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## Sculptures Grow Like Flowers In this Orinda garden, art sprouts from the ground up

By Chris Lavin



Discarded irrigation pipes are beautifully used for dreadlocks. Photo Chris Lavin

live in Orinda? I'm happy in Berkeley!"

She wanted him to go away.

But the friend had insisted, so she and her husband, Matt Wyse, went to look. (Only to shut the guy up, she says.) She set foot on the overgrown property off El Toyonal, trekked inside the abandoned house, shined a flashlight up into the dark second story, "and I knew I'd be living here someday," she said.

It took a while to buy it. Wyse found herself visiting the absentee owner almost every day. She persisted for some months. Wyse is a persistent person. Finally, on one such visit, Wyse insisted on a signature at the dotted line. Wyse is also insistent.

With papers signed, Wyse, who owned and operated Bizarre Bazaar in Oakland for many years, and her husband, who owned and operated bookstores, made the move. She envisioned a landscape of blooms, of flowering shrubs, of verdant vines reaching to the sky. But little would grow beneath the spreading oaks, and the tannins in the soil didn't support the kind of life she had considered. "I mean, look at this!" she exclaimed, holding her hands out helplessly beneath a towering oak tree. "I couldn't get a plant to grow!"

Therefore Wyse began to create her own garden - a sculpture garden that would begin to take shape and gradually transform their 3 acres into a garden of whimsy, of contemplation. It has become a garden of life, of life's entrapments, its allures and pleasures. A meandering walk takes one through sculptures both small and large, sculptures that grow from the ground or hang from trees.

Wyse chooses her materials carefully. When a contractor friend called and asked her if she would like a truckload of plastic irrigation pipe that he had just torn up, she didn't say yes right away. What color is it? she asked. "A very nice brown," he said. Now those pipes hang in three consecutive sculptures from an oak, reminiscent of regal portraits of faces framed by perfect dreadlocks. The walkway takes you past sculptures too large to move.

"I didn't know what I was getting into," Wyse said about her largest work. It started with another friend calling and asking if she wanted some Manzanita he had cleared. She said yes. She did not expect three moving vans full of branches and trunks. The friend dumped it. She shaped and molded the pieces together, covered it with chicken wire, began sculpting it with cement. It took years to complete. But Wyse is persistent.

"It weighs 75,000 pounds," she said. "And I know it because of my bills from Diamond K," the supply store in Lafayette. It took years to complete when the English ivy, finally - one of the only plants to grow on the land -- began to make it complete. "It looks good now," she said.

Now, Wyse's space is full. Fences are adorned with flowers and lace and bags and beautiful plastic shaped bottles or carry-out containers. She has outgrown her galleries, throughout which she recently sprinkled full jars of glitter to make a connection between one piece and the next. On the path, sculptures like moose ferns fall from the trees; stalagmites come from the other direction, sprouting sculptures that vary from the whimsical to the baffling.

Wyse has been an artist for a long as she's been alive. She also is an animal lover (she had ocelots, once upon a time, with beautiful pictures and happy cats to prove it) and she eloped at the age of 15 to leave her family home in Newark, N.J. She seems to be a person who does not look back. She is a free spirit, with a dandy hat and bright lipstick to prove it. Her beginnings, she says, are only the start of what she has produced.

She pointed to a cluster of crisp black umbrellas and fresh blankets on the ground. Someone could live here, a visitor might think. But it's a sculpture. "This is the Homeless Ladies Encampment," Wyse

To hear how artist Karen Wyse came to own her house, which she and her husband bought way back in 1974, is to take a trip back in time. Picture Berkeley, picture peasant skirts, bare feet, picture freedom and anarchy. Picture a friend showing up at your door and saying, "You have to see this place in Orinda."

BART was new. Most fares were 30 cents.

Wyse's friend had been going door-to-door in Orinda selling powdered laundry detergent. It was a somewhat typical job people did back then, with a commission of 25 cents per box, and he had gone to knock on a door that turned out to be on a 3-acre piece of land that was to die for. Wooded acres, an abandoned house, outbuildings, a creek running through it. Paradise, the laundry detergent salesman thought. But Wyse didn't understand the concept when he rushed to her to explain.

She wasn't interested.

"Orinda?" she yelled at her friend. "Who wants to

announced. She had recently changed a sculpture near it, to freshen it up, replacing a takeout container.

"So it's changing all the time," Wyse said, looking around. "Just like we are. We need to get spiffed up, too!"

For a tour through Karen Wyse's sculpture garden, you may watch an independent production that says it all on YouTube, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qpz9FcwjnTk>. Or just search Karen Wyse on YouTube.



Even the ceilings of Karen Wyse's home are filled with sculpture. Photo Chris Lavin



A redundant phone is rethought. Photos Chris Lavin



Wyse has trouble finding coffee cups because she is constantly tying them to trees, where they look better than on the shelf.

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