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A Carefully Flawed Contender

By Hilary de Vries

Michael Douglas Has Crafted a Career Playing Characters Who Are More Neurotic Than Heroic. Will His Risk-Taking Pay Off This Awards Season?

Also In This Issue

- > Soul Climbing in Yosemite
- > Shoes That Are Good for You
- > California Caviar

The Art of Reforestation

When Nature Meets Steel, the Result Is the Destination Tree

IT IS, AT ONCE, DISCONCERTING AND WONDROUS, the contents of this 35,000-square-foot space. A pair of maples, one lopped in half, with its summer foliage languishing like an abandoned party dress. A half-built magnolia. And in the back, a group of redwoods reaching majestically toward the ceiling's exposed heating and air-conditioning ducts.

"Look at the moss growing on this one," says Bennett Abrams, whose Carlsbad-based company manufactures what, until now, had been largely left up to the Divine Being.

"What you're seeing is a sculpture of a tree," Abrams explains as we gaze at his man-made forest.

"That's all we do. Only trees"—at prices ranging from \$4,000 to \$250,000 each.

Behind him, a welder pieces together the steel bones of what will be another redwood. Nearby, a worker dips into an oatmeal-like mixture, applying it to a steel frame. As the mud starts to dry, NatureMaker's 40 artisans will carve life into the tree. "We're famous for our lightning strikes," says Abrams, gently touching a long scar that runs down the redwood's flank.

Many of these trees will take root as destination trees—in other words, trees that are worth driving hours to witness. "In Iowa, we installed a beautiful redwood seven stories tall," Abrams says, "in the middle of this sporting goods store." More than 20,000 people patronize the store each weekend, and at one point they could purchase T-shirts that read: "Meet me under the tree."

In the Middle East, Abrams has his own reforestation effort going on. "I made an olive tree for a sheik's palace in Abu Dhabi. His wife saw the tree I had done for Caesars Palace in Las Vegas and wanted one just like it." In Bahrain, Abrams has been approached to create a North American rain forest.

But Abrams' sculptures point to a painful possibility—that someday his trees may be one of the few reminders we have of these species as they lose out to disease, development and epic human carelessness. "Not in my lifetime, but sometime in the next century we're going to see the demise of the tree," he says quietly. "No one will remember me, but these trees—they're non-biodegradable—will still be here in 200 years." —Debra J. Hotaling

