

PEOPLE **SAVING** PLACES

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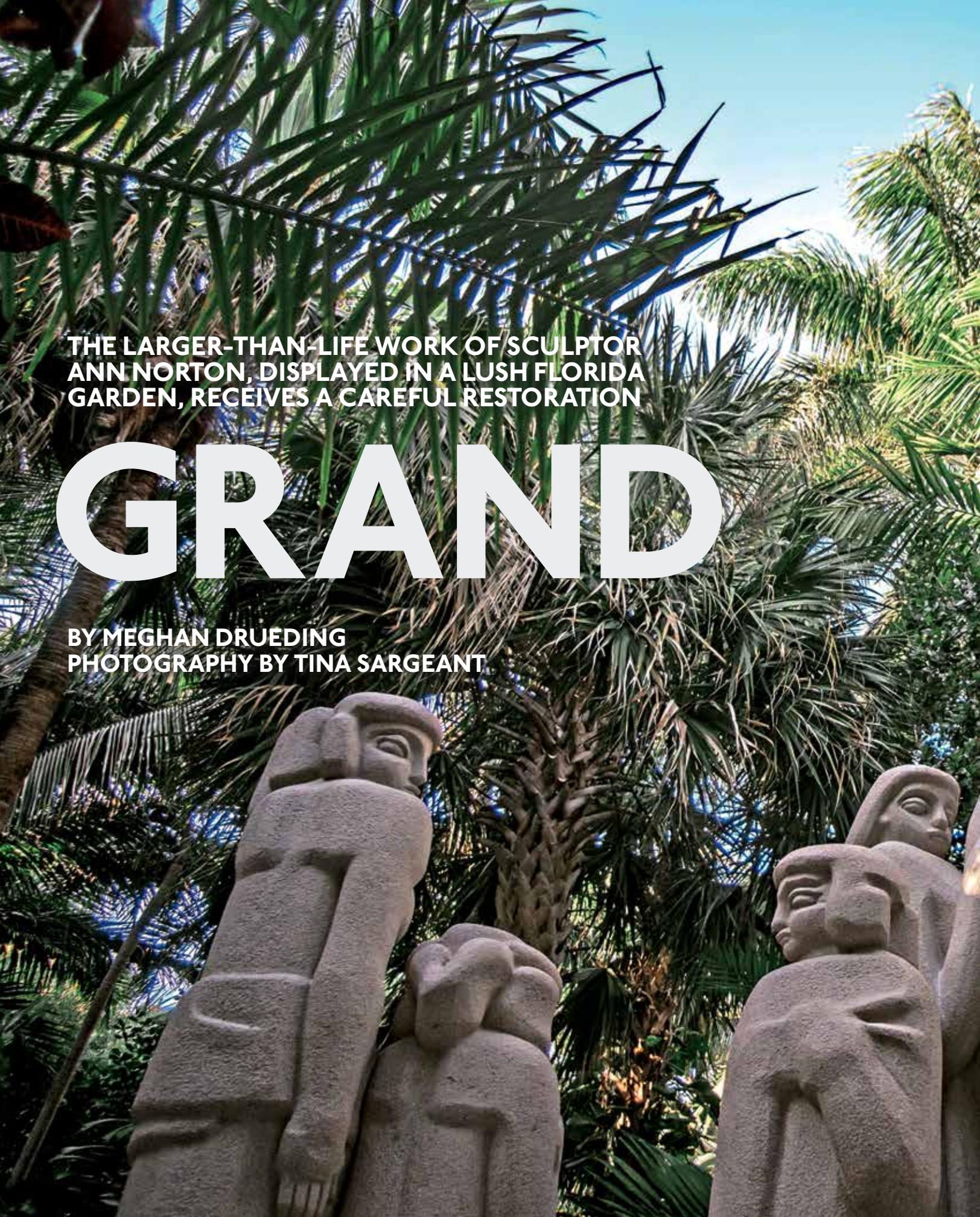
ARTIST IN RESIDENCE

INSIDE A FLORIDA SCULPTOR'S TRANQUIL HAVEN

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INDUSTRIAL
REVIVAL IN
BALTIMORE

RENEWING A
SAN FRANCISCO
LANDMARK

A photograph of a lush Florida garden filled with tall palm trees. In the foreground, several large, light-colored stone sculptures of human figures are visible. The sculptures are stylized and appear to be made of a textured material. The background is a dense canopy of green palm fronds against a clear blue sky.

**THE LARGER-THAN-LIFE WORK OF SCULPTOR
ANN NORTON, DISPLAYED IN A LUSH FLORIDA
GARDEN, RECEIVES A CAREFUL RESTORATION**

GRAND

**BY MEGHAN DRUEDING
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TINA SARGEANT**

VISION



In the serene, palm-filled confines of the Ann Norton Sculpture Gardens in West Palm Beach, Florida, the rare black-and-blue Atala butterfly dips from one frond to another all spring and summer. Scientists believed the Atala to be extinct in southern Florida from 1937 to 1959. But recent conservation efforts have brought it back, and it's drawn to the thick undergrowth of glossy green leaves in the jungle-like sculpture gardens—a modern-day stop for art, nature, and garden lovers that's undergoing a revival of its own.

Right about the time the Atala was thought to have died out in South Florida, the gardens' eventual namesake, New York sculptor Ann Vaughan Weaver (shown at right), was starting a new life there. The Alabama-born, classically trained artist had spent years scraping by on a meager income. Her accolades from her time in New York were many: traveling fellowships to Europe, a silver medal from the Cooper Union Art School, participation in group exhibitions at The Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art. In 1939, the 35-year-old received a coveted private commission for a garden sculpture, which she executed to the delight of her client, a Vermont doctor. She hoped to do more.

But the nation's entry into World War II was approaching, and the market for personal luxuries like custom statuary soon vanished. Weaver's New York abode was a rented room that cost \$8 a day, and according to William Eiland in his 2000 biography *Ann Weaver Norton: Sculptor*, she "lived for a period on nothing but bananas." The fanatically hardworking, 5-foot-tall sculptor needed a full-time job. She got one in 1942, as an instructor of sculpture at the recently opened Norton Gallery and School of Art (now the Norton Museum of Art) in West Palm Beach.

Her new bosses, art collectors and museum founders Ralph and Elizabeth Norton, had moved to the area in the late 1930s. Elizabeth's ill health kept her at home much of the time, but Ralph and Weaver became friends, bonding over their shared love of art and classical music. Elizabeth Norton died in 1947, and after six months as a widower, Ralph asked Weaver to marry him. Although

she agonized about what to do—she worried that marriage would interfere with her work and force her into Palm Beach society life—she ultimately said yes, with her art as a caveat. "If you are willing to take an artist for your wife and one like me," she wrote him, "then I am yours."

Weaver—now Ann Weaver Norton—needn't have worried about becoming a society matron. She hadn't married Ralph for his money, but she now had the financial freedom to dive into her work more fully than ever before. She had been creating plaster sculptures that bridged the figurative and the abstract, and now she was able to get more of them cast in bronze, an expensive process that made the pieces more marketable.

The couple lived in the historic West Palm Beach neighborhood of El Cid, in a 1925 house originally designed by the well-known Palm Beach architect Maurice Fatio and then renovated in the Monterey Revival Style by another important Florida architect, Marion Sims Wyeth. The Nortons hired Wyeth to design an attached studio for Ann, where she worked full-time. Ralph stayed true to his promise to respect and support her career until his death in 1953 at the age of 77.

Ann was only 48 years old, and there was still a lot of the world—and the United States—that she hadn't seen. She began traveling, and the otherworldly landscape of the American Southwest, particularly Bryce Canyon in Utah, captured her imagination. "She was really inspired by the rock formations there," says Cynthia Inklebarger, curatorial manager at the Ann Norton Sculpture Gardens.

Ann had agreed to produce a sculpture in her husband's honor for the Norton Museum of Art, and over time it became much larger than the three-piece work she had initially envisioned. An evocative grouping of mysterious figures whose forms recall Bryce Canyon's rocky outcroppings, it consisted of pink Norwegian granite and measured 15 feet tall at its highest point. The piece, *Seven Beings*, became too big for its designated spot at the museum, and she decided to install it in her own backyard instead.

Previous pages: Ann Norton's *Seven Beings*, completed in 1965, is one of her best-loved works. *Opposite:* Her studio contains clay and plaster models and maquettes, as well as many of her cedar sculptures.







The Ann Norton Sculpture Gardens is a member of Historic Artists' Homes and Studios (HAHS), a program of the National Trust. For more information on HAHS, visit SavingPlaces.org/historic-sites

Clockwise from top left: Gateway Number 3 (1974–75) measures 27 feet tall; Gateway to Knowledge, a West Palm Beach replica of a Norton work in Massachusetts, forms the background for Momentum (2015) by Jim Rennert, part of a temporary exhibition this spring; Rennert's bronze Timing (2017) was displayed near Norton's 30-foot Gateway Number 5 (1977).





Untitled Horizontal Sculpture, a 1979 Norton work in handmade Mexican brick, occupies a shallow pool in the house's rear yard. The 48-foot-long sculpture was conserved in 2019.

With the help of engineer Gene Leofanti and stonecarver René Lavaggi, who became her lifelong collaborators, Ann Norton completed *Seven Beings* in 1965. Since the 1950s, she had focused more and more on the approach of “direct carving”—making sculptures directly from a material, as opposed to creating plaster models and then casting them in metal. During the 11 years she spent on *Seven Beings*, she also began exploring the use of wood as a medium, using hand tools to carve 30-foot pieces of British Columbian cedar into abstract works influenced by Native American totem poles. And sometime in the 1960s or ’70s she grew interested in building tower-like sculptures out of handmade brick.

Norton had her studio expanded so she’d have even more room to execute the large-scale works she had long dreamed of being able to complete. “I’ve always thought big,” she told a reporter from the Palm Beach *Evening Times*. “Even when I was first learning in art school, my drawings were always running off the page.” The wood sculptures remained indoors, protected from the elements, but her 2-acre property was the ideal site for her massive brick sculptures, and soon *Seven Beings* had company. The Ann Norton Sculpture Gardens were starting to take shape.

As Norton traveled the world, particularly India and the British Isles, her work grew more abstract. In her *Gateways*, a series of up to 30-foot brick forms with carved openings, critics saw the influences of Jain temples and Scottish dolmens. The six *Gateways* are scattered in the northern half of the sculpture gardens, along

pathways through dense subtropical vegetation.

After laboring mostly outside the mainstream of the art world for decades, Norton received a spurt of attention during the last years of her career. The Rodin Museum in Paris invited her to contribute a sculpture for a show there in 1976, and two years later she received her only public commission, for a posthumously completed piece in Cambridge, Massachusetts, called *Gateway to Knowledge*. A pair of important New York venues—the Clocktower gallery and the Max Hutchinson Gallery—held exhibitions of her work in 1978 and 1980.

By that point, Norton had been diagnosed with leukemia. She wanted to make sure her life’s work would be preserved in a peaceful setting where members of the public could come and undergo a “deep refreshing,” as she put it. She contacted a friend, Sir Peter Smithers, a British politician, former spy, and garden designer. “She told him the last piece of the puzzle was this garden,” says Margaret Horgan, the site’s managing director.

Smithers planned a rare collection of climate-appropriate palms and cycads (cone-bearing seed plants) that would complement the existing native palms, pines, and mahoganies. The idea was that visitors would feel as if they were in a tropical jungle, stumbling across Ann’s sculptures serendipitously. “A first meeting with each one must be an event, almost a shock,” he wrote in his 1996 memoir *Adventures of a Gardener*. By the time Ann Norton died in 1982, the gardens were open to the public.



Opposite from top: The house's rear portico; The garden's meandering paths through lush vegetation create a sense of discovery. *This page:* A maquette Norton made for *Seven Beings*.

Since then, an evolving group of dedicated staff members and volunteers have maintained the nonprofit Ann Norton Sculpture Gardens and raised money to keep it going. “The gardens have a rabid fan base,” says Dave Lawrence, president of the Palm Beach Cultural Council. “I think the mix of art and nature makes it pretty extraordinary.”

In 2015, the site brought in conservator Rosa Lowinger and her firm, RLA Conservation, to evaluate the condition of the nine major outdoor sculptures, which had withstood multiple hurricanes. Plant growth, moisture, and salt air had damaged some of the bricks, as well as the rebar that forms the armature of most of the works.

“I love those sculptures, because I work with these materials all the time, but on buildings,” says Kelly Ciociola, a principal conservator at RLA. “It’s amazing what Ann Norton was able to do with an architectural material as sculpture.” Ciociola and skilled RLA technicians Humberto Del Rio, Junior Norelus, and Pablo Brouwer have conserved six of the garden sculptures since 2016, gently cleaning them and removing vegetation—including roots that had grown in tiny cracks, ultimately spreading out and causing more damage.

Rusted rebar had also expanded inside the brick cladding, so the RLA team removed the bricks and old mortar joints, treated the rebar, and then replaced the brick where possible. In cases where the old brick was too damaged, they created replacements from restoration mortar, repointing them so they look as close to the original bricks as possible.

Refining the property’s landscape has also been a top recent priority. SMI Landscape Architecture has worked with the gardens over the past few years to make its pathways more wheelchair accessible without detracting from the sense of surprise Smithers and Norton had wanted. In 2018 the firm created a small amphitheater for outdoor classes and performances, and in 2019 it completed a “welcome garden” on the corner of the site to provide a more public street presence.

RLA was scheduled to start work on another garden sculpture, *Untitled (Monument Number 8)*, in March, but the COVID-19 crisis scrambled those plans. The site hopes to start that work this summer, along with repairs to the main house, which holds gallery space for visiting exhibitions. (The fixes to the house are funded as part of a state relief package passed after Hurricane Irma, which damaged the building’s windows, railings, doors, and balconies in 2017.) “The repairs will be great for the house’s preservation, but they also will protect us the next time there’s a hurricane,” says board of trustees chair Frances Fisher.

Norton’s studio, too, sustained damage in the storm, and Horgan and Fisher hope to have it restored sometime in the next year. The 1,224-square-foot studio gives the impression that the detail-obsessed artist has just stepped away and will return any moment.



Her chemicals for patinating her metal casts are stacked behind glass doors, her smocks are lined up in a closet, and her tools hang in cabinets. Maquettes, models, charcoal and pastel drawings, and wood and metal sculptures fill the space, providing a sense of the range of Norton’s work. “When people walk into the studio, they’re struck with the size and height and the light coming into it,” Inklebarger says. “The wonderful smell of the cedar pieces hits you, and then you’re taken with the amount of work in there. You can see her depth and breadth as an artist.”

The sculpture gardens are typically open from October to June but, like other historic destinations across the country, the site closed in March this year. If local public health restrictions are lifted by the fall, Horgan and Fisher plan to open the gardens again in October for the 2020–21 season. The site is a member of the National Trust’s Historic Artists’ Homes and Studios (HAHS) program, and it’s slated to host the exhibition *Artists at Home*, a gathering of images from HAHS sites, in the spring of 2021. An exhibition of work by artist Carol Prusa is planned for the fall of 2021. And the hope is that the gardens’ extensive educational programming will restart soon.

The property remains a haven for endangered plant life such as the Old Man Palm, native to Cuba and named for its beard-like husk, and the Coco de Mer, another palm that hails from the Seychelles and grows the largest naturally occurring fruit in the plant kingdom. And the Atala isn’t the only butterfly drawn to the gardens. Their proliferation of the Dutchman’s pipe vine attracts the yellow-and-black Polydamas swallowtail, while milkweed brings monarch butterflies. “We always have something flying around,” says Horgan. “A regular population of birds live here, including woodpeckers. There are always sounds—lots of sounds.”

Birdsong makes a fitting accompaniment for the enormous, silent yet sentient-seeming sculptures, which Peter Smithers called “great brick creatures” in *Adventures of a Gardener*. “As I worked around them in the years ahead,” he continued, “each would assume a personality of its own. It would hardly have surprised me if one of them had spoken to me, though in what language I cannot imagine.”