

# SOCIAL LIFE



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*in the hamptons with*  
**KEIRA KNIGHTLEY**

FASHION, BEAUTY,  
TRAVEL, ART  
EXCLUSIVE GALA PHOTOS



## NOVA MIHAI POPA: THE ARTIST AND THE STORY BEHIND NOVA'S ARK

BY KEVIN BERLIN

SOCIAL LIFE PRESENTS AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH TUNDRA WOLF, THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF NOVA'S ARK PROJECT.

- **Nova Mihai Popa** (1928–2009) was born in Transylvania, Romania. He was a sculptor, painter, architect, and visionary. His work is in the collections of the New Orleans Museum of Art; the National Museum of Bucharest; the Prague Museum; the International Center in Suzhou, China; and private collections throughout the United States and Europe.

- **Nova's Ark Project**, founded in 1994, is the oldest and largest combination art complex/private sculpture park/nature preserve in the Hamptons. Located in Bridgehampton, this unity of painting, sculpture, architecture, and nature is the ultimate expression of Nova's idea of "integral art."

- **Tundra Wolf and Luna Shanaman** were Nova's life partners for decades. Tundra and Luna spearheaded the restoration of 95 acres: planting pastures, wildlife habitats, installing conservation practices, and reintroducing horses, sheep, and other animals to the land. Today, with Nova gone, Luna and Tundra continue the mission that Nova dreamed of.

- **Art Southampton** will feature a carefully selected group of 80 international art galleries exhibiting paintings, sculpture, works on paper, photography, video, and installation by modern and contemporary artists, from July 9 through 13.



Nova Mihai Popa in his studio at the elliptical house he built by hand 1986–1990. Photo by Tundra Wolf, circa 2003.





Nova contemplating two of his four Mighty Oaks, steel, 7 x 6 x 16–18 feet (each), 2006. Photo by Tundra Wolf.

### **Art Southampton is coming to Nova's Ark.**

Actually I am glad you mentioned Art Southampton because I was thinking about that today, and the fact that, Kevin, we are really very private people by nature; we are not particularly outgoing. We like to keep doing our work in a certain almost solitude, but you know we have art assistants, and we have to relate to the public. In a way, Art Southampton is wonderful because we can keep in the main our privacy, but there are five days when the public comes in and sees what Art Southampton is offering indoors and what we have to offer out of doors.

### **Nova Mihai Popa, do you refer to him as Mihai or Nova?**

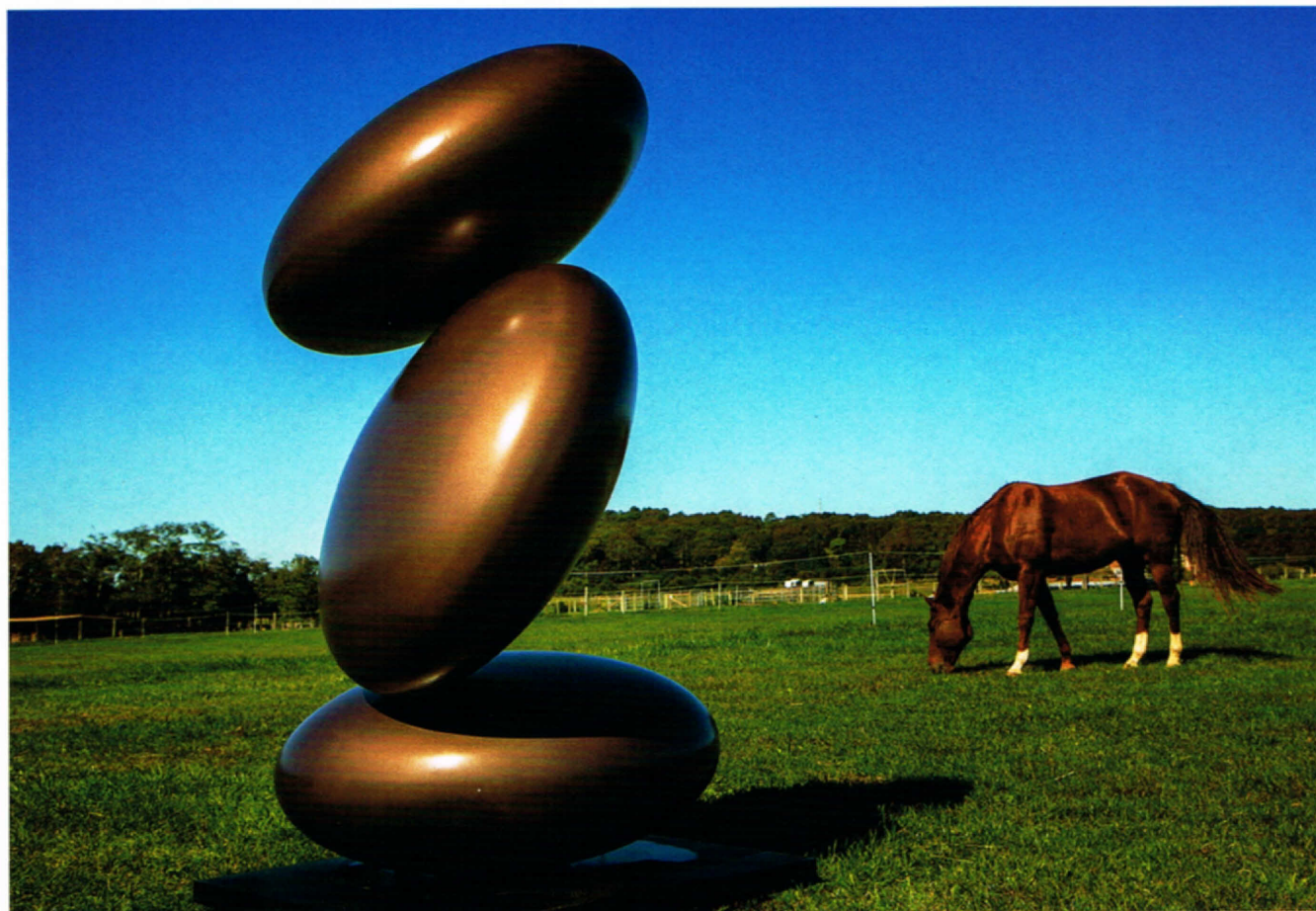
We always called him Nova, but his birth name was Mihai Popa. Mihai is the equivalent of our Michael.

**So I'll call him Nova. I've heard him described as a visionary, as a philosopher, in a lot of ways as a person who was much bigger than life but also a humble person with a great love of nature. Can you describe a little about the man behind the art?**

He was born in the mountains of Transylvania and was

brought to Bucharest by his father, a woodcutter, who moved into the city because he wanted a better education for Nova, Mihai at that time, and his sister. He found a little plot leased to him by a church, which was surrounded by rich villas, and Nova's father brought the animals from the farm, the goats, and the chickens. He was looked down upon, literally because the villas were tall and figuratively because these rich people lived pre-communism. But when communism came along it was interesting, Nova said, because all of a sudden these people who were so arrogant with their comfort and luxury lost their riches and were going to his father, and saying 'Can you spare an egg? . . . Can you give me a little of those greens?' And his father never turned his back, always gave to these folks. I remember also Nova saying that his sister was ashamed to go to school in clothes that were patched and Nova said to her, 'Don't you ever feel that way. You go. You keep your head high. And you just know who you are.' And I think these early experiences made him really feel that he had to excel. He always felt that a man could be much more than usually expressed. He told me the story once about a man he knew that had written a book traveling on the tram car to work every day, using that little half hour of time each day productively.





Nova Mihai Popa, *Bell Tower*, painted steel, 4 x 5 x 7 feet, 2009. Currently on grounds of The Ark Project.  
Photo by Thierry Van Biesen.

So those were the early influences. I have a letter from Nova's nephew, who told the story about Nova being about 10 years old and lying to his mother and saying that he was going to go for the day to visit some camp, and he actually tried to stow away on a ship.

**Oh my!**

Yes, and the police found him and returned him. So from the time he was a young boy he was always obsessed with America. To him it represented freedom. And as he got older, it was the same problem: he could become an artist but they would never send him to the free West. They sent him to China and Russia and Eastern Europe, but they didn't want to let him go to the West. So he tried to become a boxer; he thought maybe he could get out that way, but that didn't seem to work. When a professor took him to the basement to show him jars in formaldehyde of two brains, the brain of an intellectual and the brain of a boxer, and he saw the difference in the convolutions, he gave up boxing, tried medicine for awhile, and then stayed with art.

**And he graduated from the academy?**

Yes, the Institute of Bella Arts in Bucharest.

**So he was well on his way in terms of art education.**

Oh yes, he was considered one of the premier young artists of the generation, but he didn't want to paint happy workers with flags and happy peasants. He wanted to do something that was abstract. He saw abstraction as a distillation about experience, almost like poetry, more synthetic, a synthesis of life experience. He loved abstract and the communists didn't want him to do abstract. They didn't understand it. They thought it was frivolous, so they many times were very oppressive to him. The police would pick him up for days and they would just question him because, for example, his first wife wore red when they went out on the street. He pushed boundaries and they didn't like that. He was dying to escape. He made plans with friends but they always chickened out at the last moment, and finally he decided to do the unthinkable and crossed the border at night by himself and got hit in the chest by a phos-



phorus bomb. You probably read about that.

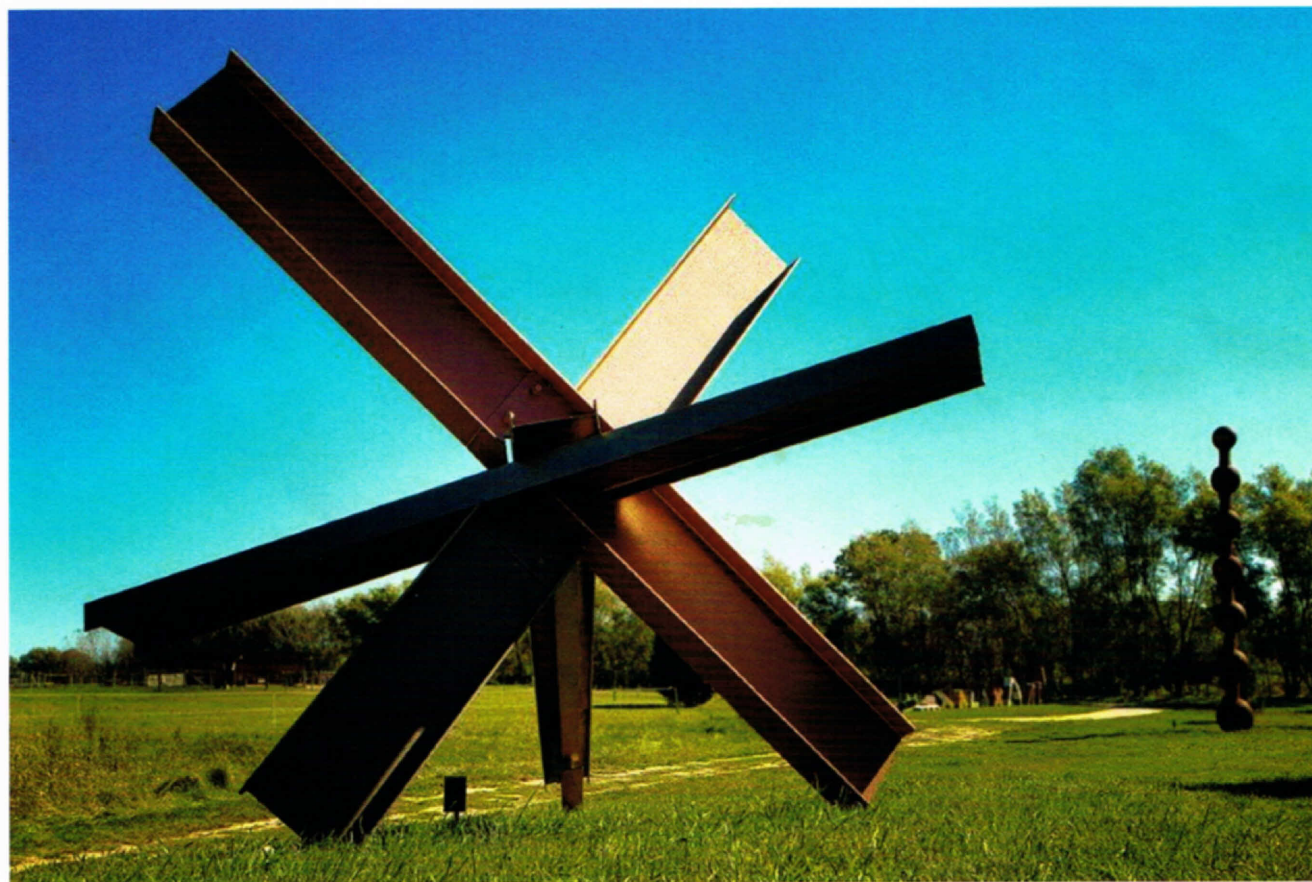
**I did. There were a number of exposed bones, a bullet in his leg.**

Yes, and he then had to drag himself 28 days across Yugoslavia because he was in another communist country. The peasants probably wouldn't, but they could turn you back, so he traveled at night, skirting the villages, and the barking dogs, and he eventually got to the worst border crossing between Yugoslavia and Italy. For some reason I don't think he ever really thought about how he was going to do that crossing. I mean he said at that moment his heart just sank, he felt like it was all over, that he would have to give up, that there was just no way. But he was a strong swimmer. One night seeing that the current seemed to be going his way, he went out into the water maybe 300 yards so he couldn't be seen, and he swam along the shore all night. He said what he thinks saved him was sometimes he would wake up with a jolt with water in his mouth and believed he had been napping, probably for a few seconds, a minute or so, on his back dead-man floating, and that gave him the energy to keep going. He got to the shore as the sun was rising. Was he still in Yugoslavia or Italy? It

all looks the same, coarse looking, and very rocky. He pulled himself up, said to himself "Mihaitza, don't fall asleep, just sit here." Before he knew it, his head was on his outstretched arm and he was sleeping. And when he woke up the sun was on the other side now going down and kids were throwing pebbles at him, 'Hey, che fai?' and he knew that he had made it. The kids' father was a fisherman and he nursed Nova back to health. For 28 days Nova had not eaten much except what he could dig out of the ground, but luckily that wound on his chest never got infected. He always had a big beautiful scar there, like a flower, like a sun. So that was it. We always sent money to the fisherman, the kids' father, and then one day the fisherman said to Mihai, 'Please don't send the money anymore. It is making envy of my neighbors, villagers. I've bought a boat, I've bought this, I've bought that. It is enough.'

**It wasn't long after he arrived in the United States, in New Orleans, that he became involved with a museum, a gallery, and the art world.**

Yes, he had met a gentleman named Grissom, who was on the board of the New Orleans Museum of Art, at that time called the Delgado Museum. Grissom arranged Nova's pas-



Nova Mihai Popa, *Big Bang*, painted steel, 12 x 22 x 12 feet, 1996. Photo by Thierry Van Biesen.



## ART



Peasant roots... little Mihai with family.

Luna, Nova, Tundra  
at their Florida  
home, circa 2004.

In art, what my intent is, is to  
regain the link with nature.  
Re-understand the divinity of  
the universe, and reveal the  
sense of sacred in man.

—Nova Mihai Popa



Nova at work on the design of *The Settlers*, 2005.  
Photo by Tundra Wolf.

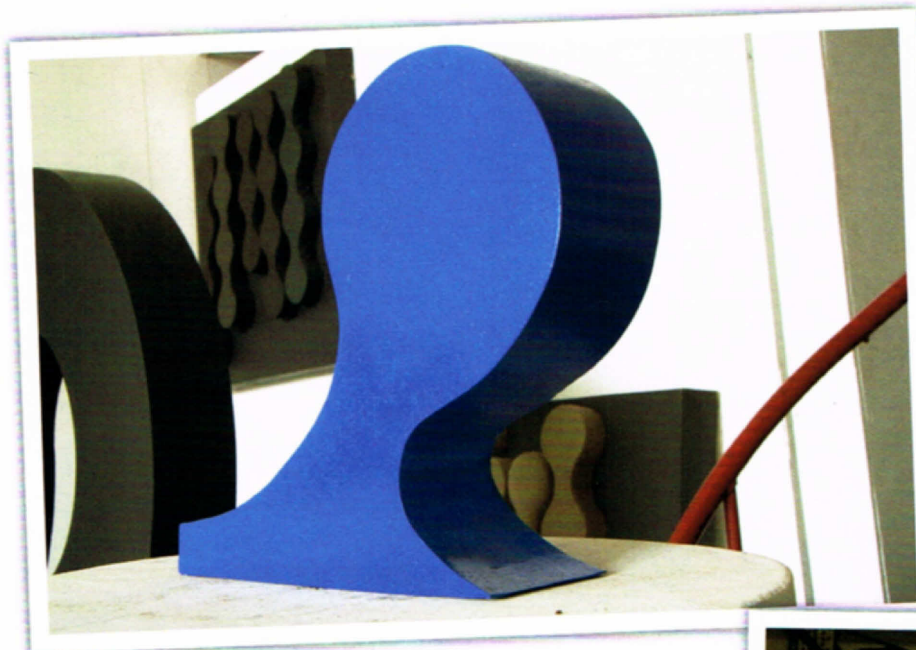


If you leave something behind, it  
is the most important thing of  
every life. If I will leave behind  
an indication for how the humans  
can survive in their tragic condition  
for a long time, that would be the  
greatest achievement of my life.

—Nova Mihai Popa



## ART



Nova Mihai Popa,  
Untitled, painted steel,  
1 x .5 x 1.5 feet, 1996.  
Photo by Tundra Wolf.

Integral Art aims to fuse  
the old with the new, the  
spiritual with the technological,  
the abstract with the realistic.

—Nova Mihai Popa



Nova in NYC studio with elements for new sculptures, 1968.





Nova Mihai Popa, *Totem Towers*, steel, 3.5 x 3.5 x 31 & 3.5 x 3.5 x 20 feet, 2008. Photo by Thierry Van Biesen.



sage to the U.S. on a cargo ship, and it arrived in Fort Lauderdale, where, for the first time, he could breathe the tropical air that he had always dreamed of and feel free. He went to New Orleans to join Grissom and his family. The board wanted to help Nova become an international artist, and he participated in several shows at the museum and the A.L. Lowe Gallery. At that time he was a painter; he painted a lot of spheres. The idea was to develop pattern recognition — Stella: stripes, Nova: spheres — so that he would have an entry style. At that point he decided that was not why he had risked his life to come here, as tempting as it was, as comfortable as it would have been, and he struck out for New York, and that is where he met me.

**You met him at a park?**

Yes in Central Park.

**And how did you end up in Bridgehampton?**

Well, we eventually got a loft in midtown Manhattan, a former button factory, which we renovated. It had beautiful views of the city. Even though it was 2,500 square feet, eventually it felt small because Nova was doing very large works; for example, models for cities of the future. There is an Earth city, a floating city, and a cosmic city. The models are 12 feet tall. We have them and hopefully will display them in two years at Nova's Ark Project. Nova also wanted to begin working with steel, so he needed more space. We knew Bridgehampton. We had gone out there and found in 1973 a very small cottage on a quarter acre that we bought for \$19,000. I remember saying to Nova, 'Are you really sure we will be able to afford the \$143 a month mortgage?' We were just artists, young and poor artists. But you know, from that modest start we next found an old dilapidated barn on one acre of farmstead, so we sold the little house and bought that. Things just kept rolling after that. I worked for several decades as the vice president of a performing arts organization. So we had some money from that. We saved a lot. Eventually we were able to get the next door property, which was the farm that had everything we needed for creating the sculpture park.

**That's what we know of as the Ark Project today.**

Yes.

**Should we talk a little about the large scale sculptures?**

I think the *Astronauts* was one of the first sculptures built at the sculpture park. It was his tribute to what he called 'those incredible pioneers of our time.' He saw them as 'the new immigrants' in a way, the ones reaching out to the cosmos, which is where Nova believed we would have to go if we continued



Tundra and young Sparti learning to understand each other, Florida 2010.

to destroy the Earth. Nova also felt that we as a civilization don't really have an art that represents the whole, all of us, like the Aztecs, the Inca, the Egyptians, Stonehenge. And I think the *Astronauts* was his way of building something that would make us feel like it represented everyone globally.

**I have read many of Nova's quotes, including 'We are all built — humans, trees, oceans, planets — we are all built together, to be together.'**

He totally felt that. He was very sincere in all of this. Again, he dedicated his whole life to that, to helping people realize that.

**What plans do you have for the future? Obviously you are carrying on a legacy.**

Luna and I are just really reviewing all of this right now because it is important, definitely. Private people as we are, we have a mission, and that is to keep the legacy and Nova's



mission alive, so that there will always be a public component to what we are doing. I would like to open the property to exhibits by top-quality sculptors from time to time. I think it is important, and I think it will attract people. Nova was a superman: he made everything. Everything that you see on that property, every bolt, every hinge, design in wood, every renovation of the buildings, it was all done by Nova and his team of young, inspired art apprentices. And I think he wanted to show people: *Look, we have so much more power than we ever give ourselves credit for. We can do much more. We can come out of our comfort zone and still have a great life.* He had a good life, he was loved, he loved, but he worked every single day of his life, and he had a mission, and I think that is why he lived a very rich and productive life.

**You talked a little about Art Southampton before. Is there is anything else you would like to say about your partnership with them.**

Yes, well, we are very pleased to be hosting them. To us, it is a top-quality art fair that is well organized, and with very good leadership. This is our first year working together. I can't be



Nova Mhai Pops, *Detail of Astronauts*, steel, each 3 x 4 x 20–22 feet, 1995–1996.

sure of what will come to pass, but I hope our relationship is long and fruitful.

**Yes, they have done a beautiful job in the past.**

I think it is a wonderful fit between the scale of Nova's sculptures and the scale of Art Southampton.



Art Southampton, 2014.