

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



Loft-y ambitions : Retired contractor transforms junk into fanciful art

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STEVE MALONE/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS



J.W. Adkins, better known as Bill, transforms "oddball stuff" into pieces of "junk art" in his spacious shop on East Haley Street. He and his wife, Martha Adkins, are accustomed to strangers stopping by to ask, "What is this place, and what do you do here?"

the lot on East Haley Street that they wander onto the property, owned by Martha and J.W. Adkins, an affable retired couple, who never mind answering the same two questions:

"What is this place, and what do you do here?" said Mrs. Adkins, 66, with a laugh.

In his private studio, The Loft, A Gallery @720, Mr. Adkins creates sculptures "out of others' castaways."

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Drivers catch a glimpse out of the corner of their eye as they zip by, causing them to circle the block and come back for a closer look.

Walkers stop, stare and cautiously venture inside.

Many are so curious about what they see in

"We've met all kinds of people from all over the world. We love to show them around," added Mr. Adkins, who is better known as Bill.

Often the strangers end up chatting while seated with the couple in the white wicker chairs that surround the long rectangular dining table that is covered with a yellow checked plastic tablecloth.

It sits outdoors between two buildings — including a studio for her and shop for him — that are barely visible because of all the "junk art" that Mr. Adkins, 81, has created since he retired as a general contractor in Santa Barbara in 1989.

"Sometimes, we'll have three or four different people sitting around this table," said Mrs. Adkins, comfortably seated in one of the chairs and knitting a colorful scarf while she and her husband talked with the News-Press on a hot, sunny morning.

"People say I'm creative. I knit, I quilt, I make dolls, I paint. But I follow patterns.

Photo Captions:

1: The eyes have it in a gate made from scrap.

2: Curious onlookers are attracted to the site by a massive wood wall made of scrap timber on which is an assortment of letters and numbers of different colors and sizes.

3: The Rube Goldberg-style fountain is made of pieces of stainless pipes, faucets and other metal that turn a wheel around when the water is turned on.

4: The Cinderella coach is called "12:01 a.m." because it's what the fair lady's coach looked like the minute after midnight after the fairy tale ball, imagined Mrs. Adkins.



Bill's creativity comes from within," she commented.

What initially attracts curious onlookers to the site is a massive wood wall made of scrap timber on which is an assortment of letters and numbers of different colors and sizes along with a large reddish-colored concrete star, a large brown wheel and the last four letters of an oxidized copper sign from a Thrifty drug store.

Peeking over the stucco wall that encloses half of the parking lot are various pieces of whimsical sculptures, several with colored balls at the ends of slim pieces of metal.

One of them has two sets of stoplights — green, yellow and red — on long metal poles, and haphazardly attached to them are several battered license plates.

"I call the piece 'The Wreck,' " said Mr. Adkins, adding, "Some people like to play golf. I like to do this."

His wife named the huge, egg-shaped metal tank resting on four rusty wheels. Growing out of the soil inside is a full-grown tree surrounded by colorful plants. "Mission Linen was going to haul the tank to the junkyard. I cut the top off and put the wheels on it. Martha calls it '12:01 a.m.' It's Cinderella's coach the minute after midnight after the ball," said Mr. Adkins, comfortably clad in his well-worn bib overalls, with a bright blue T-shirt and sturdy work boots.

Bald-headed with a white beard, he said with a twinkle in his eyes, "I started out bald and wearing a bib, and I'm ending up the same way."

One of his favorite pieces is the large metal alarm clock that has pieces of its innards jutting out from its ceramic face.

"I call it 'My Alarm Clock That Blew Up.' For years, I measured time while I was working. In retirement, I don't measure time. A friend gave me the ceramic face, and it took me 15 years to make the body, which was a searchlight I bought at a government auction at Port Hueneme. When I finally showed the clock to my friend, he said, 'It's about time,' " said Mr. Adkins.



The native of Lompoc who moved to Santa Barbara in 1954 began collecting "oddball stuff" for his mind-boggling works of art after he retired.



"I would go to government auctions at Vandenberg Air Force Base and Port Hueneme and buy a lot of surplus. One of the first pieces was a gear about 6 feet in diameter that was brand new. I paid \$25 for it. It was intended for a bridge crane for a shuttle at Vandenberg, but after the Challenger exploded, the project was scrapped," Mr. Adkins said.

The gear, now rusty, is tucked among pots of succulents that enhance the area along with potted ferns and hanging baskets of colorful geraniums and petunias, all planted by Mrs. Adkins.

At first, her husband bought items at government auctions simply because they were such good deals, which he would later sell at a profit.

"I could buy 200 chairs for \$7," said

Photo Captions:

1: Coins of many sizes decorate a door.

2: Among the pieces in the front parking area is a wooden door-like frame in which rests a huge bellows that is 5 feet tall. "The shingle roof is made of speedometer faces that are upside down," said J.W. Adkins.

3: Pots of succulents enhance the area along with potted ferns and hanging baskets of colorful geraniums and petunias, all planted by Martha Adkins.



Mr. Adkins.

"I asked him to buy one metal locker for storage when we owned Hardwood Mill on East Gutierrez Street. He brought home 40 lockers that we sold for \$10 each. They went really fast," added his wife with a chuckle.

Items were stored on 40 acres of property they owned in Winchester Canyon.

"Sometimes, I bought four truckloads and sold the stuff to anyone who had money," said Mr. Adkins. "It became a hobby. After Ronald Reagan was no longer president, I was invited to his ranch to take a lot of surplus. I had three or four truckloads."

Every two weeks for four years, he went to auctions at Vandenberg and Hueneme and at private locations.

"I became an auction freak," quipped Mr. Adkins.

In 1983, the couple bought the 20,000-square-foot property on East Haley Street, a former recycling yard that had more than enough space for his workshop, where he began turning pieces of scrap into works of art, "which are totally for our own enjoyment."

Near the outdoor dining table is a 5-foot-tall rusty tank with a smokestack that Mr. Adkins found in a junk yard and is now used as a barbecue pit.

"We eat most of our meals out here," said the camera-shy Mrs. Adkins.

There is a 15-foot-tall white metal spiral her husband acquired when he bought a trailer "just to get the big screw out of it."

Next to it is a Rube Goldberg-style fountain made of pieces of stainless pipes, faucets and other metal that turn a wheel around when the water is turned on. It backs up to another fountain made from the bottoms of cobalt blue Skyy Vodka bottles.

Pointing out a brick wall decorated with gadgets from sign companies on the side of one of the buildings, Mr. Adkins explained that the bricks

were left over from the 80,000 bricks that were left behind when they bought the property.

"We sold them all except for the halves, which is what we used for walls and patios," he said.

Across the way is a tall metal frame with stainless steel tubing, about 6 inches in diameter, running through various openings, and on the front are little platforms at different levels where shiny brass and silver trophies in the shape of horses and chess pieces are displayed.

Among the pieces in the front parking area is a wooden door-like frame in which rests a huge bellows that is 5 feet tall. Its title is "For Ember After."

"The shingle roof is made of speedometer faces that are upside down," said Mr. Adkins.

He admitted with a sly grin that he attended Lompoc High School but never graduated. "I quit when I was in 10th grade because I knew everything."

After a year in the U.S. Navy, he became an apprentice carpenter with his late grandfather, Skip Nagus, in Lompoc until moving to Santa Barbara to work for E.M. Clark Construction from 1954 to 1968, when he started J.W. Adkins Construction Co.

A graduate of Santa Ynez Valley High School in 1964, Mrs. Adkins was born in Santa Barbara, raised in Buellton and came back to Santa Barbara in 1966 to attend Santa Barbara City College. She had a series of jobs as bookkeeper, dental office manager and receptionist, the last for the Santa Barbara Medical Clinic when it was still on State Street.

The couple, who were married in 1986, were owners of Hardwood Mill from 1981 until it closed in 2001.

"We sold exotic and domestic hardwoods and did custom milling," said Mrs. Adkins, who ran the business after her husband retired. "If you needed an extra leaf for your dining room table for Thanksgiving dinner, we made it."

She is also the owner of the classic 1956 blue-and-white Chevy in pristine condition that is parked near Mr. Adkins' shop.

With his skills as a master carpenter, Mr. Adkins has transformed the former warehouse on the property into a charming two-story structure that has dozens of cubbyholes for Mrs. Adkins' pieces of fabric for her quilting projects and for skeins of yarn for knitting on the first floor.

Upstairs is The Loft, A Gallery @720, a stylish studio, where Mr. Adkins, recently dubbed "A Castaway Visionary," creates sculptures "out of others' castaways" and "manages to bring to life that which others had seen as useless," according to the website that has just been created, www.jwadkins.com.

The private studio is open by invitation or to unexpected drop-ins. The art is not for sale, but Mr. Adkins could be persuaded to sell "if the price is right," said his wife.

A self-published book, "The Loft," with pictures of the unusual property by local photographer Paul Wellman, is expected to be released by the end of this month. Its 185 pages are filled with pictures of Mr. Adkins and his artistry. When the price is decided, the book will be sold at the studio and through the website.

"The website and the book are something new for us," said Mrs. Adkins. "We're taking baby steps. That's how we have always operated when we started Hardwood Mill and when we bought this place, and it has worked."

"We don't know where it is going to go. That's the fun of it. Nothing ventured, nothing gained," added Mr. Adkins.

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FYI

Although people are welcome to stop by 720 E. Haley St. on a casual basis to enjoy J.W. Adkins' junk art, those who wish to tour The Loft galley upstairs are asked to call 963-3521 to make an appointment. For more information about the book, "The Loft," email marthaladkins@cox.net.