

Staff Report and Recommendations Agenda of October 12, 2026, Item 10a

County of Ventura • Resource Management Agency

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I. APPLICANT/PROPERTY OWNER:

Applicant/Property Owner: Frances Rehwald
11688 Cotharin Road
Malibu, CA 90265

II. REQUEST:

Provide a recommendation regarding adoption of a Mills Act contract for a property located at 11688 Cotharin Road, Malibu, CA 90265 (Tony Duquette Historic District) (Case No. CH26-0052).

III. LOCATION AND PROPERTY INFORMATION:

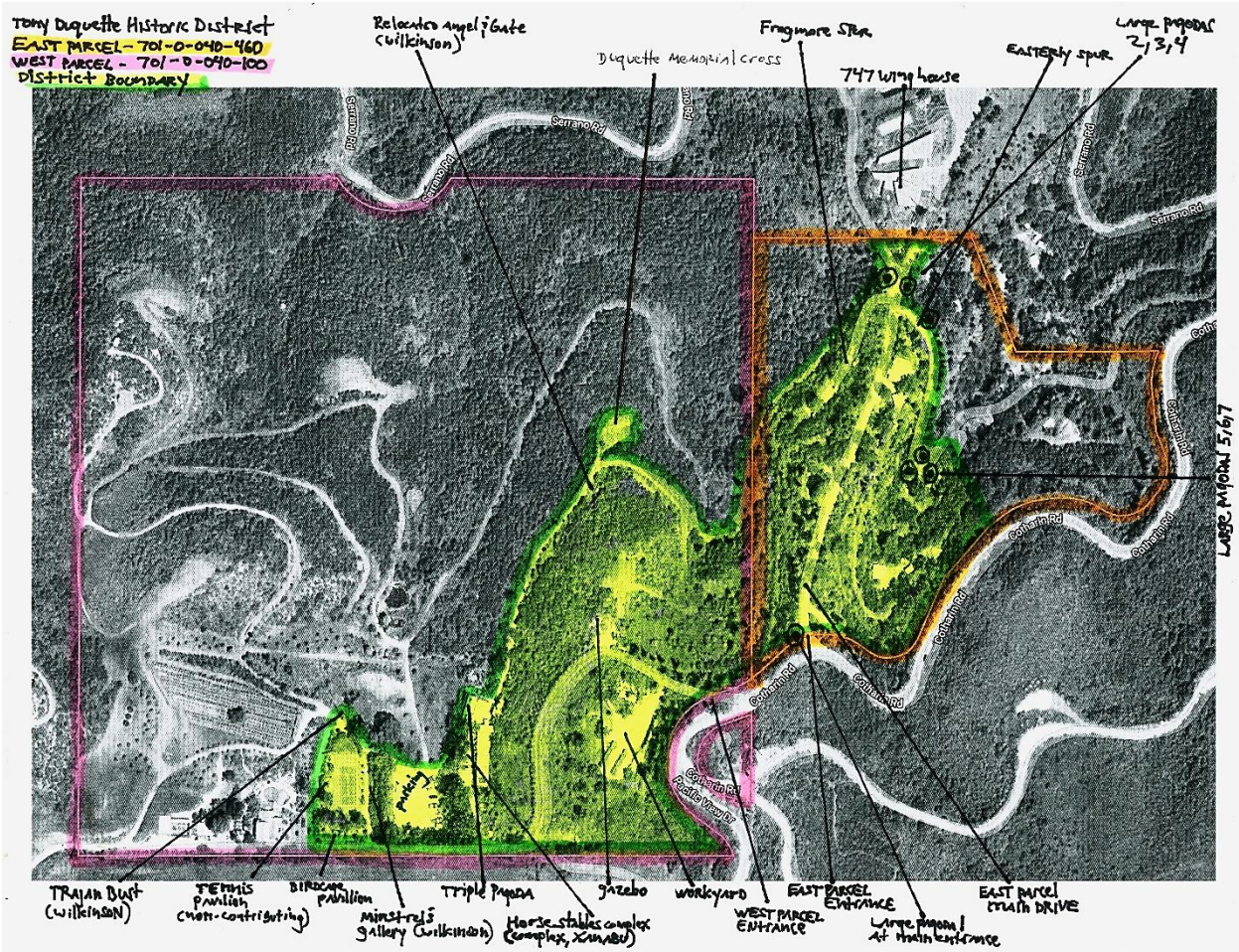
11688 Cotharin Road, Malibu, CA 90265 (unincorporated Ventura County)
Assessor's Parcel Number (APN): 701-0-040-460
Historic Designation: Contributor to the Tony Duquette Historic District
Common/Historic Name: Sortilegium

The Tony Duquette Historic District, focused upon the creations of nationally significant artist and designer Anthony "Tony" Duquette, includes multiple resources across two parcels under separate ownership. The district represents the former home and one of the last bodies of larger-scale work by Duquette (1914-1999). The historic district boundary follows the presence of contributing resources and is situated upon, but not fully inclusive of, the following two Assessor's Parcel Numbers (APNs): 701-0-040-100 (39.4 acres) and 701-0-040-460 (10.9 acres). The Mills Act contract only includes APN 701-0-040-460.

IV. PROJECT SCOPE:

The property owner has requested to enter into a Mills Act contract (Exhibit 1) with the County of Ventura for the potential benefit of property tax savings in exchange for continued preservation and rehabilitation of the subject property. The subject property is a designated Contributor to the Tony Duquette Historic District, which is a required prerequisite in order for the property owner to be eligible to enter into a Mills Act contract. In accordance with Section 1365-8 of Ventura County Ordinance No. 4604, the Board of Supervisors is the final authority for adoption of a Mills Act contract. Refer to Figure 1 for an overview diagram of the historic district.

Figure 1 – Tony Duquette Historic District: Overview Diagram



Credit: Daniel D. Paul

V. PROPERTY DESCRIPTION:

In December 2024, the property owners' architectural historian, Daniel D. Paul, completed a Historic Resources Report (Historic Report) for the Tony Duquette Historic District (Exhibit 2) in support of a district nomination.¹ The Historic Report describes the district as focused upon the creations of nationally significant artist and designer Anthony "Tony" Duquette, and inclusive of multiple contributing resources across two parcels under separate ownership. The district was officially designated by the Cultural Heritage Board (CHB) on January 13, 2025.

¹ Paul, Daniel D., *The Tony Duquette Historic District, County of Ventura Historic District Application*, December 20, 2024.

District Contributors

The district consists of the contributing elements identified below. Each contributor is described in detail, along with photos, in Exhibit 2.² A Photo Exhibit is contained in Exhibit 3.

East Parcel:

- 13 ceramic insulator sculptures
- Seven large pagoda sculptures
- Nine light standards converted to flag masts
- Four stacked drum pagodas
- *Winter Sun* sculpture
- Four drum stack sculptures topped with A-frame racks
- Two smaller-scale concrete Pagoda sculptures
- Four fiberglass egg-topped posts

Character-Defining Features

In addition, general character-defining features of the entire district include the following:³

- Found object constructions
- Military and industrial-grade objects as art media
- Unorthodox use of materials and media
- Axial arrangements
- Symmetrically paired sculptures and objects in procession
- Tower, mast, stacked, or otherwise vertically acclimated sculptures and objects, and toppings
- Multitude of finials and spires
- Coral red coloration
- Three-point arch motifs, often cut into various drums; their cut-out pieces reused as flag-like tailings
- East and Southeast Asiatic theming
- Landscape elements
 - Succulent specimens that include jade, aloe, yucca, blue agave, and foxtail agave.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

- Pepper trees, spider fern, geraniums, oleander, and cypress trees
- Pre-existing coniferous, oak and eucalyptus specimens
- Yard and planter edging of Marston Mat; perforated cable trays; and radiator panels of waffle or knobbed forms
- Asiatic vases, vessels and urns; oversized examples in symmetrical processions
- Dried tree branches painted coral red, bunched or set in emanating, coral-like designs

VI. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

Anthony “Tony” Duquette (1914–1999)

Tony Duquette born in Los Angeles on July 11, 1914.⁴ His mother, Elsa Fuhrer, an England-born musician, played in a string quartet and introduced Tony to live stage performances, which strongly influenced his artistic sensibilities. Duquette attended Los Angeles’ Chouinard Art Institute, where he gained experience designing displays for department stores like J.W. Robinson’s and Bullock’s.⁵ Concurrently, he freelanced for prominent interior designers Billy Haines and Jimmy Pendleton and created displays for Adrian, a renowned Hollywood costume designer.⁶

In 1941, Duquette opened his interior design studio, receiving mentorship from Elsie de Wolfe, the pioneering interior designer who recognized his genius.⁷ Around the same time, he befriended MGM director Vicente Minelli, who became a lifelong collaborator. Duquette later became the godfather to Minelli’s daughter, Liza.⁸ However, World War II interrupted his burgeoning career. Duquette enlisted in the Army, serving at Fort MacArthur in San Pedro for four years. After the war, Duquette resumed his career with vigor, working in set design for films such as *Yolanda and the Thief* (1945), *Ziegfeld Follies* (1946), and later *Kismet* (1955), the only film he fully designed.⁹ His first one-man show at Los Angeles’ Mitch Leisen Gallery in 1947 cemented his reputation.¹⁰

In 1949, Duquette married Elizabeth “Beegle” Johnstone, a painter and his creative partner.¹¹ The couple traveled to Paris for their honeymoon and to prepare for his landmark exhibition, *Oeuvres de Tony Duquette*, at the Louvre’s Pavillon de Marsan

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

in 1951. After returning to Los Angeles, Duquette’s work featured in exhibits at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and San Francisco’s M.H. de Young Memorial Museum.¹²

By the mid-1950s, Duquette was a top interior designer for Hollywood royalty and high society, including clients like Doris Duke, J. Paul Getty, and Elizabeth Arden.¹³ Among his notable projects were the interiors of Doris Duke’s “Falcon’s Lair,” the Hilton Hawaiian Village, and the Los Angeles Music Center. Duquette’s jewelry designs also gained fame, such as a necklace for the Duchess of Windsor.¹⁴ The Duquettes purchased a Malibu ranch in 1955, naming it “Sortilegium,” meaning “enchantment.”¹⁵ Over decades, they built 21 structures, including pavilions and decorative follies. These creations were made possible through the assistance of skilled craftsmen and primary laborers, including Elias Rodriguez and Abraham Quinonez, whose talents contributed significantly to bringing Duquette’s visions to life. The ranch became their creative haven for the rest of their lives.¹⁶

In addition to their Malibu property, the Duquettes acquired a Victorian house in San Francisco, “The Little House of the Flowers,” in the 1960s.¹⁷ They split their time between these homes and their Beverly Hills residence, “Dawnridge”. Duquette’s embrace of counterculture aesthetics during the 1960s was evident in the light shows at his Robertson Boulevard studio and hippie-themed parties at Sortilegium.¹⁸ In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Duquette expanded his creative endeavors to set and costume design for productions like the Salzburg Festival’s *Jedermann* and Broadway’s *Camelot*, starring Richard Burton and Julie Andrews.¹⁹ His costume designs for *Camelot* earned him a Tony Award in 1961, shared posthumously with Adrian.²⁰

Hutton Wilkinson, who began working with Duquette as a teenager during Duquette’s 1971 “Personal Culture” exhibit hosted by the City of Los Angeles, became a key figure in Duquette’s later career.²¹ Wilkinson evolved from protégé to business partner and biographer, helping preserve and promote Duquette’s legacy.²² Despite their success, the Duquettes faced tragedy, including the loss of Sortilegium in the 1993

12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.

Green Meadow Fire, which destroyed all but a few structures.²³ Nevertheless, Tony and Beegle rebuilt on the adjacent property owned by Hutton Wilkinson, creating an elaborate, multi-layered promenade centered around a repurposed horse stable.²⁴ This final project epitomized Duquette's philosophy of transforming found objects into magical environments. Elizabeth "Beegle" Duquette, Tony's wife and collaborator, passed away in 1995. Tony continued working and creating until his death in 1999.²⁵

VII. SIGNIFICANCE:

The Tony Duquette Historic District represents the former home and one of the last bodies of larger-scale work by Duquette.²⁶ The historic district boundary follows the presence of contributing resources and is largely defined by the concentration of Tony Duquette's remaining creations as they exist on both parcels. The district also includes variety of contributing resources informing the biography of Duquette's later years. These include a handful of structures and objects made by Duquette's multi-year protégé Hutton Wilkinson who, at the time, owned the western parcel, an earthen workspace to which salvaged post-fire objects were relocated, and a memorial cross salvaged from Sortilegium and installed after Duquette's passing by Elias Rodriguez, Duquette's primary laborer for many years.²⁷

Duquette's work within the proposed district showcases his signature use of found and repurposed materials, reminiscent of "art environments" like Watts Towers in Los Angeles and Bottle Village in Simi Valley.²⁸ He incorporated diverse elements such as scrap metal, surplus materials from military and Hollywood backlots, satellite dishes, fiberglass components, and succulents rescued from Chavez Ravine in Los Angeles. These materials, combined with salvaged movie set pieces like the gazebo from *The Gazebo* (1959), illustrate Duquette's ability to transform discarded objects into cohesive and enchanting designs.²⁹

Duquette's approach mirrored his set design process, where he directed teams of skilled craftsmen, including Rodriguez and Abraham Quinonez.³⁰ The east parcel, originally part of Sortilegium, once housed structures like "The Star Barn," lost to the fire, while the west parcel features post-fire works and a memorial cross installed by Rodriguez.³¹ As part of making his art environment upon Wilkinson's property, Duquette continued to work with fiberglass fabricators with whom he had worked for

²³ Ibid.
²⁴ Ibid.
²⁵ Ibid.
²⁶ Ibid.
²⁷ Ibid.
²⁸ Ibid.
²⁹ Ibid.
³⁰ Ibid.
³¹ Ibid.

years in Hollywood, and it featured fiberglass shells, finials, and even the casting of a tree root system from which Duquette carved various animals.³² The district represents Duquette's bold, unorthodox creativity and his legacy as an innovator who reimagined the boundaries of art and design.³³

Period of Significance:

The historic district's period of significance is 1955 to 1999.³⁴ 1955 was the year that Tony and Elizabeth Duquette purchased the district's east parcel that became "Sortilegium," beginning improvements upon it by 1957. Tony Duquette worked upon the horse stables complex on the proposed district's west parcel until his passing on September 9, 1999.³⁵

VIII. MILLS ACT PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS:

The requested Mills Act contract is a formal agreement between the County of Ventura and the property owner for a minimum term of ten years. The contract automatically renews each year on its anniversary date and another year is added to the effective term of the contract. The contract runs in perpetuity with the land unless non-renewed or canceled. The contract is transferred to new owners when the property is sold and is binding on all successive owners.

Minimum Preservation Standards

The property owner agrees to restore, repair, maintain, and protect the property for the life of the contract in accordance with the specific historic preservation standards and conditions identified in the proper maintenance of the property (Exhibit 1, Attachment C).

Proposed Rehabilitation Plan

The proposed ten-year rehabilitation list (Exhibit 1, Attachment D) for the subject property describes the property owner's intent to restore, rehabilitate, and maintain the character-defining elements of the property (Exhibit 1, Attachment B) in accordance with the *Secretary of Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*.

Due to the property's low assessed value and limited anticipated tax savings, the applicant proposes a focused rehabilitation effort on Large Pagoda #7, a contributing structure within the Tony Duquette Historic District. Work over the first three years

³² Ibid.
³³ Ibid.
³⁴ Ibid.
³⁵ Ibid.

includes disassembling and identifying damaged elements, structurally rehabilitating the pagoda with skilled labor and necessary equipment, and completing refinishing and painting using appropriate materials and methods. This pagoda, along with others on the property, originally featured a variety of fiberglass elements and decorative attachments, and part of the rehabilitation effort includes recreating some of these historic components to restore its original character. All work would be completed by Abraham Quinonez, who trained and worked under Tony Duquette and was involved in the original fabrication of the pagodas. Figure 2 demonstrates the current condition of Large Pagoda #7, with additional photographs provided in Exhibit 3.

Figure 2 – Large Pagoda #7, 2026



Credit: Daniel D. Paul

The applicant also proposes to conduct annual maintenance on the property related to contributing resources/objects.

Inspections and Monitoring Requirements

County staff inspects Mills Act properties every five years to ensure proper maintenance and rehabilitation work is completed pursuant to the terms of the contract. The initial ten-year term is the period of time in which the rehabilitation projects should be completed. In addition, property owners are required to complete an annual self-certification in order to update County staff on their progress of rehabilitating and maintaining the property.

The authority of the CHB as it relates to Mills Act contracts is set forth in Ventura County Cultural Heritage Ordinance. Specifically, Ordinance Section 1365-8 allows the CHB to make recommendations regarding applications for and administration of historical property contracts (i.e. Mills Act contracts) to the Board of Supervisors. The Board of Supervisors is the final decision-making body for the adoption of the contract. The CHB may recommend modifications to the Mills Act contract to incorporate different or additional preservation or rehabilitation projects in the Ten-Year Rehabilitation Plan as deemed necessary, or may vote to recommend denial of the Mills Act contract if the CHB finds that the property is not eligible. The CHB does not have the authority to revise the Mills Act contract language and incorporate new conditions, though it would be feasible to include such recommendations in their resolution to the Board of Supervisors, should the majority of CHB members agree.

IX. STAFF CONCLUSION:

Based on the information provided in this staff report, staff recommends approval of the Mills Act contract for the subject property. The property meets the eligibility requirements of the Mills Act program, and approval of the contract will support the preservation and rehabilitation of the property consistent with the *Secretary of Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*.

X. PUBLIC COMMENTS:

No public comment regarding this item have been received to date.

XI. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS:

Staff recommends the CHB take the following actions regarding the request:

1. **CONDUCT** public hearing, **RECEIVE** oral and written testimony, and **CONSIDER** the Planning Division staff report and all exhibits and attachments hereto;
2. **CERTIFY** that the CHB has reviewed and considered this staff report and all exhibits hereto, and has considered all comments received during the public comment process;

3. **APPROVE** findings one through four as follows:

1. Frances Rehwald possesses and owns real property located at 11688 Cotharin Road, Malibu, CA 90265;
2. The property is a qualified historical property that is privately owned, not exempt from property taxation, and is a designated Contributor to the Tony Duquette Historic District;
3. The owner desires to carry out the relevant purposes of the California Government Code for the entire site, the buildings' interior and exterior, and all contributing structures thereon; and
4. The owner desires to limit the use of the historical property to retain its characteristics as a property of historical significance; and

4. **ADOPT** a Resolution (Exhibit 4) recommending that the Board of Supervisors approve a Mills Act historical property contract for the subject property.

Prepared by:

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Exhibits:

Exhibit 1 – Mills Act Contract

Attachment A – Legal Description

Attachment B – List of Significant Character-Defining and Historic Features

Attachment C – Mills Act Minimum Standards for Maintenance, Use, and Preservation

Attachment D – Mills Act Ten-Year Rehabilitation Plan

Exhibit 2 – Historic Resource Report, December 20, 2024

Exhibit 3 – Photo Exhibit

Exhibit 4 – CHB Resolution No. 2026-11 to the Board of Supervisors