In This Lush Florida Garden, Art and Nature Are Inseparable

It’s quiet in the Ann Norton Sculpture Gardens. On a particularly blustery day, one might hear the wind whip through tall palm leaves or the ocean just across the street, but its West Palm Beach, Florida, neighborhood is quiet enough that some tourists report initially wondering if they’re in the right place. The signage is demure, and from the sidewalk all one can see is a stately home and, behind a low wall, a dense collection of lush, verdant palms.

Deep in that jungle, the Seven Beings wait for visitors. They’re attentive and watchful, but utterly silent. Each figure faces a different direction,
scanning the trees. They’re endlessly patient. And when someone turns a corner or peeks out from behind the leaves, the giant beings, lovingly carved from pink Norwegian granite, stare back.

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Seven Beings, pictured above, "shows how we as human beings really flow together with nature," says Frances Fisher. "You have these enormous beings in front of you, and their eyes are facing different directions almost like they’re seeing or have foresight ... I think they kind of symbolize connectivity. Connectivity to others, connectivity to spirit, connectivity to nature."

That kind of encounter—one moment a visitor is browsing among the trees, the next they’re face-to-face with a monumental sculpture—is by design. Ann Norton, the artist who lived and worked here, planned for the gardens to function as a spiritual retreat where living plants and creatures would live in harmony with her art. Seven Beings is one of the nine sculptures meant to be discovered, almost as surprises, inside the lush jungle of rare plants and cycads. “It’s almost like those sculptures are coming out of the ground to make a powerful intersection between the world of art and nature,” says Frances Fisher, chairman of the Sculpture Gardens’ board.
The nonprofit Ann Norton Sculpture Gardens (ANSG), which includes Norton's house, studio, and two acres of tropical plants, is dedicated to preserving Norton's all-encompassing vision for her work. Because of its commitment to preserving and sharing Norton's world with the public, the ANSG was recently added to the National Trust's Historic Artists' Homes and Studios program.

A lifelong conservationist, Norton wasn’t only building a home for her art; she meant to create a sanctuary for living beings. That’s why the ANSG puts as much emphasis on the plants as they do on Norton's sculptures. “We have two collections here: We have Ann’s art collection and then we have our palm and cycad collection,” says Margaret Horgan, director of community engagement. The gardens contain over 250 species of rare tropical plants, and their growth is essential to carrying out Norton’s vision.

"I think the fact that it started small and got larger as she got into the project is really reflective of her philosophy that creativity was an ongoing process," Fisher says.

Many stress that Ann Norton, born in 1905 in Selma, Alabama, was a “woman ahead of her time,” as CEO Cynthia Kanai puts it. “Ann was a very modern, contemporary thinker,” she says. As a young woman, Norton decided art was her calling and moved to New York City, where she studied at the Art Students League of New York, Cooper Union, and the National Academy of Design; her work was shown in the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and in galleries in Rome, Paris, and Miami. Norton’s nine monumental sculptures also reflect her Modernist vision. Seven Beings is the only one that depicts recognizable figures; the other eight are massive, abstract works in brick that tower over human visitors and stand among the sturdy palms.
Fisher, especially, sees Norton as a forward thinker. “I did not know Ann—she was before my time—but I did know Ann, because I grew up in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and our families were friends,” she explains. “Throughout my childhood, I heard stories of this courageous woman who left Alabama and moved to New York City during the Depression to study art. That story was always relayed to me in terms not only of following your life’s passion, but of having the strength and courage to do that as a woman.”

Norton, then known as Ann Weaver, came to Florida in 1942 for a job as the sculpture instructor at industrialist Ralph Norton’s newly-founded gallery and art school. She and Ralph formed a fast friendship; after his first wife died, they struck up a relationship, and Ann and Ralph married in 1948. Ann challenged Ralph’s views and influenced the growth of his collection at the Norton Museum of Art, which stands just up the street from the house they shared, today part of the ANSG. “She had quite an influence on his ability to look at art in a more contemporary way,” Kanai says.

Their partnership gave Ann the space and means to begin realizing her artistic vision—and even his death in 1953, five years into their marriage, propelled her. She began work on Seven Beings in his memory. Initially, the granite sculpture was meant for display at the Norton Museum, but as she kept adding figures, it grew too large for that space. Her monumental work would have to reside somewhere else.

As she worked on her other eight statues, Norton produced sketches, drawings, and models in wood, bronze, and stone, which are now displayed in the Norton home. But for the statues in the garden, she always returned to brick, which she fired herself. Fisher sees this choice of material as a love letter to Alabama. “If you travel anywhere near Selma or the Cahaba River, that brick is so prevalent,” she explains. “The color varies, but the bricks are a red clay that is almost a part of the earth in Alabama.”

One of Norton's eight monumental brick sculptures in the Ann Norton Sculpture Gardens.
Towards the end of her life, Norton collaborated with her friend Sir Peter Smithers, a landscape architect, to design the gardens where her sculptures would reside. “They created a partnership that was based on his understanding of how nature played with art,” Fisher says. Together, they drafted the garden’s founding principles, which envisioned the gardens as a low-labor ecosystem, where the plants would thrive with minimal effort, and where the sculptures would be displayed in a “tranquil, withdrawn, and meditative” atmosphere. Norton also founded the nonprofit that maintains her gardens today.

Norton died of leukemia in 1982, but her plans and legacy were intact. “A lot of the specimens that went in at the very end of her life were immature,” Horgan says. “Now we get to reap the benefits … They’re full and grown and magnificent.”

Preserving Ann’s vision is the ANSG’s main goal, Fisher says. “We want to represent Ann’s commitment to conservation and to preservation of the quiet retreat in the middle of a growing urban area. It was very important to her that the mystery of art, the ability to communicate something far larger than ourselves, be reflected in the preservation of her property,” she says.

That includes preserving her studio—”we like to think that if she came back tomorrow, she’d find it as she left it,” Fisher says—and her 1925 home; to that end, the home, studio, and gardens are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

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Frances Fisher
It also means nurturing and repairing the gardens after hurricane and drought damage. It means growth: Today, the Gardens display other artists’ work alongside Norton’s statues and provide educational programming where children learn about ecology, nutrition, and visual arts. Most importantly, it means maintaining the space as Norton lived in and arranged it for generations of new visitors.

Fisher calls the ANSG a “gift” to South Florida. “The gift is the union between the powerful art and the natural landscape,” she says. “When you see the nine monumental sculptures that are mysteriously discovered as you wander her gardens, you can really feel that spirituality.”

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