning at 11 a.m. at Sacred Heart Church in Olema. Memorial donations can be made to the Sacred Heart Church Building Fund, Hospice of Petaluma, and West Marin Senior Services.

>> Vandals

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esized, "because the pieces looked like big building blocks."

Another possibility, she speculated, was that "some people may have seen it as a display of wealth and were perhaps offended by its location."

Deputy Stephen Debrunner of the Point Reyes substation said he was patrolling Bolinas when the sculpture first went up. "I thought it was sort of humorous," he said, "these big green monstrosities."

Winds that night downed a three foot eucalyptus on the Olema-Bolinas Road and Debrunner thinks they may have felled the sculpture, too.

"I just feel like there was nothing else to indicate a vandalism," he said, "there was no spray paint and usually when you have a vandalism like that they're going to knock over everything."

According to the Stinson Water District's weather station, at the stroke of midnight there was a wind gust of 20 mph and during the early morning on January 1 there was a gust of 25 mph.

Betsyann, who lives in the house with the Bush dolls, is confident the wind knocked over the sculpture. Wind that night slammed closed a gate she had left open and broke it. "The wind comes down this gully and it just rattles things," she said.

She pointed out that her art has been

up for over a year and she has never had a problem with vandalism. "Everybody I talked to is just grateful for artwork," she said.

And in her opinion, Bolinas could use more of it.

"I was amazed when I went to Washington D.C. and saw all the statues and corners and the beauty of manmade things," said Betsyann. "We always look at the beautiful redwoods but there's a whole different quality to pieces that somebody has put together."

Scene of the crime

Last Saturday, I dropped by Johndonnell's to see if a conversation with the art owner might make the matter more comprehensible.

Riley has a trim goatee and a winning smile. He was dressed smartly: dark jeans, unlaced boots, a pin-striped blue shirt rolled at the sleeves, a burnt umber vest and a wool scarf. We sat on white couches in a sunny room with picture windows that looked out on marshland in front of the Bolinas Lagoon, which glowed gold in the early morning light.

Art was obviously important to him, and he seemed to follow Trepmp's motto, that just to make a statement was something worthy and something that could be called art. A cast of a truck tire through mud rested against one wall, a mirror bordered with driftwood hung in the living room above a large misshapen ball the same color as the sculpture and a glass dining room table with a base of tawny wood was surrounded by white chairs with bristly backs meant to imitate pond reeds.

"Unicorns and fairies live here," said Johndonnell, smiling.

Johndonnell was raised in Santa Cruz. "My mom was a hippie," he said. "I grew up with Hare Krishna babysitters." As a kid, he built wood sculptures on the beach. The family often came to Bolinas to go hiking.

"I distinctively remember music on the streets," he said, recalling the Bolinas of his childhood.

The artistic spirit of the place is much of what attracted him here. Now, he said, Bolinas is in a transition.

"Whether that's good or bad is really the debate," said Johndonnell. "Something like this piece punctuates that conversation."

He said that the backlash has been surprising, especially coming from Bolinas. "I've never met so many liberals that are scared of change," he said.

In an effort to ease the transition for newcomers, Johndonnell helped start Studio Soiree, an evening fundraiser held at the studio of artists who either live or spend time in West Marin. Last July, an event was held at the home of Bolinas watercolorist, Sally Robertson. The Soiree started as an effort to help raise money for the artists as well as the Bolinas Firehouse, and Johndonnell hopes to continue it.

He doesn't necessarily love the piece—"it's not my personal taste," he said—but he still thinks it was a good idea to try and touch up some of Bolinas' empty spaces.

"There's so much space that's just private but open to public view," said Johndonnell, "sometimes people just make

them into scrap yards but I'd rather devote mine to creative space."

Johndonnell suggested we walk to the front yard and examine the scene of the crime. Beatwave lay on its side like a dismembered dinosaur, the crumpled canvas straps that held it together stuck in the damp earth. Fallen eucalyptus leaves were pasted to the piece and a knocked-over Stella bottle lay to the side.

"See, they're pretty easy to push over," he said, lifting a piece up.

Together, we hoisted another and moved it beside a third section, then moved a piece from the front to the back, reinventing beatwave.

Johndonnell walked to the edge of Mesa Road and examined the latest incarnation.

"That will do for today," he said.



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