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TURNING STEEL INTO LACE

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Cal Lane, a sculptor and welder who turns ordinary objects into lacy artworks. Credit: Phil Mansfield for The New York Times

SINCE 2002, Cal Lane has lived in a picturesque house on five bucolic acres in Putnam Valley, N.Y.

Her landlords, David and Diane Waldman, of Rancho Mirage, Calif., have never charged her rent. The Waldmans are art collectors who pride themselves on helping talented newcomers. After seeing photos of Ms. Lane's work, they offered the use of the property, which she says has given her the opportunity to focus on her art.

Though no money changes hands, she has found a way to show appreciation. Last summer, Ms. Lane drove across the country in her pickup truck and delivered a sculpture to the couple, whom she had never met. The piece—a wheelbarrow into which Ms. Lane had cut intricate, lacy patterns—now stands between a painting by Robert Mangold and a sculpture by Sol LeWitt.

Even in that rarefied company, "everyone seems to be attracted to Cal's wheelbarrow," said Dr. Waldman, a physician at the Eisenhower Medical Center in Rancho Mirage.



Ms. Lane, 39, grew up on Vancouver Island, in British Columbia, and studied welding, planning to use the technique to make art (and, if that proved impossible, simply to make a living). Some sculptors, including Richard Serra, who has called welding “a form of stitching,” use the technique to join pieces of metal. Ms. Lane, by contrast, uses her torch to cut baroque patterns into such mundane objects as shovels, Dumpsters and old oil drums.

The work is about the contrasts between the industrial and the fanciful, the opaque and the transparent. Ms. Lane described herself as “a person who always has opposites in my head.”

She started her adult life as a hairdresser (her mother owned a salon in Victoria), but she said she was a tomboy and “welding seemed to fit me better.” The mix of feminine and masculine vocations (teasing hair and welding steel), she said, is encapsulated in her work.

The property in Putnam Valley, 50 miles north of New York, contains a two-story house, a large red barn and a number of smaller structures. It once belonged to Martha Boswell Lloyd. She was one of the three Boswell Sisters, 1930’s singing stars whose vocal style is said to have paved the way for later marriages of pop and jazz.

In the 1960s, part of the Lloyd estate was bought by Jean and Terry Hennessy, riding instructors who kept dozens of horses in the oversized barn.

One of their students starting when he was 5 years old was David Waldman, a Brooklyn boy who liked hanging out with the Hennessys so much that “I became like a surrogate child to them,” he said recently.

As the couple reached old age, they suffered a series of setbacks she lost her hearing, and he lost his sight. When they ended up in nursing homes without much money, Dr. Waldman bought the house, he said, so they would have a chance to return to it, “although they never really did,” he said.

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Ms. Lane is the artist in residence at the five-acre compound in Putnam Valley, N.Y., owned by David and Diane Waldman of Rancho Mirage, Calif.

Dr. Waldman, who is an allergist and immunologist, said he talked to the Hennessys about the house before they died in 2001, and they decided he should try to use it to do some good.

So when they met Nancy Dwyer, a painter and sculptor, they offered her the chance to become their first artist in residence. Ms. Dwyer, who performed extensive renovations on the house, was lonely there and asked if she could have a roommate; she proposed Ms. Lane, whom she had met through a friend. The Waldmans approved. Ms. Lane, who had been living in Nova Scotia, moved into the house and began studying art at Purchase College, in Westchester County.

After about a year, Ms. Dwyer left to take a teaching job in Vermont, and Ms. Lane stayed on. At first, she said, she didn't know what the Waldmans expected from her.

"It was awkward," she recalled. "I didn't know how much they liked my work, so I kept asking them if they wanted me to send a check."

The one thing they asked was that she not do welding in the wooden barn, which is not only a historic structure but a treasure trove, containing (among many other things) the Hennessys' riding equipment. (Ms. Lane said she would have avoided welding in the barn even if the Waldmans hadn't asked.)

While making art, Ms. Lane has found time to paint the house, dig a koi pond and plant an herb garden. She is also handy. "I seem to have a close relationship with the boiler," she said.

The one time she needed help with it, the repairman who showed up was intrigued by her work. Now, she said, he drops by occasionally "to give me odd steel things like oil drums and car parts."

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By improving the house, and positioning several of her artworks on the lawn, “she really made the property come alive,” Dr. Waldman said. When she was in California, he added, “I showed her some of the old scrapbooks of the Hennessys, and she got involved with the whole spirituality of the place.”

Ms. Lane said, “It was exciting to see those old pictures and listen to the stories that connected the objects I had been living with.”

Ms. Lane says she hasn’t acquired any furniture. “My life has been transient in all respects,” she said. “I’m a wanderer, from friends, lovers, jobs and places. The only thing I could ever stick to is making art.” In fact, she said, her five-year stint at the Waldmans’ is a record for her.

She says her life in Putnam Valley has been solitary. “I keep thinking that it’s good for me, because it’s making me focus on work.” She later added, “I did have a nice man come by recently to cook me dinner.” The result? “I saw him as trying to steal time away from my work.”

Some of that work will end up in a show in March at the Patricia Faure Gallery in Santa Monica, Calif. The trip west will give Ms. Lane another chance to visit with her landlords. On the last trip, Diane Waldman gave her some of her family’s heirloom lace. Ms. Lane is using its patterns in her latest sculptures.

Referring to his mentors, the Hennessys, Dr. Waldman said: “Their wish was that the property would somehow do some good for other people. And it has.”

“Cal would have loved them,” he added, “and they would have loved Cal.”

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