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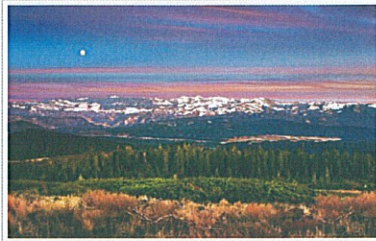
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Moonrise over Martis, by Olof Carmel

Olof Carmel: Making Change Happen

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April Print Edition

by Carole Sesko

As you drive along Donner Pass Road, east of downtown Truckee, you are bound to notice a new building taking form. The Carmel Gallery is expanding, and creating a new storefront on the fringe of Commercial Row. Husband and wife team, Olof and Elizabeth Carmel, are multi-talented individuals and award-winning photographers. Among her many accomplishments, Elizabeth is known for her book, "Brilliant Waters," a collection of images depicting the quiet natural beauty of the Sierra landscape. Olof's landscape photography is also widely collected, and has an impressionistic painterly quality. But lately, Olof has donned a set of tool bags, and is busy erecting their new gallery space. Here's the scoop:

Moonshine Ink: I think it's admirable that you are building this structure with your own hands. Did you design it as well?

Olof Carmel: I drew the plans, and by doing the work myself, there's continuity in it for me. I want to do it right. When you take the role of architect, you have all the details worked out on paper and in your head. I want to be sure it's complete, and everything is detailed correctly. The framing part is fun because it goes up so quickly, but once we get it buttoned up, the inside will take more time. The good thing about this project is it isn't too complicated. Unlike a house, there's not a lot to trim out.

MI: Tell us about your background.

OC: In the late 1980s I was living in Yosemite, working as a park ranger. I wanted a place to settle down so I bought a piece of property in Tahoe Donner and set about building my own home. In that process, I met a lot of great people in Truckee willing to share information, and I worked on some of their projects too. Through that experience, I worked on 5 to 6 homes, and became a builder. I was trying to keep it creative, between drawing the plans and constructing the building. After I finished my own home, I learned a lot by living in it, and having it critiqued by friends. During that time, I was also the head cross-country ski coach for the middle school and high school kids. We won the state championship. My nickname in those days was "Coach Carmel." It was a very rewarding to experience to work with the kids.

MI: How did you get the idea for the new gallery?

OC: When we first bought the Church Street house in August 2006, we didn't imagine we could fit another building here. As we thought more about the proposed Railyard project, the idea for a new building developed. As artists, Elizabeth and I have done a lot of shows and been in other people's galleries, and we realized we were getting tired of traveling and hauling stuff around to do the shows. We never thought we'd own our own gallery before, but the idea of having a permanent space downtown began to appeal to us. At first, it was fun to fix up the existing house on Church Street. As we eyed the large backyard bordering Donner Pass Road, the new building began to design itself. Our goal was to get on the main street.

MI: You and Elizabeth seem to make a great team. How does your partnership work?

OC: We each have different strengths and we bring different skills to the table. Elizabeth has a background in planning, and my background is in building. These qualities complement each other and we work well together, especially on this type of project. In our careers as artists, Elizabeth has a strong eye for composition and color, and she has a great mastery of computer knowledge. In addition to my photographic abilities, my strengths are in the production side of art and the business end of things - like packaging, dealing with galleries, and maintaining inventory. I graduated from the Stockholm School of Economics with a degree in business. Between the two of us, we merge into one good idea. It's not like two people who think the same, and we are fortunate that way. Elizabeth and I are good at problem solving together.

MI: When do you plan to finish the new gallery?

OC: Right now we are thinking it will be completed in December. We are looking forward to setting up a whole new stage of our careers with this gallery.

MI: Your site is along the gateway to the new Railyard project. How do you think that project will influence the downtown core?

OC: This building is designed to be a link between the old and the new. Rick Holliday thought it would be a good idea too, and he encouraged us to do it. I think the Railyard project will infuse great new retail energy into the downtown area. Our feeling is there's been a lot of growth and development in Truckee since we all came here, mostly in the outlying areas, but less in the downtown core. The growth hasn't hurt the area. On the contrary, Truckee has expanded. Presently the downtown is experiencing an economic slump, but new development could bring renewed interest in the downtown. We have an opportunity to create a new identity for downtown Truckee. I would support the idea of closing Bridge Street between the Truckee Hotel and Bar of America, cobblestoning the street, and having a pedestrian plaza with outdoor dining, festivals, and a spot for the town Christmas tree. This could help out the downtown intersection by eliminating traffic from one direction. Eventually, I'd like to see Church Street landscaped and have a pedestrian park too.

MI: Anything else you'd like to tell us? What is your vision for the downtown area?

OC: We feel we've had a lot of support and encouragement to do this project every step of the way, from the town of Truckee, the planning and building departments, HPAC, and Rick Holliday. We envision Truckee with a strong vibrant downtown core and a stable economy. Truckee is not like Vail or Aspen, and never will be. When the Railyard is built, the downtown will still be a lot smaller than the downtowns in Vail or Park City. We are contributing to making change happen. For Elizabeth and I, our basic motto is: "Less talk. Just do it!"

To see more of Olof and Elizabeth Carmel's photography, stop by their current gallery at 10035 Church Street, or visit thecarmelgallery.com.

~ Carole Sesko is a Truckee-based artist and writer with a passion for promoting creativity in our community. Contact Carole at 530-587-7750 or visit carolesesko.com.

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Olof Carmel dons his tool bags to build the new Carmel Gallery on Donner Pass Road in Truckee.

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