

THE HOME FRONT

Three Bedrooms and One Art Gallery

A California couple sell local art from their ranch house

BY NANCY KEATES

Ojai, Calif.

MANY PEOPLE CHOOSE to live in Ojai because of its arts scene, which includes lots of galleries. After moving to this mountain town north of Los Angeles two years ago, Jeffrey Weinstein and his wife, Wendy Wilson, went one step further: They turned their home into an art gallery.

About 50 paintings and 10 pieces of pottery were recently displayed in the living and dining rooms of the couple's three-bedroom, 2,500-square-foot contemporary ranch house, which is close to the center of town. Open since November and named after their street address, Ojai Gallery 353 focuses on the work of established local artists and is open every day by appointment. The couple also hosts receptions every few months; Ms. Wilson, a 47-year-old personal chef, caters the events.

The couple didn't originally intend the house to be a gallery. That idea came when they were looking for someone to do a mural in their kitchen and for some paintings to hang on the walls of their newly built home. They met local artists and heard them complain about how difficult it was to get good exhibition space in town.

"We had a lot of space. They needed space," said Mr. Weinstein, 58, an architect. Plus, "it lets us have beautiful art."

While the art is mostly traditional landscapes, the house, with its pink and brown wood shingles, stone base and pitched metal roof, is a mixture of Craftsman and industrial modern. The front door opens into the living room, where the Douglas-fir ceilings slope higher as the room progresses, from 9 feet to 20 feet at the other end. Floor-to-ceiling windows, including a panel in blue, yellow, purple and green squares, look out to a yard with eucalyptus and Chinese elm trees.

The house's open spaces and materials have made it a good place to view art. The large windows provide sufficient light and the walls are white. Tile floors can handle the foot traffic and hide dirt. Leather sofas and a cultured stone fireplace add warmth to the room.

The receptions often spill into the kitchen, which looks like the set of a cooking show. A 10-foot-long, custom-made stainless-steel hood hangs over the middle of an oval-shaped island. The ceiling is barrel-shaped, and the top of one curving wall is covered by a 12-foot-by-7-foot mural of orange fields and mountains painted by Ruben Franco, a well-known Ojai artist originally from Mexico. The kitchen opens up at one end, through sliding glass doors, to a wood deck, an outdoor fireplace and a large yard with lots of trees.

Large, rolling, red barnlike doors can be closed, shutting off the private wing of the house when an art event or cooking class is taking place. "That way I can stay in my room," said the couple's son Elijah, 12.

There, a large playroom leads to the master bedroom and two bedrooms for Elijah and his 13-year-old brother, Josh. The kids' rooms are identical in size and furnishings, so there would be no fighting. The art in the bedroom wing of the house isn't for sale.

The gallery doesn't generate much income: The couple takes a 40% commission from the sales of the paintings, eight of which have sold so far this year priced between \$500 to \$2,500. "It's a labor of love," Mr.



SHOP AROUND The art hanging in the library, top, is for sale. Clockwise from above: Jeffrey Weinstein, Wendy Wilson and their sons Elijah, in the tree, and Josh; the kitchen; the living room seen from the dining room.

Weinstein said, adding that one side benefit is that he's befriended several artists with whom he drinks beer, plays tennis and talks.

Landscape and still-life painter Bert Collins, who lives next door, said the artist community in Ojai gets bigger every year, but the weaker economy has made gallery space scarcer. "I think what Jeff is doing is the greatest thing in the world if you've got room for it," she said. The home will be a stop this year on the gallery, or "detour," portion of the artist's association's October studio tour.

Mr. Weinstein, originally from Brooklyn, moved to Santa Monica, Calif., in 1977 for architecture school; Ms. Wilson, from Berkeley, Calif., moved to Los Angeles in 1983. They met when Mr. Weinstein was redoing an office where Ms. Wilson worked. Finding Ojai a nice escape from the city, the couple bought the 1-acre property in 1998 for \$300,000, and rented out the existing 1,500-square-foot ranch house.

When Mr. Weinstein began drawing the floor plans for a new house in 2002, it took him four years to get it right. Some of the delay related to

practical changes: He originally made it two stories but eliminated one story when construction costs went too high. But it also took so long because he enjoyed the process. "When I finally got to do a house for myself I wanted to make it last as long as possible," he said. After initially trying to give the existing home away, the couple tore it down.

The new house was finished in 2008 for about \$750,000 and the family used it as a second home until they moved in 2010. A four-bedroom, four-bathroom contemporary home nearby on 4 acres is currently for

sale for \$1.3 million.

Opening their doors to customers is sometimes tough. "We always have to be on our best behavior," said Mr. Weinstein, noting some guests overstay their welcome at receptions, and he has to "show them the door."

But the couple said having prospective art buyers traipse through their living room is mostly fun. "I felt connected to the community really quickly here—more connected than I did after 17 years in Santa Monica," said Ms. Wilson. Mr. Weinstein added that he sometimes has to show the door to his friends, too.