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Artist Among Us – Nova Mihai Popa

By Eileen Casey
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"The Settlers" All photos by Tundra Wolf

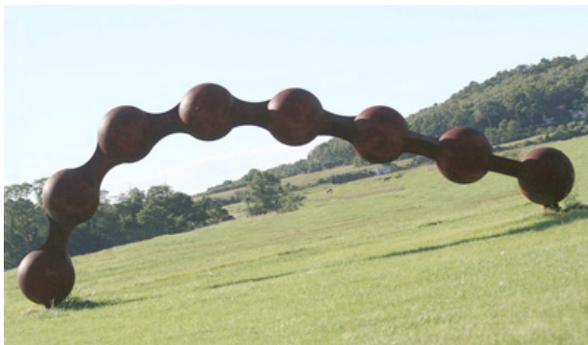
This week we continue our profiles of artists both living and working in the Hamptons with a feature on sculptor Nova Mihai Popa of Bridgehampton. In Romanian, 'Mihai' is the equivalent of Michael and is pronounced 'mee-high' and 'Popa' means 'priest.'

Born in Transylvania, Romania in a small mountain village named Abrud', Nova was later raised in both Transylvania and Bucharest.

His father was a simple woodcutter, but with a deep wisdom and knowledge of life according to Nova. Growing up in Transylvania, Nova had a deep connection to nature, and his family grew crops, had fruit trees, sheep, goats, and chickens. Nova observed the rhythms of nature which is reflected in his sculptures.

Nova always had a yearning for things western, especially American. As a child he already had a six-gallon cowboy hat and a holster with two six-shooters. He loved all things American, and vowed to get to America one day, which he did, although not without great difficulty.

Educated at the Institute of Bella Arts, the sculpture park created by Nova in Bridgehampton is visited by numerous groups of tourists



throughout the summer, as well as local school groups.

"Milky Way"

For the past 15 years, Nova has instructed over 150 international art students in the principals of Integral Art. He has taught them how to build sculpture from concept to finished product. A number of these "apprentices" have gone on to become excellent artists and art teachers.

Nova's non-profit foundation, TerraNova, hosts a children's program called "Imagine That" directed by former MOMA Education Director Joyce Raimondo. The children tour the property, viewing the sculptures and huge 3-D murals Nova creates. Inspired by their tour, they then create their own sculptures. Parents are required to participate with the children. A highlight of the program is a visit to The Ark Project's resident herd of lambs and sheep, often found grazing under the huge sculptures.

Nova's organization, The Ark Project, donates a portion of its land each year for charity events. Last year the "Super Saturday" event raised over \$3 million for the Ovarian Cancer Research Fund. Benefits for other organizations, including Bay Street Theatre, Jacobson Center for the Performing Arts, Ellen's Run, the Child Development Center of the Hamptons, Evidence Dance Company, and the Hamptons International Film Festival.



Nova with his massive sculptures.

Nova is a member of the World Future Society, Southampton Chamber of Commerce, and the Artist's Alliance of East Hampton.

When did you start making art and what medium(s) did you work in or consider to be your roots in art?

Nova: Where I grew up in my small mountain village in Transylvania, the houses of the peasants and the churches were ornamented with carvings. They lived surrounded by art and this idea is with me today in my 'elliptical house' - a sculpture to live in, with

massive curved wood beams and many sculptural and carved elements. I have also always admired the sculpture of Brancusi, who lived not far from my native village. He was the first artist bringing abstraction to sculpture, and he became world-renowned. My lingering memory was that my childhood was spent in a universe of natural man.

In primary school I remember sketching palm trees and islands in the sun in math classes and getting punished by upset teachers. I guess the early need to design, to color and sculpt was to understand the creation of this world by mirroring it in my own creation. For me art was always the strongest human instrument of investigation of our existence and our spirit.

My mission as an artist is to put as much spirit as I can into matter. I continue to love and do painting, but I developed a powerful desire to carve in steel because of its elemental, cosmic quality. Iron is the skeleton of the stars. It possesses an enormous force. Used in art forms, it exudes staying power and self-reliance. I love the challenge of taking this raw, resistant, independent and proud material and making it vibrate with human spirit.

What is it about the Hamptons that brought you here and enticed you to stay, work, and pursue your art here as opposed to some place else?

Nova: Nourished by New York, the Hamptons is a quintessence of American connectivity made of urban and rural life together. Farmers, businessmen, artists, workers in one tight knot makes the place ready for an intense existence. It is a variety in unity with dynamic vectors, provocative and expressive. A good medium for creativity.



"Riverstones"

How do you support yourself as an artist?

Nova: Support for making my art comes from selling art, leasing part of the property, semi-volunteer

work done by young artists-to-be, and by doing a fair amount of the upkeep ourselves.

Why live and work in the Hamptons as opposed to elsewhere?

Nova: The Hamptons are close to New York, and collect some of its great intensity, which is needed by an artist. But also, the Hamptons offer the other needed quality of tranquility, aiding creation.

What local environmental or historical aspects of the Hamptons do you relate to that may or may not be reflected in your medium?



"The Astronauts"

the savage law of dialectics, in which people were disunited and at lethal fight with each other. At the end of the 21st Century, the conflict between humans, and between humans and nature, accelerated to a crisis. Today's humans have arrived at the final impasse and so has art, as art follows life like a shadow.

By a great human confusion that started 300 years ago, materialism took an undeserved preponderance over the human spirit. A technological civilization imposes on people an existence saturated with an inorganic environment that forces both humans and planet earth into an inorganic existence. This artificial life imposed by a human-controlled evolution splits man from his own nature and sets his fate towards a mechanical existence, towards a virtual man.

The natural man, the "jewel of cosmos," is about to lose his identity, and so is his art. Most of the contemporary art is made of lifeless material structures - dead forms without spirit. The human race stands today in front of 'bifurcation' - a fatidic moment of choice, between continuing a mistake, and reaching its terminal or changing and renewing its chance to survive.

Fortunately, a powerful river of new awareness, of common sense and science itself (quanta physics) tells us that the universe is spiritual, that it is made of consciousness. There is hope for humanity. But we are not out of danger yet. The consciousness, this new light, has to be spread - has to enter the mind of every human on this planet - and inside this revelation, everything has to change.

Nova: I do environmental art - sculptures placed in nature that fit perfectly in the rolling hills, the forests, meadows, and water of this generous place.

What artists do you feel have influenced you and or your work?

Nova: Brancusi and Moore, Michelangelo and Picasso, and the Ancestrals - Egyptians, Mayans, people of Stonehenge.

What advice would you give an emerging artist?

Nova: To look forward. To rediscover again everything by themselves. To extend the edge of life in their art. To reject obsolescence, herd psychology and the nightmare of sameness.

What gives you an edge (if any)?

Nova: To understand what my cutting edge could be, we have to look at what is happening today.

I was born in a world caught in a vortex of contradiction under

The way of life, the culture, the arts; the culture of consciousness has to be built, via integration. We have to put together old and new, to bring the past into the present in continuous coherence, and bring back the meaning in life and in art, and especially to design the forms of unity.

Long ago, somehow by instinct and by love of humans, I envisioned this course of events and with modest persuasion and great difficulty I built in Bridgehampton an Institution of Integral Art, with the firm belief that the day would come when my art would

be a suggestion for new forms of art awareness that will help orient people in the complex and long quest for survival. I called this institution "The Ark Project." It stands on 100 acres of land and contains galleries, museum spaces, and a vast sculpture park filled with the art of meaning and unity I just described.

Integral Art is a modern attempt for a universal art of our time. Akin to the great communal art of previous civilizations of man. For three decades I did the best I could to reach that universality in my art. I attempted to find the forms of unity between man and between man and cosmos; to find the graphic matrix of common forms in the universe and inspire the presence of forces that can put humans together. I attempted to freeze in steel the wills and the desires of all times and in all humans. To build groups of sculptures like temples for the prayers of time.

The greatest quality of art is that it gives humans a rare accord. When we contemplate art we activate the sacred side of ego. In the presence of art we become brothers. In art we are finally equal. We transcend and feel solidarity

What are you working on now, and are you involved in any upcoming shows or exhibitions?

Nova: For the next year I will be very busy building three new very large works for public exhibition: 'Multiverses', 'Sky Columns', and 'The Forest'.



"The Soldiers"

Nova invites visitors to The Ark Project Sculpture Park and Galleries during summer visiting hours. For more information, contact: www.thearkproject.com and ark@optonline.net.

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