

# Return to Paradise

Celebrating Walter Byck and Marijke Byck-Hoenselaars' thirty year legacy of visionary leadership and community engagement through art and sculpture.

## JEFF NATHANSON

### Curator's Statement and Acknowledgments

While doing research for the Return to Paradise exhibition, I was amazed to find in my own archives, an invitation from the 1996 inaugural exhibition, “Objects in Nature”, in the Paradise Ridge sculpture grove. I recall that I received the card from John Toki, who I knew in my capacity as the Executive Director of the Richmond Art Center. John’s work was featured along with Bruce Johnson, Dan Dykes, and Gale Wagner in that exhibition curated by Dr. Walter Byck

Many years later during my tenure as Director of the Museum of Sonoma County, I got to know Walter Byck well. I was taken by his genuine warmth and impressed by his passion for his acclaimed winery and his vision for sculpture’s role in creating a remarkable destination. A place like Paradise Ridge doesn’t just happen by accident! Walter was a unique and powerful force, steadfast in his commitment to presenting art of and for the local Sonoma County community. It was a pleasure to present him with the Museum’s Visionary Award in 2019.

Walter and I shared many visits strolling through the Grove and taking slow drives around the winery’s meadows and vineyards. We enjoyed long conversations over glasses of wine, sharing ideas about philosophy, life, and the power of art in nature. Walter and I began imagining a new exhibition in Marijke’s Grove, and I was honored when he asked me to curate a new show in early 2023.

By the time I visited Walter and author Chris Smith in Walter’s home in June 2024, ideas for a new exhibition were taking shape. Chris was writing a book about Walter and his conception of “paradise.” Walter and I had plans to visit Bruce Johnson’s studio in the near future. He and I continued discussing the concept for a new sculpture exhibition that we envisioned as a semi-permanent installation in Marijke’s Grove.

Walter seemed vibrant, engaged, and energized during that visit, so it was a huge shock to get a call from Chris, just a couple of days later, that Walter had suffered a stroke. Sadly, Walter passed away a few days after that, on June 15th — the day of his 92nd birthday.

Return to Paradise is a celebration of Walter’s life, vision, and passion for art and community. In a sense, it is an extension of the original exhibition concepts that Walter and I envisioned, now reimaged as a posthumous tribute to Walter and his late wife Marijke, who was a loving partner in their shared vision for Paradise Ridge. The “Return” theme is a homecoming of sorts for the invited artists, who collectively represent the breadth of artworks presented in Marijke’s Grove over the many years since 1996. From veteran sculptors like Bruce Johnson and John Toki, who were featured in the inaugural show, to Briona Hendren, a young artist and curator who organized the final show mounted before Walter’s death, the artists in Return to Paradise all have a history of exhibiting work in the Grove.

It is a fitting tribute to Walter Byck that the artists, and their families, have wonderful stories and tributes to share about their fondness for him and appreciation of his unwavering support. It is with much gratitude that I acknowledge Judy Voigt and the Voigt Family Sculpture Foundation for their partnership in putting this exhibition together. The Voigt Foundation partnered with Paradise Ridge in organizing the exhibitions in Marijke’s Grove since 2012, and it has been a pleasure collaborating on this project. I wish to thank the Byck family — Rene, Maria, Sonia, Carole-Anne, and Peter — for their support and encouragement. And I have incredible appreciation for all the people who worked so hard to realize this exhibition: my wife and partner in Nathanson Tell Arts, Connie Tell; Michael Schinaman, who literally did the heavy lifting; Ben Benson; Doug Unkrey; Walter and Marijke’s grandson Jonathan Barwick; all the artists; Chris Smith; former Voigt curators Debra Lehane and Kate Eilertsen; and the donors to the Byck-Hoenselaars Fund, without whose generosity this exhibition would not have been possible.

Jeff Nathanson  
Return to Paradise Curator  
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### BIO

Jeff Nathanson is an arts administrator and curator who is a founding partner of Nathanson Tell Arts, a firm specializing in arts management and curatorial services based in Sonoma County, CA. He currently serves as Chair of the City of Santa Rosa Art in Public Places Committee (APPC).

From 2017 to 2024, Nathanson was Executive Director and Art Curator of the Museum of Sonoma County (MSC), where he successfully guided the organization through a period marked by natural disasters and the pandemic, as well as a major expansion of the museum’s exhibitions and public programs. Prior to his tenure at MSC, Jeff served for twelve years as Executive Director of the Arts Council of Princeton (Princeton, NJ). Before that, he was Curator of Special Projects at the Princeton University Art Museum. From 2000 to 2003, he served as President and Director of the International Sculpture Center (publisher of Sculpture magazine, Hamilton, NJ). From 1991 to 2000, he was Executive Director of the Richmond Art Center (Richmond, CA). Jeff studied art and music at UCLA and UC Santa Cruz. He holds a BA in Fine Arts from UC Santa Cruz and a graduate certificate in nonprofit management from the Indiana University School of Philanthropy.