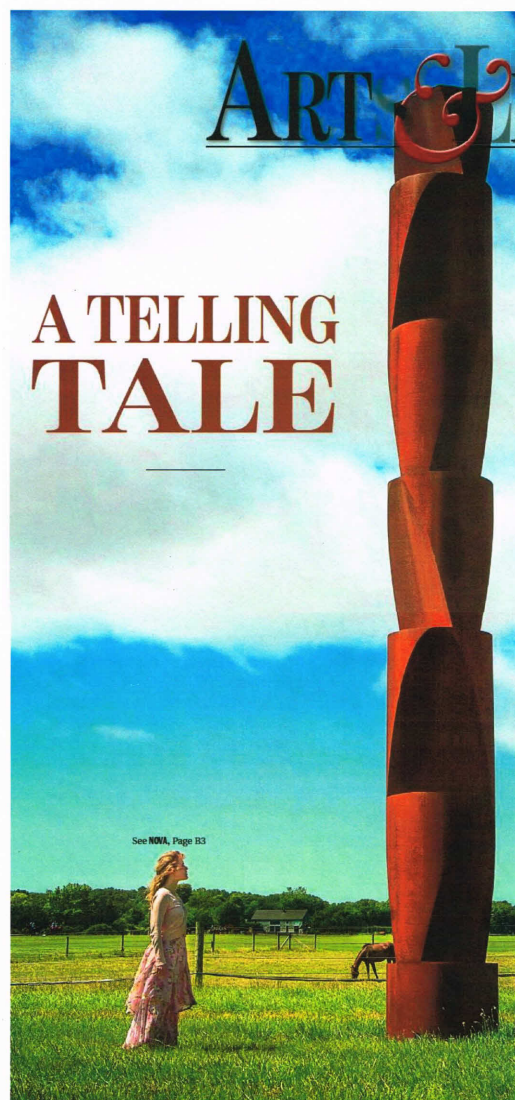


## A TELLING TALE

BY MICHELLE TRAURING



"Totem Towers" at Nova's Ark Project in Bridgehampton. THERRY VAN BIESEN



Artist Mihai Popa, above, known simply as Nova, created larger-than-life sculptures, including "The Astronauts," right. TUNDRA WOLF AND THERRY VAN BIESEN

His name was Mihai Popa. He could silence a room just by entering it—a big bear of a man, often wearing his signature peasant hat, never far from his roots. He was obsessed with science and the cosmos, nature and the afterlife. And he loved women. He was willful, bold, uncompromising. He wasn't one for small talk. He could be stern on occasion.

He wanted to build a place the world could interact with, enjoy and dream about. He wanted to challenge and stir the imagination.

He was a creator. He was a visionary.

Above all, he was an artist.

To most, he was known simply as Nova. And on a 95-acre preserve in Bridgehampton, he left behind his Ark Project—a sculpture park featuring more than 40 of his pieces, carried on by his longtime life partners Tundra Wolf and Luna Shanaman. They have kept his mission alive since his death in 2009, and with it a piece of him.

"Nova wanted this to be a place the public could come and get away from that," Ms. Wolf gestured beyond the property's tree line last week during a private golf cart tour of the property. "The cacophony of what's out there. The curating's left to me, and I'm always trying to feel Nova's spirit. I was with him for decades, so I pretty much know how he thought."

### The Meet-Cute

On a beautiful day in the 1960s, Ms. Wolf was strolling through Central Park with her energetic dog, Gregor, who had a penchant for jumping over the benches. When he had finally tired himself out, he lay down in the grass as she sat down, opening her book of Russian mysticism by Peter D. Ouspensky. She was 21, bright, shapely, and didn't care much

for American men.

When she saw a tall gentleman approaching her, she paid him no mind—until he opened his mouth. He was European and 15 years her senior. She was entranced.

"He was good-looking, and he was forceful. He was masculine. Nova was really a man," she recalled, dreamily. "It didn't take me too long to fall in love with him—an hour or two."

Born on February 20, 1928, in the quaint Transylvanian mountains of Romania, Mihai Popa wanted to come to America from the time he was 6 years old, daydreaming of palm trees and the Wild West while wearing a 10-gallon hat and carrying toy pistols. At age 10, he ran away from home—a carved dwelling, much like living inside a sculpture—and tried to stow away on a cargo vessel, where the communist militia found him hiding.

Forced to make the most of his situation, he studied painting and monumental art at the Institute of Bella Arts in Bucharest. But when he strayed from drawing happy workers and peasants—favoring abstract art exploring spheres, the most basic form in the universe, he had said—the communists would arrest him and hold him in custody for days at a time.

"They didn't want abstract art. They didn't understand it," Ms. Wolf explained. "They were kind of simple. But happy workers with flags? That was terrific. He didn't want that. He wanted full, free expression."

The young artist and his friends would often talk about escaping, before backing out last minute. Finally, one night, he took the plunge. Strapping his writings, poetry and photographs to his chest—under a leather jacket—he set out for Yugoslavia on foot. As he attempted to cross the border, a phosphorous bomb hit him in the chest.

When he looked down, he could see the white of his sternum, Ms. Wolf said. The flare had burned through all of his papers and pictures. They had saved his life, she said.

When he got to Trieste, the border between Yugoslavia and Italy, he was nearly dead. This was the most dangerous crossing of all, Ms. Wolf said. He swam all night across the Adriatic Sea, beaching himself in Italy as the sun rose.

"A fisherman nursed him back to health. And from there on, he just determined the rest of his life was going to be dedicated to giving back," Ms. Wolf said. "This is a man who, every day of his life, I watched him work."

On the outskirts of Italy, he learned the art of sculpture. In Rome, he sold them. And in Paris, he met a shipbuilder who, finally, brought Nova to the United States.

### The Big Move

In 1966, the artist landed in New Orleans. He immediately caught the attention of what was the Delgado Museum of Art now the New Orleans Museum of Art—and its board of directors gave him a few words of advice.

"We like your art. We can make you a national artist and, ultimately, an international artist," Ms. Wolf relayed the story, quoting the board

members. "But you'll have to stay with your current style for a number of years so the public can develop pattern recognition. Frank Stella: stripes. Nova: spheres."

Nova had risked his life to come to America for artistic expression. He had traveled here to expand. He would not be suffocated—least of all by his own art. He respectfully declined, packed up and moved to a modest brownstone on 83rd Street in Manhattan, not far from where he first met Ms. Wolf.

By 1970, the couple was living at the top of a tall Garment Center building. Two years later, Nova had started to weld and, soon, his work was outgrowing their illegal loft. It was time to relocate. On a fluke, they visited the East End and bought a shack in North Sea—"squished in between these trees on a quarter acre," Ms. Wolf said—in 1973 with their last \$3,000, and a monthly \$143 mortgage payment.

Still, it wasn't big enough—Nova did not have enough room. In 1986, they purchased a property in Bridgehampton—and, on it, an old barn with two potato trucks inside—and transformed it from a dilapidated farm into where the hand-crafted, carved, ecological Elliptical House and Museum House stand today.

They were his prototypes for building homes with a small footprint on the earth while using recycled material—the same concepts reflected in his designs for his "Earth Cities" of the future, which will be on display next year, Ms. Wolf said, after the park is further expanded and more sculptures installed.

"When the first beams of the Elliptical House went up, it was actually The Southampton Press that named it the 'Ark of Scuttlehole,'" she said. "In a way, Nova was a little bit like Noah, right? He wanted to give humans an idea for a way to live with cooperation, harmony and especially harmony with Gaea. That was, in a way, a burden for him. He had this mission he felt he had to accomplish."

He would often work into the early morning hours, poring over his designs and drawings at his table on the second floor of the Elliptical House, where he resided with Ms. Wolf and, by the 1980s, Ms. Shanaman, too. There, they lived, loved and created together.

"We were never cheap. We weren't a commune. It wasn't about that," Ms. Wolf said. "We were like an army—a little army of like-minded people who wanted to build something special. Of course, Nova spearheaded everything. He was full of energy."

### The Legacy

Today, larger-than-life sculptures dot the farmland behind the Elliptical House. A mere fraction of its 95 acres, which they purchased in 1991, is available for touring, co-existing with a dozen horses, a herd of sheep and frequent resident artists. Bronx-based Oz Valle arrived in May, escaping his own personal gridlock in the city—professionally, spiritually and artistically.

"Being here has sparked an awakening. I had turned my back on my art," he said on Monday evening, sitting on a bench on the edge of the sculpture field. "I felt like I was the wheel of a car, stuck in mud, getting all dirty trying to spin out of it. But it got cleaned up while I've been here. Nova may not be here, but he's speaking, definitely: 'You've got it. Do something with it.'"

On August 6, 2007, Nova penned a letter to his sister, Marioara, who still lives in Romania. He wrote that his climb on "Life's Mountain" was "long and rough," but now that his time left was slipping away, the descent "all seems so easy and fast."

"I have worked with faith to leave behind me a trace, a mark with a real value for the other generations," he wrote. "Promise me that you will see every being or thing in front of your eyes as a miracle. A leaf, a small path in the grass, a sunset, the pillow you sleep on, a closed door behind you when you leave somewhere, the street you walk ... All is a universe."

"Breathe sensually," he continued, "let all the earth's reaches enter in your consciousness like a long divine feast—promise me this. I am doing the same here each and every moment."

Two years later, Nova died on March 28, 2009, at his home in Florida after a day of working on notes for his book of philosophy, which Ms. Wolf said she will edit this winter for publication. He was 81.

"I think his big, generous heart gave out," she said. "But you know what? That day, he did everything he always did. He swam, he designed, he did everything. And then at night, it was, like, 'Bye, girls. Checking out. See you around the corner.' Like that. I was quite numb for a very long time."

Despite their grief, Ms. Wolf and Ms. Shanaman kept the sculpture park up and running, and stayed together as Nova had wished. They have become even better friends, Ms. Wolf said, and their home is full of laughter and inspiration. Next year marks the largest expansion Nova's Ark Project has seen in many years—fresh pieces, newly blazed trails, never-before-seen exhibitions and even tours of the Elliptical House.

"We're very private people, but when you build monumental sculptures, they, by their very nature, are not private," Ms. Shanaman said. "In 2015, we're completing Nova's mission by opening the house."

In the meantime, Ms. Wolf continues to curate the grounds, channeling Nova's vision to the best of her ability. And wondering if she will ever be with him again. "It would be interesting to see, if when I die, I'm going to join Nova," she said. "I'm preparing, already, for that."

She gazed calmly toward the looming Astronauts and Totem Towers, and continued, "I think he'd be very proud. I do. If he was as particular as he was in life, I think there'd be things he'd be rumbling about. But I don't think he's as particular now. I think he's in another place."

She gestured to the cloudless sky above her. He is freed, Ms. Wolf said. And, here, so is she.

"I just want this now, this place. I want the peace. I want the cosmos," she said. "Just like Nova."

*Open houses at Nova's Ark Project in Bridgehampton are held on Thursdays, through September 25, from 5 to 8 p.m., and Sundays, through September 21, from 1 to 5 p.m. Suggested donation is \$10. For more information, visit [thearkproject.com](http://thearkproject.com).*