



# Groundbreakers

By Kelly Flaherty Curley

## Suburban escape

Angela Buenning doesn't want to escape suburbia, but she does want to document it. Her photographs of Silicon Valley allow viewers to stop and think about their surroundings: They freeze the relentless pace of development for a moment, so we can consider its impact.

"I'm not trying to condemn or praise, just document what is happening," says Buenning. "I'm interested in what the landscape can tell us about the choices we've made — what it reflects back to us."

A native of Lawrence, Kansas, who studied human biology at Stanford University, Buenning became interested in photography while a graduate student in journalism at UC Berkeley. She now teaches journalism at Eastside College Preparatory School in East Palo Alto. Her work falls somewhere between documentary and fine art and has captured the eye of both the San Jose Museum of Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Her photographs of Silicon Valley, sometimes haunting, sometimes beautiful, will appear in an exhibition next month at the San Jose Museum of Art called *Suburban Escape*.

Buenning, 35, works out of a small studio in the backyard of her home near downtown Palo Alto. One wall holds shelves of equipment and photographs, another her desk and computer and another displays an intricate photo-collage of a 1,705-tree orchard slated for destruction. She decided to make a record of each individual tree in the orchard before another high-tech building took its place.

"It's great to show that [agricultural] part of the Valley and to get some images while it still exists," she says. She shot the photographs over three separate winters so that she could capture bare branches against a gray sky. "I wanted to show the architecture of the branches and that the death of the orchard is embedded in the progress as well."

Buenning's lens captures moments in Silicon Valley's history: A billboard set on a picturesque hillside reads "Automate or Die," a dismantled server farm creates an oddly beautiful combination of color and pattern, a row of pre-fab houses in different stages of construction reflects rapid change. About three years ago, her photographs caught the eye of Ann Wolfe, then a curator at the San Jose Museum of Art, now with the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno. Wolfe says the exhibition is the first of its kind to bring together a variety of artists who have paid particular attention to issues of land use and suburban development in California.

The exhibition is a milestone in Buenning's career, and will include photographs from some of the artists who inspired her work, such as Jeff Brouws and Todd Hido, among others. Her next project takes on a related subject — Silicon Valley's impact on Bangalore, India. "I'm interested in the connection between the two places and how technology is changing the landscape there," she says. ♣



Photo by Tyler Vu

Photos by Angela Buenning from the Silicon Valley series.

BELOW: Biotechnology Company Headquarters, Mountain View, March 2001.

BOTTOM: Covered car, Mountain View, March 2001.

