

Metal & Magic

Harmony in the Garden

By Moira Sheridan

ONE ARTIST WORKS WITH HARD, COLD METAL, transforming its obdurate nature with fire and hammer. The other weaves a bamboo trail through the woods and asks, "Why not?" One is thoughtful and deliberate, the other spontaneous and playful. Though their results and approaches couldn't be more different, **Greg Leavitt** and **Simple**, both Pennsylvania artists, share a powerful inventiveness and love of the creative process that imbues their work. Their creations, meant mainly for the outdoors, echo and enhance nature's forms, be they monumental sculptures or men made of grass.

Many gardeners have seen Leavitt's work at the entrance to the Mt. Cuba Center in Hockessin, Delaware, where his stunning tree gate welcomes visitors. Many, too, will remember the striking entryway he created for the now closed Waterloo Gardens in Devon, PA, featuring 16 feet of wisteria vine in curling metal across the top. His pieces have appeared in the Philadelphia Flower Show since 1979, and in addition to private clients, he has done work for numerous horticultural organizations, restaurants, hotels, a zoo, and even a cemetery. Forged mainly from steel, copper, and bronze, his sculptures exemplify a mastery of traditional blacksmithing techniques and a penchant for detail. Flora and fauna are the dominant themes of much of

his work, even when depicted in the abstract.

"I'm not trying to convey a perfect rendition," Leavitt says, pulling sample pieces from a bag at his studio. Grape clusters, dragonflies, fish, a snail that was hot carved (quickly taken out of the fire and chiseled) emerge from within the canvas, each exquisite by itself. "It's more like working in the spirit of the blacksmithing process. Forms are stylized and there are things in my palette that are special to the process, like

twists and scrolls. I'm constantly looking at balance and the juxtaposition of energies, which is extremely important."

The exploration of the juxtaposition of energies is central to Leavitt's, "Macromergence," a masterpiece that was dedicated in September at Star® Roses

and Plants/Conard-Pyle in Jennersville, Pennsylvania, where it stands at the entrance to the new demonstration garden. Designed by his wife Tiana, who is his partner in all aspects of their business, the 15-foot-tall structure is an abstract interpretation of the wonders of plant reproduction. It rises from a star-shaped base 38' in diameter, with two intersecting arches crowning



Macromergence, a Greg Leavitt sculpture at Star® Roses and Plants/Conard-Pyle.

an interior fusion of activity. Inspired by electron micrographs of plants, the sculpture translates the micro world into the macro with stylized versions of stamens, ovules, a double helix, and the energy of a seed sprouting.

It is Leavitt's most monumental piece to date, one that was designed to work with the strengths of his Berks County studio, a cavernous, barn-like structure built in 2000. He labored for a year within the 5,500-square-foot space with 22-foot



Greg Leavitt stands at the anvil in his 5,500-square-foot studio in Berks County, PA.



Leavitt's studio can accommodate a 5-ton sculpture. In the foreground is his work *Eye of the Moon*, one of his favorites.



The hexagonal frames are similar to work done for a railing at the Hyatt Regency Hotel at Penn's Landing in Philadelphia.

ceilings, transforming long sheets of metal into airy forms with various methods, including hot forging, cold bending, and welding. To transport the sculpture to Jennersville, it was taken apart and driven on flatbed trucks to the site, where Leavitt spent four hours welding it back together. At the dedication, Conard-Pyle president Steve Hutton said, "I've admired and pined for a Greg Leavitt sculpture for an awfully long time. What I like about it is it's ebullient, energetic, whimsical, all kinds of wonderful things that gardens are."



Simple in his Malvern garden, caught in a rare moment—sitting down.

If Leavitt is a master in metal, Simple works magic with just about anything. He loves recycling, fast-food colors, animation movies, false perspective, mirrors and illusions, and manipulating plants through pruning. He is a self-described specialist in horticultural art and the PeeWee Herman/Ed Wood of the horticultural world. No medium is off-limits, and he has worked in wood, metal, ceramics, concrete, and earthenware, even creating a series of living espaliered tree enclosures. His

art adds a playful element to gardens, from bamboo trellises to trompe l'oeil building facades to sculptures woven with grasses. Anywhere and everywhere, a party may break out. He lives with his partner Michael Howell in Malvern, Pennsylvania, where Howell owns and runs Create A Scene, his business that designs, constructs, and maintains gardens. While Simple's business is a separate entity, Howell sometimes calls upon his wizardry with hardscaping.

"Don't give me blueprints; give me a picture," Simple says of his visual approach to projects, adding that he designed a structure for Conard-Pyle on a napkin and tends to see things in Technicolor™ detail.

Bob Yungman and Vince Pompo, longtime clients, confirm the Simple approach. "We'll say we want to do this or that and he sees it in four dimensions—below and above ground and over time," says Yungman. Five acres of their 15-acre West Chester property is a gallery of Simple's work, planted with multiple gardens that all bear his touch. Espaliered Japanese maple trees form an enclosed sitting room. "Rosco's Roadhouse" is a faux cabin in the woods, complete with front porch and intricate woodwork on the façade. Walk through the door and it opens onto the outdoors beyond. The Viewing Stand, an open wooden structure overlooking an expanse of garden, incorporates Simple's deft touch with mirrors and lighting. It features a mason jar chandelier and another light-studded fixture made from Yungman's grandmother's wooden ironing board. A large mirror at one end reflects and amplifies the light.

"Art should be surprising," says Simple, who sometimes uses empty frames in the garden that appear as mirrors. "Everything I do is an experience [for the viewer]," he says. One of those experiences occurred at Yungman and Pompo's property,

just after nightfall on a cool summer evening. Simple arrived with a plastic bag and took off into the dusk at a furious pace. Striding the trails that wend up and down, through the woods and out of them, he halted suddenly at a grove of beeches on a downward slope. Dousing a spotlight just up the path, he plunged the woods into complete darkness, sunk to his knees, pulled something from the bag and plugged it into the spotlight's outlet. In an instant hundreds of blue stars appeared among the beeches, transforming the grove into a twinkling canopy. Mesmerizing and beautiful, the thin rays of light illuminated the night.



Seats are lined up to look out on the garden at night from the Viewing Stand by Simple.

Light is a key element in Simple's gardens, where he strives to incorporate all the senses. He is certified to work in neon and optic fiber, and has created many sculptural elements with bended neon and high resolution optical fiber. "Neon took me off guard. I had seen low-rider cars that had neon running along the bottom of the car and it influenced me to start working with light, so I went to neon school in Hollywood, Florida," he says. Music is another staple, with speakers hidden in bird houses or ornamental details of outside structures. His tactile nature is evident in a living curtain he created in his Malvern garden, by selectively pruning a weeping Katsura tree so that the new young shoots reach to the ground, creating a walk-through living wall.

Both Simple's and Leavitt's journeys to artistic success have been winding; both are primarily

self-taught. Leavitt, who has been sculpting for 42 years, remembers the moment that started his career. While living in a Colorado ski resort just out of college, he met some sculptors doing extraordinarily creative things with metal and he said, "I want to do that; it was my struck-by-lightning moment." He took a metal working class and was allowed to use the instructor's equipment in his free time. Without a formal art or mechanical background, Leavitt took to it, as he recalls, "like a tenacious turtle." After moving back east and working at Upper Bank Nursery in Media, he set up a little studio when he saw a niche for garden gates and railings. The piece that launched him into high-scale commission work was the set of gates at Waterloo Gardens in Devon. "They were one of my first projects [in the Media studio]. They were big and dramatic with lots of floral design and beautiful copper work. It was an installed piece that people started to know because so many people went there, and it helped me get many commissions," he says.

Today he prefers large, abstract work like the Conard-Pyle sculpture. "I like the boldness, speed, and extemporaneous nature you get into," he says. At the same time, he thrives on detail and a closer look at any of his works reveals the painstaking nature of his art. Through the use of sometimes ancient tools, he bends metal into impossibly delicate shapes, and the intricacies are as impressive as the whole.

Simple's entrée into art was almost a necessity. "I went to trade school for electronics, and I was the one in the back of the class blowing up

'transistor tubes'," he jokes.

"I grew up very dyslexic and it made me use my hands, which turned out to be a blessing in disguise. I was supposed to be an electrical technician, but instead I got into art." For years he worked in ceramics, pottery, and macramé—"it was the '70s after all," he says—and built an entire house, including floors and much of the furniture, from wood he felled and hand-planed himself. After the breakup of his marriage, he took to the road in a VW bus, reinventing himself as Simple, the Roving Garden Artist. Support from the horticultural community during that time provided the outlet for his creative talents, he contends, and allowed him to launch a career. His work, at famed horticulturist John Greenlee's California garden in the 1990s, put him on the map, gaining him clients throughout the U.S. and abroad.

It was inevitable that the two artists' work should intersect and, at Yungman's and Pompo's property in West Chester, they do. Two herons



An elaborate facade on the side of Rosco's Road House, a trompe l'oeil "cabin" designed and built by Simple.

arch and stretch their steel bodies over a terraced pavilion. The herons, designed by Tiana and forged by Greg, are 450 pounds each, but look ready to break free from their bases and fly away. The terraced pavilion, complete with fountain and music, is Simple's handiwork. The two also collaborated on the Conard-Pyle exhibit, with Leavitt creating the sculpture and Simple and Bowell designing the demonstration garden. Though opposite in many ways, their collaborations are pure harmony.



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Ed Note: All pictures ©Maira Sheridan. For a full-color version of this article, go to the HPS/MAG web site, www.hardyplant.org.



Greg & Tiana Leavitt's herons grace a terrace, pond, and trellis designed and built by Simple at Bob Yungman and Vince Pompo's West Chester garden.