

Greener

What has jolted a far-flung group of Northwest artists out of familiar aesthetic furrows?

Farming—thanks to twelve commissions, awarded last winter by the Maryhill Museum of Art. Four artists each from Oregon, Washington and Idaho, working in diverse media, were attracted by a 2003 announcement from Maryhill curator Lee Musgrave and co-organizer Don Stuart, regional director of the land preservation group American Farmland Trust (AFT).

The challenging twist: each artist would spend days on a farm or ranch, learn about sustainable agriculture, get to know the family, then create work from the experience.

“This was one of the hardest bodies of work I have ever had to make,” said painter-photographer Megan Murphy of Spokane.

The subject matter sounded easy enough. “I thought I could make it romantic,” Murphy said. Instead, as she and others discovered after Musgrave selected their portfolios, myths and preconceptions about agriculture usually mask complex, overwhelming realities. It is rich material for art.

Bridging an Old Gap

“There is a need for more art that engages,” Musgrave said. In a 30-year career he has curated work confronting social issues and reaching beyond art’s world; also Maryhill, on 3,000 acres near Goldendale, Wash., considers agriculture part of its history and mission.

Stuart didn’t know art but he did know farms, and felt the show could bridge an old gap in a new way.

“It’s almost an accepted truth that people don’t know where their food comes from,” Stuart said. Twelve family farmers and ranchers, recommended by local conservation districts for their excellent care of the land, would be the profession’s ambassadors.

In February, artists and farmers were paired, and the experiment began.



by Sam Lowry

Pastures



Unprepared for the Reality

"This is the most exciting piece I have ever worked on," found object sculptor Bonnie Meltzer of Portland said as she added finishing touches. Decades as a working artist/urban gardener drew her to the project.

Still, she was unprepared for the worry of watching farmers Sam and Nancy Sweeney of Dayton, Ore. struggle through a potentially devastating season of soggy ground and late starts.

"I had a conversation with him last week," Meltzer said in early November. "They are still working—it's alfalfa now—but the hardest part of the year is over and I guess they didn't lose money."

All involved wondered what bonds would form between farmers and artists. Strong ones, Meltzer and others discovered as they watched "their farmers" toil.

Behind the Barn

When not vexed by weather, Sweeney concerns himself with Willamette Valley land use issues, calling himself a "reluctant activist."

Meltzer's usual work is narrative and political, so she picked up the tune. Houses with shoes ("marching suburbia"), an empty shopping cart ("what we get with no farmers"), and a ballot box appear in her three-paneled piece.

Rachel Brumer of Seattle has built renown as a maker of art quilts.

"But I didn't end up making a quilt," Brumer said of her work with Randy and Kim Mower on their 120-cow dairy farm in Sedro-Woolley, Wash.—one of a dwindling number of such farms in the rich Skagit Valley. "Quilting just didn't seem to encompass their world."

Brumer was stunned by the Mowers' hungry minds. "They know so much,"

"Bequest" by Bonnie Meltzer, 60" x 60". Meltzer crocheted the "bioswale" fringing the Sweeneys' road while waiting for Al Gore to speak about global warming at the Portland Convention Center.



Sorcha Meek works in her Hood River studio. She made paintings of the Frahm farm on canvas sewn with horsehair to onion sacks.

she said. “Every time you turn around there is more they’ve just figured out.”

And Brumer couldn’t shake a powerful image: Randy had not spent a night off the place in over 28 years. “That extreme commitment—it was a powerful issue for me.” Brumer built her work around it, a piece of sculptural furniture incorporating themes of care for land and loss through time (it features an old-fashioned library card catalog).

Tragedy

As her Maryhill paintings evolved, Sandy Marostica, from Boise, drew a particularly hard lesson.

Marostica grew up on a farm and left long ago, but found a personal reawaken-

ing as she and her husband spent time on Brad Orme’s cattle ranch near St. Anthony in eastern Idaho.

“I went out with Brad and fixed fences. He told me about ranching and the four generations of his family,” Marostica said. “He was totally connected to nature.”

Orme was killed in a motorcycle accident near his home in August. Family succession, the artists learned, is always a pressing issue. Orme, single, left no heir.

“Who’ll take over?” Marostica wondered. “I have almost been afraid to ask.” Orme’s father, Rich, will stay for now.

“It totally changed the work,” Marostica said. The epigram to her second piece reads: “Everyone here is missing Brad.”

Horse Hair and Onions

Sorcha Meek, painter-printmaker from Hood River, Ore., also departed from the familiar to create paintings, sewn with horsehair to gessoed onion sacks, depicting Rod and Lana Frahm’s thousand-acre onion



“Closing the Gates” by Sandy Marostica, oil on canvas, 36” x 30”. In spring before the cattle arrived, rancher Brad Orme would close gates behind the migrating elk.



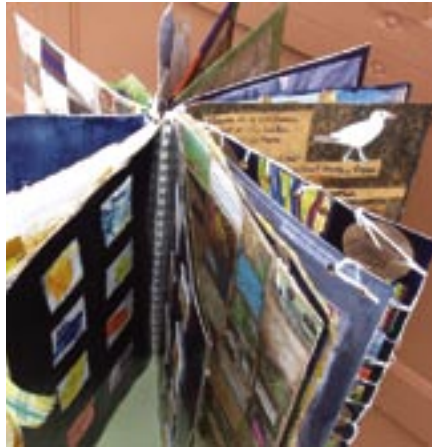
and beet farm on the Snake River near Ontario, Ore.

“When I got there and saw and experienced the place, I realized it was going to be about land and earth and people,” Meek said.

Next visit, Rod greeted her with a giant metal bouquet welded from harvester parts—his own work of art. “You make what you do interesting and fun,” he said.

The compelling result of Maryhill’s leap into relationship-based art, “Sustaining Change on the American Farm,” will

open the museum’s season in March 2006.



“Book of Wheat” by Pat Tolle. Paper and mixed media, 12” h. During visits to the Ericksen wheat ranch near St. John, Wash., Tolle collected impressions, sights, sounds, textures, materials and themes.

Also included in the exhibit:

- Installation by landscape architect Michelle Arab of Seattle, from work on the Pirie and Jane Grant farm of Othello, Wash.
- Panoramic photography by Jan Boles of Caldwell, Idaho, of the Wayne and Jacie Jensen farm in Genesee, Idaho.
- Oil paintings by Portland’s Sidonie Caron of Doc and Connie Hatfield’s Oregon Country Beef ranch near Brothers, Ore.
- Paintings by Robert Dozono, Portland, of Bailey Family Orchards in The Dalles, Ore.
- Oils and watercolors by Norman Nelson of Boise, painted on the Koester ranch in Lava Hot Springs, Idaho.
- Sculptural clothing by Nancy Taylor of Potlatch, Idaho, from work on the Delay tree farm in Athol, Idaho.
- Paintings and book art by Pat Tolle, Mukilteo, Wash., from the Tracy and April Erickson wheat ranch near St. John, Wash.



“Cowboy Horsepower” by Sidonie Caron, oil on canvas. Caron painted at the High Desert Ranch owned by the Hatfields, pioneers of Oregon Country Beef. Photo courtesy of the artist.