

'We're not really considered real artists because we use a chain saw. We're the hillbillies of the artist feeding chain.'

MARK FONTAINE, CHAIN SAW CARVER



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

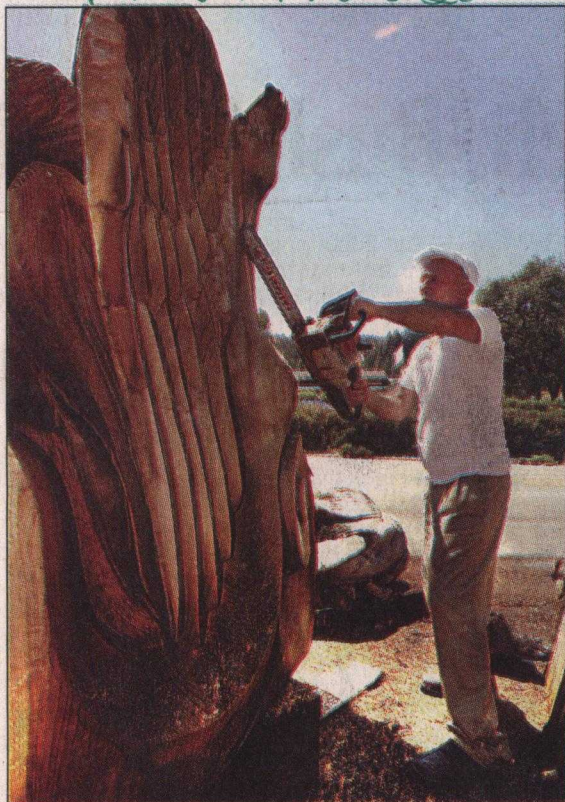
Cliff Short of Felton wields his chain saw much like a painter wields a paintbrush to create works of art.

CUT OFF

ARTS COMMUNITY HESITANT TO RECOGNIZE CHAIN SAW
SCULPTORS; WOODCARVERS RELISH OUTSIDER ROLE

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By ANNE WALLACE ALLEN
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✓ FELTON — It's loud, it's dirty, it's dangerous. And although it demands control, precision and considerable skill to master, the art of chain saw carving apparently isn't highbrow enough to garner the respect it deserves from the mainstream arts and craft community.

Chain saw carvers — from the forests of the Northeast to the Santa Cruz Mountains — use their noisy, unwieldy tools to turn logs into bears, benches, eagles and just about everything in between. And despite what the arts world has to say about them, these sculptors say their work has a place.

Felton chain saw carver Cliff Short has run his business from a studio and shop on twisty Highway 9 since 1971. In Short's eyes, the massive wood sculptures for sale on his front porch are the works of a craftsman with as much creative zest as an artist who paints abstract designs.

"For me, if it has function, it has more value," Short, 67, said.

Although it's been decades since any of Short's cre-

See **CHAIN SAW** on **BACK PAGE**

Cliff Short sees chain saw art as the work of a craftsman with as much creativity as any artist.

Chain saw

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ations have been displayed in museums, much of his woodwork can be seen throughout Santa Cruz County. Short spent two years carving the details of six official California seals — each made of 3-inch-thick redwood — that are on display in the County Government Center.

To be successful, Short and other chain saw carvers agree, it helps to be strong enough to control the chain saw without severing a limb in the process.

"You've got to be mechanically inclined to do this," said Mark Fontaine, who sells bears and other pieces from his home in Vermont's northeastern corner. "You've got to run power tools without hurting yourself."

Chain saw art is popular all over North America, especially in rural and mountainous areas like New England and the West Coast with longtime logging traditions.

Fontaine, who comes from a long line of loggers in Groveton, N.H., never wanted to go into logging.

"I knew I was going to make my living off my artwork," he said. "I just wasn't sure how."

The chain saw is fast, and it takes a special skill to turn out pieces that look like art. The

archetypal chain saw creation, the bear, often comes out looking crude and roughhewn.

But Fontaine's bears, which make up 90 percent of his orders and cost from \$50 to \$550 and more, are handsome to look at, the result of delicate handling. They are stained with porch stain and linseed oil, and they have black hematite stones for eyes.

"I take pride in my bears," he said, although he refuses to say how long it takes him to carve one. "I'm not trying to do production. It's an original piece of artwork. Some people want a special piece of Vermont they can bring home with them."

In Felton, Short says he gives his wood sculptures a smoother look by sandblasting them after the chain saw has done most of the work.

He said his sculptures are popular among both tourists and local residents often willing to pay between \$1,000 and \$10,000 for a sculpture, depending on its size.

He receives orders from all over the world, Short said.

"I make a good living," he added.

But even though bears are the bread and butter of the chain saw-carving business, Short does other subjects.

He crafted the 7-foot-high wooden statue of a firefighter on display in front of the Zayante fire station. And, the large wooden ox

in the Felton Covered Bridge Park is Short's.

Short said he never tires of crafting wooden furniture and other functional sculpture out of redwood and oak. On average, he completes two projects a week.

Fontaine goes beyond bears, too. He does eagles, benches and trees, and he's carved on commission such diverse items as newel posts, a Mack truck, rainbow trout and a caricature moose, to name a few.

He recently delivered an 8-foot-tall beaver to a convenience store in Lancaster, N.H. He's done several dragons, and he was recently commissioned to do a gargoyle.

What carvers create depends somewhat on where they live. Chain saw artist Burt Fleming, of Baker, La., carves a lot of alligators and pelicans and is hard at work on a huge crucifix, complete with a 10-foot-tall Jesus figure. But like Fontaine, most of Fleming's business is in bears. He thinks that's because bears can stand up on their hind legs.

"They can hold signs, they can wave at you; they might hold a pot, or a mailbox," Fleming said. "A duck or something like that ... he's either standing or sitting or flying. Anytime you make a bird hold something, it's not normal."

But despite the intricacies of the work, this is an art that wins little respect.

While there were metal artists

and woodworkers among the potters, glassblowers, weavers and painters on a recent Open Studio Tour organized by the Vermont Crafts Council, chain saw artists were visibly absent.

Part of the problem might be the subject matter that chain saw art often takes — such as trolls and gnomes. But Martha Fitch, the council's executive director, said chain saw art shouldn't be treated any differently from other sculpture.

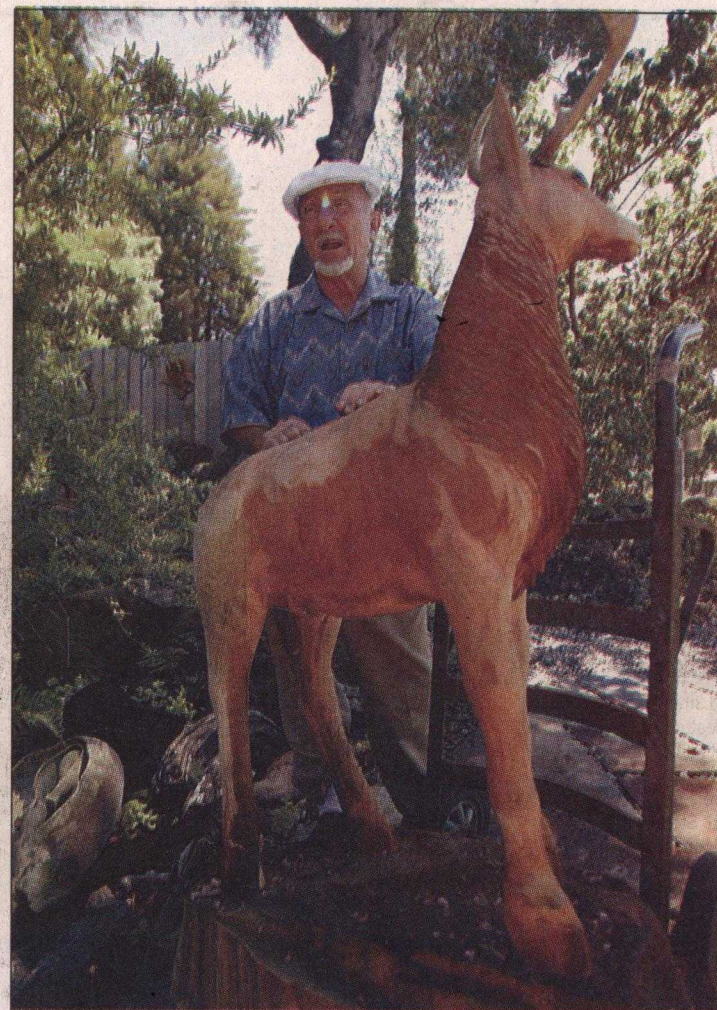
"The whole art of sculpture is seeing the form inside the material, and cutting away the part that doesn't belong," she said. "People using chain saws to do that are doing the same thing as people using tools to cut away a part of granite."

"Underlying some of the interest is that it's scary," Fitch said.

Fontaine isn't concerned about the opinion of the mainstream art community. He's always known chain saw artistry wasn't a high-brow undertaking.

"We're not really considered real artists because we use a chain saw. We're the hillbillies of the artist feeding chain," he said. "The people that do buy my product, their appreciation is enough for me."

Sentinel staff writer Shanna McCord contributed to this report. She can be reached at smccord@santacruzsentinel.com.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel
Cliff Short of Felton shows off a deer he created with a chain saw.