

WELDER'S WHIMSY

Farm castoffs come to life as fanciful metal sculptures

Story by Jolaine Collins • Photos by Lori Eanes

When Phillip Glashoff left his family's ranch in the Suisun Valley to study agriculture at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo more than 40 years ago, it wasn't farming, but a talent for welding and art that led him back home.

"After college, I realized my true passion was art and metal sculpting," Glashoff said.

Those passions have propelled him into a world of art shows and art galleries throughout the West, where he's developed a following for his whimsical sculptures—made from scrap metal and steel objects often found around farms and industrial operations.

Glashoff has devoted 5 acres of his property near Fairfield to what he calls a sculpture ranch. From summer through fall, visitors can stroll the ranch and enjoy his unique creations, exhibited among Scottish Highland cattle and walnut and orange trees.

Art lovers are especially tickled by Glashoff's take on animals and people. A life-sized bull sculpture features a motorcycle gas tank for a head, industrial wrenches for legs and a body composed of tire rims interwoven with rusty tools, giving visitors reason to pause and appreciate the artist's inspiration.

There are amusing sculptures of women with torsos made of oxygen tanks, hair fashioned from bicycle chains that resemble braids, and disproportionately long eyelashes made from metal rods. The sculptures depict a number of activities such as gardening, dancing and cooking.

"Growing up on the ranch, I had a lot of time to spend looking at art books," Glashoff said. "I learned to weld as a kid, because there was always something that needed to be fixed on the property."

At Cal Poly, Glashoff took a specialty welding class, practicing his new craft by creating three-dimensional forms for the school's Tournament of Roses floats.

Phillip Glashoff turns welding into an art form by transforming industrial tools and metal castoffs into whimsical characters at his Suisun Valley ranch.

Scottish Highland cattle graze among 5 acres of metal sculptures created by Phillip Glashoff, bottom center. The Glashoff family has farmed in the rolling hills of Suisun Valley for nearly 100 years.



After college, while working as a ranch manager at Nut Tree Ranch in Vacaville, Glashoff discovered a new outlet for his three-dimensional art skills: building creative scarecrows for display. His experimental scarecrows became the genesis for Nut Tree's popular Giant Scarecrow Contest, which attracted hundreds of clever contestants and thousands of visitors each fall for many years.

These days, his scarecrow inspiration can be seen in his metal creations that stand tall as wise shamans, whimsical wizards or earth mothers, balancing metal birds on outstretched arms.

"I enjoy working with steel because I want to create images that last," Glashoff said. "My sculptures range from the size of a salt shaker to a 25-foot totem pole made from tractor grilles. Lately, I've been adding butterflies to some of my sculptures. People really like butterflies."

He estimates 90% of the materials used in his work is repurposed.

"I was green before it was known as green," he said, laughing.

Proving that one man's trash is another man's treasure, Glashoff's art materials include salvaged fire extinguishers, compressor covers and tractor seats. Early in his career, he hunted for materials around ranches and farms. ("Every ranch has a boneyard," he said.) His current sources include a network of tried-and-true scrapyards, where he finds everything from rusty nuts and bolts to car bumpers and industrial fans.

"I like using objects that have an organic feel, like tanks for bodies and black pipes for legs," he said.

Glashoff often adds cast-off accessories to his

characters. Old pots, pans and cutlery are perfect accompaniments for the chefs he creates. A sculpted farmer might hold a rusted pitchfork and pruning shears.

Considering the diversity of materials and individuality of each sculpture, one might find it surprising that Glashoff doesn't do sketches before his welding torch meets metal.

"I don't always know what I'm about to create," he said. "I just start from scratch. Sometimes I work on as many as 15 pieces at a time. I'll put things aside until I feel what they will become."

The country roads leading into Glashoff's 20-acre parcel are lined with small versions of his sculptures, crafted into mailboxes for neighbors.

The mailboxes offer a visual welcome to visitors driving into Suisun Valley wine country, where grapevines wind through the lands the Glashoff family has farmed for generations.

"I feel very blessed to be raised on a farm. It taught me a lot of skills. The land around me and its history continues to inspire me," Glashoff said. "Sculpting is a lot of fun for me, and it's very rewarding to know that people enjoy my sculptures in their yards, and as public art." 🌿

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MORE ONLINE

Watch Phillip Glashoff in action and tour his sculpture ranch at www.californiabountiful.com.

TAKE A TOUR

Glashoff Sculpture Ranch in Fairfield is open by appointment during the summer months. This year, it closes Oct. 31. Call 707-427-8060 for an appointment. If you go, consider a stop at neighboring produce farms or wineries in the Suisun Valley.

