



Ascending into the **Cosmos:**

Decades ago, on a remote shore of eastern Italy, Mihai Popa was strewn on the ground and as the sun was setting, he began cracking open his eyes. What awoke him was the constant pelting of small pebbles. Hidden a small distance away, young boys had made the emaciated, tattered Popa into their playful target for the day. But once he fully regained consciousness, a surge of fear overtook his whole being. Had he been seen? Did he make it across the border? Were those Yugoslavian boys or Italian?

"Bandito, Bandito!" the boys yelled over to him. The laughter and teasing of the young children answered all of his questions and fears, bringing him into exaltation.

"I knew enough Italian to feel like I was in heaven," he recalls. Raising his body to the descending sun while the young boys continued to pelt him, Popa gave his indebted gratitude to the higher forces above for safely guarding him from the perils he had just overcome. "I promised God and to the forces superior that I would do something phenomenal, something unusual for humanity."

Mihai Popa, better known today as Nova, narrated this pivotal moment in fleeing persecution in his native Romania, in the safety of his compound in Southampton—with not a bit of elation lost. Discrimination against Nova began

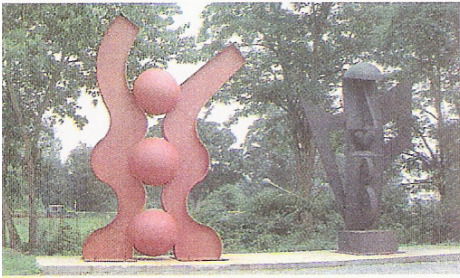
when after years of creating works for the Romanian Communist government, he decided to create revolutionary abstract works for a one-man exhibition. Within a month of its opening, the exhibit was condemned by the government, forcing him to flee. From then, Nova was determined to break down boundaries like the ones he risked his life to cross. And the promise he made that day on Italy's shores would foster the Integral art philosophy he has devoted his life to ever since.

Through the three-dimensional form of sculpture, Nova creates simplified, yet gargantuan monumental constructions. He repeats and reuses the same forms throughout his array of steel and concrete works; stripped of any decorative and ornate realism, nature and humanity are represented through geometric forms. But the circles, spheres, triangles and curvilinear forms he commonly uses are not to be confused with the cold, stagnant forms characteristic of the geometric shapes of the 1960 Minimalist style.

Nova rallies against the idea of art being a physical aesthetic heavily reliant on random designs of forms and colors. With his works, Nova endeavors to induce a spiritual effect by carefully selecting forms that convey a symbol of human coalescence spanning beyond boundaries of time and place, forms that will sing resoundingly to the individual of the past and the future.

For Nova, nature is the main source of inspiration for the arts and he believes that at present, humanity has become devastatingly detached from it. He maintains that society has become full of worshippers of the consumerist system: a system void of the spiritual link that ties individuals to each other and the universe as a whole. Still, Nova has faith in artists, writers and philosophers as beings capable of reconnecting man with nature through their works.

"More and more we believe that we are part of our own universe that we



SuperNova:

A collection of Mihai Popa's, (better know as Nova,) sculptures pepper his land (facing page, left, right, and below).

The artist. (far right).



invented. The people that are serving the human-invented universe forget that divinity is not possible with this professional, narrow activity. This is a very damaging concept for the world. Being detached from the center of nature we lose what nature gives us," Nova explained. "What nature gives us is the instinct of love, which is nothing but gravity in terms of humanity; nature gives us the sense of wonder, the sense of the infinite, the unexplained, the sense of mystery. All of this is lost by the attitude in the human universe in which we replace all of these given notions with a more mechanical, colder [sense]."

For Nova, the role of the artist is vital to society: his responsibility is to search for the symbols that represent the primal elements held by every facet of nature and shared with humanity (though constantly being lost and forgotten in a "mechanical universe"). "...When I thought of the idea of Integral art, I thought of a reconciliation between these two universes. The artist is doing the mission of becoming a bridge between the human universe and the universe of nature. And that's what we try to do here."

The "here" Nova speaks of is a 100-acre expanse in the Southampton area that he calls home. Nova has converted barns into studios and open fields into exhibition spaces for his works. "Here" the Ark Project is carried out, where artists are

selected to apprentice under Nova and help in his creative process while disseminating the ideas behind his Integral Art.

Not only does the philosophy of Integral art entail conjoining the man-invented universe with that of nature, but it also pursues fusing humans together, generating the power of humanity into one force. This concept of unity is what Globalism theoretically wanted to achieve. However, Nova desires to separate his ideas from Globalism, and denote a much grander scale—what he terms Universalism; a unity meant to connect humanity with cosmic space.

"Universalism will contain in its notion something that surpasses Globalism," Nova said. "Globalism is a unity of the races of the planet Earth. Universalism [is] an integration also with the cosmos."

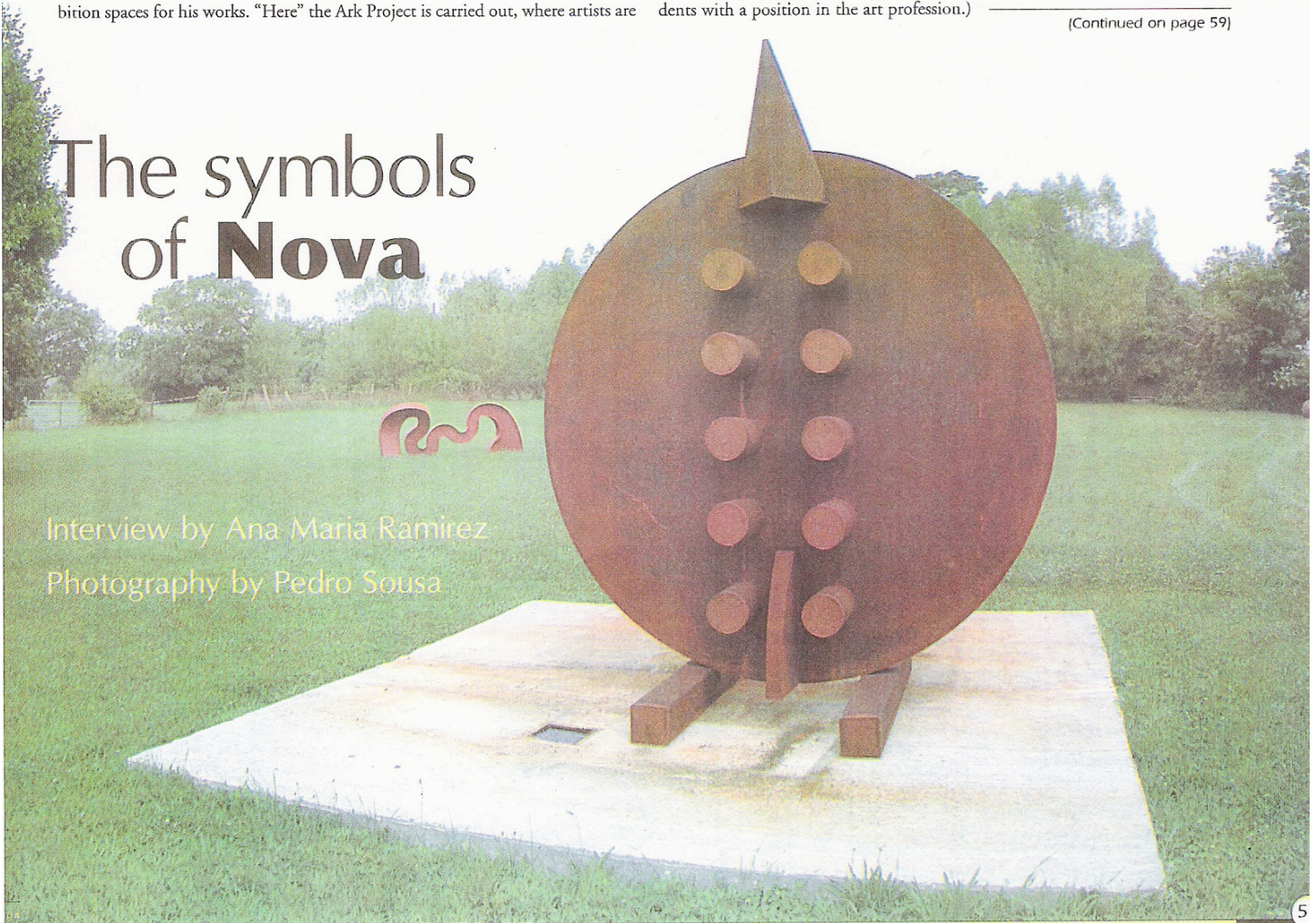
Nova's search for complete freedom stems from the landscape he was initially surrounded in during his early childhood in the mountainous province of Transylvania. In his youth, he was moved to Bucharest, the bourgeois landscape of Romania's capital. After surviving (creatively) a strictly structured education, the artist fell into an even more confining career as a union artist. (In Communist Romania, the government would automatically provide newly graduated art students with a position in the art profession.)

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The symbols of **Nova**

Interview by Ana Maria Ramirez

Photography by Pedro Sousa



Nova

(Continued from page 57)

"The negative to this otherwise good intention was that you were obliged to produce a political art that will restrict your vision to a very narrow view of what art is and its function," Nova said. "I tried to stay out honorably out of politics... But despite all of these attempts, I felt increasingly suffocated by the restrictions set on the visions of art."

The government, increasing restrictions on his expression, pushed Nova over the edge and in 1964 he opened a one-man exhibit displaying his first abstract pieces. An exhibit that inevitably resulted in his fleeing from Romania, crossing the mountains of Herzegovina and swimming across the Adriatic Sea, all the time severely wounded—surviving 28 days against all odds.

Once in Italy, Nova traveled to Carrara and took a job, for very little pay, cutting marble. After working throughout the day in these marble quarries, Nova took advantage of the great amount of stone around him and continued to work at night, carving up to 20 sculptures. With the money saved from his pay, Nova traveled to Rome with his finished works and sold each one.

"The happiness I had in doing those is that it was done in total artistic freedom. Finally whatever I dreamt in form and meaning was there," Nova stated.

Even these early abstract forms addressed these similar issues. In their abstraction they represented reality; a reality enhanced by stripping back meaningless noise and holding only to the transcendental interior.

"They were integral. They were abstract as much as they were realistic," Nova explained. "The idea of the abstract needs to enhance reality, to select from reality the best expression of the substance that reality is. The mission of the artist is to get that secret underlying spiritualness...and get them out in forms of spiritual symbols."

Ultimately, Nova's countryman Constantin Brancusi became an imperative influence on the artist's development and search for his own forms. "The Endless Column", a work of Brancusi's made up of cast-iron triangular modules stacked onto a steel skeleton, which stretches endlessly upwards a whole 98 ft. to represent inverted spirals, is in constant flux. Upon viewing it, this was an effect Nova wanted to encapsulate, but take even further. He found that the round form and the wave are shapes repeated in space and nature. And so Nova adopted the idea of a column in constant movement, but substituted the triangles into spheres joined together in a wave.

"I took it like a process of decoding the cosmos' way of workings..." Nova said. "To my surprise one day I saw the last photographs of the atoms done by a super microscope. They were just like my forms. I probably guessed through instinct what scientifically is true and true in the cosmos."

Currently, Nova is working on proposals for monuments to be placed in key areas for large audiences to witness. These monuments are what he calls his Four Dream Projects.

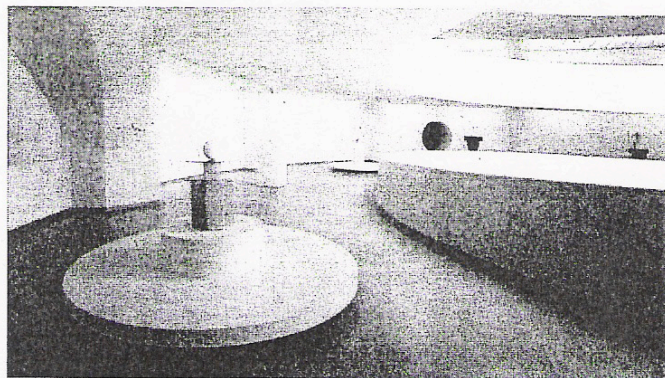
"They are four symbols that could help the coherence of the dream of this society. If the dream society is to come together, to integrate as one race then we would have to have that philosophy expressed in monuments... As long as we accept the cosmic forms we will modify our universe accordingly and we will slowly get back to where we belong."

Brancusi:

Constantin

The Essence of Things and the Necessity to Preserve It

By Ana Maria Ramirez



Beginning of the World, c. 1920

Marble on base of polished steel and limestone

7 1/4 x 11 x 7 1/4 in. (18.4 x 27.9 x 18.4 cm), overall height 22 1/2 in. (57.2 cm)

Dallas Museum of Art, Foundation for the Arts Collection, gift of Mr. and Mrs. James H. Clark

"Constantin Brancusi: The Essence of Things" has been attracting hordes to the Guggenheim Museum this season. Not sure what to expect, I made my way there and began to climb the structure's coiled framework. The exhibit begins at the bottom and ends at the gift shop at the top, where one can purchase Kandinsky-inspired scarves, Guggenheim mugs celebrating the signature architecture or even ties with Malevich renditions on them.

Brancusi's sculptures exude timelessness, appearing to be carved just days before despite their century long existence. They seem effortless, as if they spontaneously manifested into their present forms rather than being toiled over by the artist. Lacking any arrogance, the sculptures invite viewers into their meditative auras.

landscape; a spirituality inherent in his works that would eventually lead him to believe that the cosmos, and not man, is the ultimate gauge of great sculpture. As a result, Brancusi's creations are free from the restraints of earthly time. Void of detail, his sculptures are instead symbols communicating the continuous cycles of the universe.

Sculpture for the Blind and *Beginning of the World*, two of his ovoid forms, are flawless emblems of this pursuit. They are virtually identical physically, yet titled differently to guide the viewer in perceiving the forms on different levels of understanding. *Sculpture for the Blind* emphasizes the need for viewers to experience it not just as a visual form, but a multi-dimensional one while *Beginning of the World* reminds its audience that each life stems from the equivalent

"A work of art, expresses what escapes submission to death."

—C. Brancusi

However, the overall aura produced by the oeuvre was disrupted by having to experience the pieces in fragments of two or three at a time. Segmenting the forms in this manner subtracted from the spiritualist positivism or, the essence of the collection. In fact, it is known that the artist preferred to show his works within his studio in intimate groupings and in conjunction with the rest of his other forms in order to enhance the elucidation of the series. Ironically, even the museum's own Guggenheim Museum Magazine featured an article discussing the necessity for showing Brancusi in this way, yet their installation ignores this vital comprehension all the same.

Constantin Brancusi believed that nature and one's surroundings serve as the primary stimulus for art. Romanian-born, he was ingrained with a sense of spirituality by his native mountainous

and essential source. The two also serve to underscore the necessity of showing Brancusi in complete groupings—the impact of each one's meaning being intensified by the proximity of the other.

Brancusi's determination to discard the idea of art as solely an object should be a guiding force in mounting an exhibit of his works. If we treat his pieces as mere objects to be strewn sporadically across an exhibit space, we lose their drive for ascension. If we do that, we might as well place his sculptures on display alongside the Kandinsky scarves and Malevich ties, as we lose the essence of everything.

"Constantin Brancusi: The Essence of Things" will be on display at the Guggenheim (NYC) through September 19.