

# Nantucket Today

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF NANTUCKET ISLAND

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GWEN'S LEGACY**

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Amazing sculptures  
inspired by nature**

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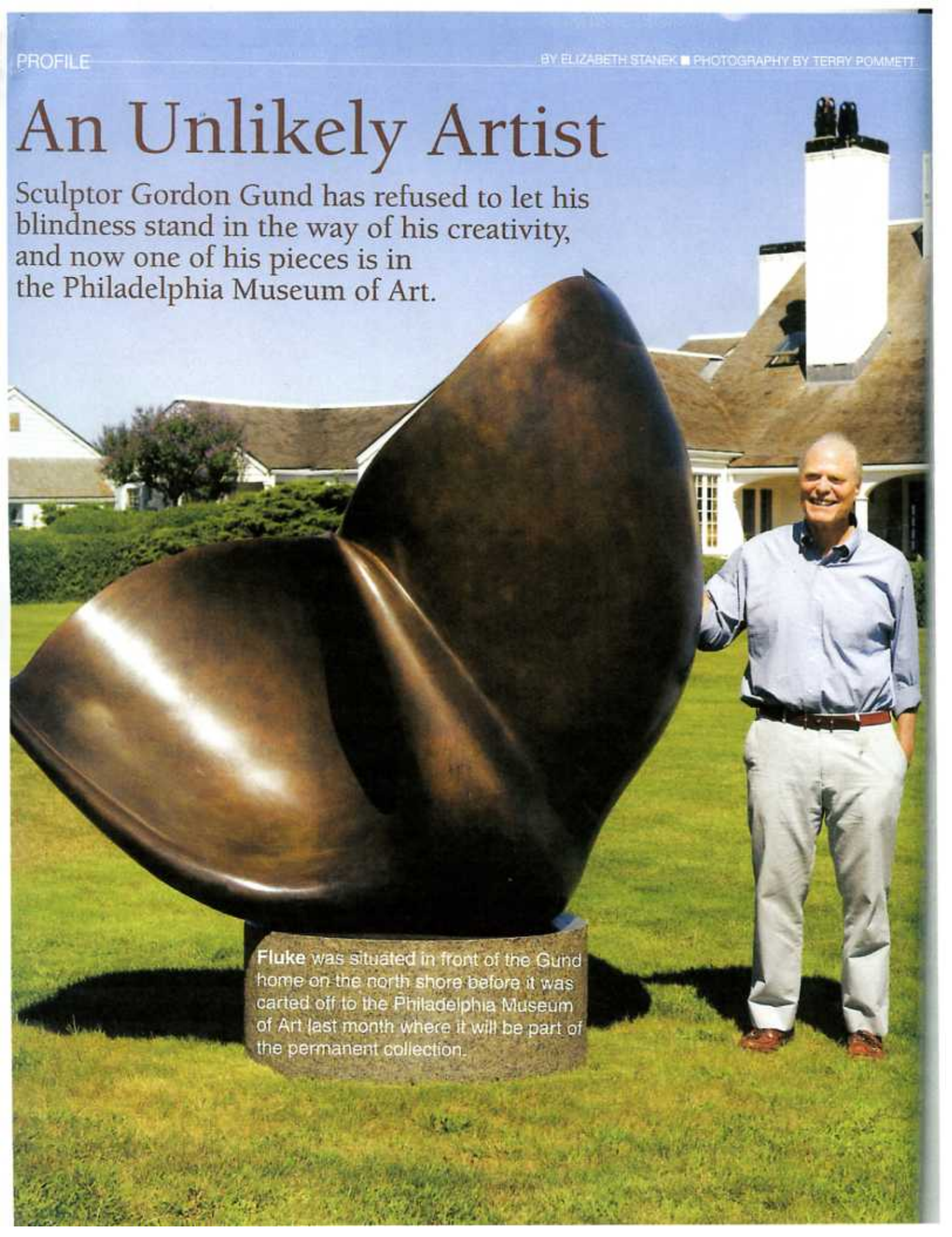
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# An Unlikely Artist

Sculptor Gordon Gund has refused to let his blindness stand in the way of his creativity, and now one of his pieces is in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



**Fluke** was situated in front of the Gund home on the north shore before it was carted off to the Philadelphia Museum of Art last month where it will be part of the permanent collection.

The seagull's silver nitrate patina is as sleek as a downpour, surely imminent on this August morning, a chill wind blowing from the north shore.

Right leg back, wings gracefully outstretched and gently curved, the gull appears to be taking off from his post above the front door, destined to ascend over the bronze-cast whale's fluke that grandly rises from a sea of green grass, before soaring freely over the Atlantic. Inside the white-shingled home, carved wood and bronze seal pups languidly laze before the living room's bay window, raising their heads toward the churned ocean, while a meticulously-sculpted Norwich terrier cocks his head by the French door. A frog rests on the mantelpiece and a stealthy great horned owl perches on a covered walkway, as if waiting for the perfect moment to make his deadly swoop through the Dionis brush.

This assemblage of moments, 45 to 50 sculptures scattered among rooms, flowerbeds, coffee tables and mantels, is a world created over the years by summer resident Gordon Gund.

"I'm an armature amateur," Gund, seated in a rattan chair, said with a laugh, explaining that armature is the framework that keeps the clay of a sculpture at an angle. His easy-going sense of humor coupled with the soft lines and intricate detailing of his wood and cast-bronze works are inspiring, considering that over 30 years ago, Gund lost his sight to the degenerative disease retinitis pigmentosa.

"Everyone has different things they feel passionate about and we all have some issues in life," says Gund. "Sculpting keeps me in touch with the world. I visualize the images, how they look in different angles, in motion, their visual expression."

One of six children – his brother Graham is an architect who lives on-island during the summer – Gund's exposure to art can be traced back to boyhood visits to the Cleveland Museum of Art. Yet, as is often the case on an island where creativity seems to saturate the salt air, it was Nantucket where Gund first became ensconced in his own artistic spirit.



Lift-off



George, named after the artist's father.



Gertrude and Heathcliffe

“Sculpting keeps me in touch with the world. I visualize the images, how they look in different angles, in motion, their visual expression.”

Gibby and Phyllis Burchell – previous caretakers of Gund’s Nantucket home – carved shorebirds, says Gund, showing a delicate apple-wood carving resting on a side table. Following his muses, Gund took to wood-carving with a penknife. “I was having so much fun, I loved it,” he says.

“It was pretty dangerous,” he admits, recalling the day his wife Lulie left him at the beach, completely absorbed in his whale carving, only to return to exclaim, “That whale’s had a shark attack!” due to his slip-ups and copious amount of resulting blood.

“She’s the one that keeps me going,” says Gordon of Lulie. “The things I’m proud of having done are the product of a lot of people.” He’s quick to attribute his successes to the help of the current caretaker, Joseph Denby, along with Nantucket native and professional carver Nancy Chase, who Gund deems an inspiration.

“What I liked to do anyway was work as part of a team. It brings more wisdom to a certain challenge,” he says, citing a challenge as an opportunity, evoking the entrepreneurial spirit that has traveled through the generations of his family. His grandfather ran a brewery, and his father, among other banking ventures, commercialized decaffeinated coffee.

While a young lending officer at Chase, drumming up new business in the Midwest, Gund reveled in talking to potential clients and hearing the stories of people starting new businesses.

“Entrepreneurs stay with it. They don’t give up if there’s a dead end, whether it’s building a business or doing a sculpture,” says Gund. “Focus. Patience. Perseverance. I love people that possess those qualities and work with them.”

Like the prominent six-foot carved whale’s fluke that graces his front lawn that can’t help but be remarked upon by newcomers pulling into the driveway, most people are first to recognize Gund for his past ownership of the Cleveland Cavaliers. After growing up alongside his brother George watching the Cleveland Barons minor-league hockey team play, his athletic zeal continued during his years at Harvard, where Gund played hockey and rowed crew, for the fun of it, he notes.



**Happy Whale**

This pair of seals, some of Gund's earliest work, is untitled.



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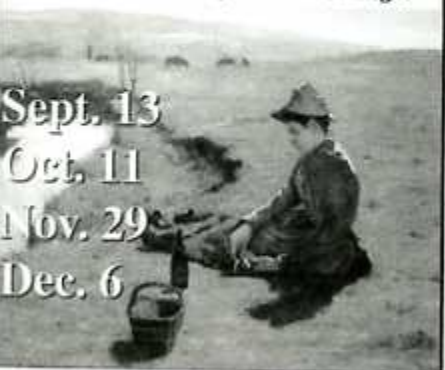
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It's no surprise then that Gund involved himself with co-ownership of three hockey franchises: the American Hockey League Cleveland Barons and the NHL Minnesota North Stars and San Jose Sharks.

In 1978 he merged the poorly-performing Barons with the equally-disappointing North Stars, which resulted in a dramatic turn-around that scored the North Stars a spot in the 1981 Stanley Cup finals.

"Sports franchises give a city a sense of identity, something to rally around," says Gund, who also owned the NBA's Cleveland Cavaliers from 1983 to 2005. "The Cavs could never get by Michael Jordan but nobody else did. We did have some good years." And they did in 2003 draft the number-one pick straight out of high school: LeBron James.

"I had fun with the challenge of turning around a team and adding value," he says. "I've always been interested in adding value to what I do."



Gie



Moonstone

Yet while LeBron carrying the Cavaliers on his back to the 2007 NBA finals recently made headlines, Gund speaks with the most fervor about The Foundation Fighting Blindness, where he serves as chairman and a member of the founding group which includes his wife Lulie. After a diagnosis of retinitis pigmentosa in his 20s, Gund was blind by 30.

"Lulie and I both felt that while this was a difficult situation for us, we wanted to turn it into something useful," he says. The Foundation, complete with its own poster dog – a Briard named Lancelot – provides seed money for scientists to research and find new innovative approaches for the treatment and potential cures for retinitis pigmentosa, age-related macular degeneration, and allied retinal degenerative diseases.

"If successful, the Foundation finds new funding from conventional sources like the National Eye Institute," says Gund. "It's kind of a venture capital approach. We're constantly looking for new ideas and the Foundation has a scientific advisory board that's world-class."

"One finding that's really exciting, we're keeping our fingers crossed, is gene therapy," says Gund. The Foundation's gene therapy breakthrough occurred in 2001 when researchers used it to restore sight to Lancelot, who was born blind due to the inherited retinal degenerative disease Leber congenital amaurosis (LCA) that causes blindness or severe vision loss at birth. Gene therapy further restored sight to Lancelot's litter, along with more than 50 of his relatives who received treatment.

In May 2007 a major milestone in retinal research was reached when an innovative gene replacement therapy to treat LCA moved into clinical trials at the University College of London and Moorfields Eye Hospital in London. Further Foundation-funded clinical trials are taking place at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and the University of Pennsylvania and University of Florida. The studies hold great promise for the treatment of a variety of retinal diseases including retinitis pigmentosa.

The Foundation also helped fund clinical trials that implemented the biotechnology company Neurotech's Encapsulated Cell Technology (ECT), where capsules consisting of

genetically-modified cells are implanted at the back of the eye. These cells produce therapeutic proteins that have the potential to slow or stop the progress of retinal diseases.

"Things are happening at a terrific rate," says Gund. "It's been a long time coming. When the work you're doing isn't producing the 'silver bullet,' you want to change direction, but when you allow that to happen, you go nowhere. The research field is like a snowball rolling downhill – gathering size, speed."

Likewise, his sculpting ability has developed through years of dedicated work. Behind Gund, a row of equally-spaced carvings adorns the mantel: delicate moonstone and a frog coined "Gie" by his granddaughter. The whale named "Dunhill" was carved out of briar-wood root that was given to Gund by a man making pipes at a London exhibition on Bronze Street. Gund uses models – shells, toy seals – to get the correct dimensions and proportions and strives to have emotions in his pieces and create a moment.

A lack of sight has not limited the sense of creative expression in his sculpting, nor has it halted his other favorite pastimes. An avid fly fisherman, Gund can be spotted off the flats of Tuckernuck with his sons catching striped bass, blues or bonito. "We can catch stripers and bass right off the beach," he adds. He also still revels in downhill skiing, made possible with the help of a good friend who verbally leads him through short turns down the fall line.

In a society that thrives on personal independence, "help" is a word that many people find difficult to learn. Yet Gund understands that asking for help goes beyond getting from point A to B: It's the give-and-take that comprises friendship, one of the three things he deems most important in life: friends, family and relationships.

This power of will to go beyond the expected is echoed in his most current sculpture: Gund's own image of a salmon in the air, its body torqued as if it is going over the line. A snapshot taken by a friend at a place they fish in Canada inspired the idea. The photo was then blown up large enough to even see the fly.

"It's such an interesting shape," he says.

For a while, unsuspecting visitors opening up Gund's freezer found his model salmon chilling out. Having a real salmon that had been stuffed on hand enabled him to touch it, feel it, get the measurements, and know where the fins were. "To the extent you can, whether in business or sculpting, you want to create an image. You want to know the dimensions," he says, explaining that the first step in his sculpting process is to make a small version in plastiline clay. "Hopefully it will have the kind of tension and energy that it has to have," he says.

It's a stunning image to envision: oily scales glistening in the late afternoon sunlight that plays on the water. The salmon writhes in the air against the pull of the taut line. A serene backdrop of blue sky sets the scene of a determined struggle against the odds as the fish twists and arches its body like a high jumper whose years of hard work boil down to this moment. Will he break the line and swim free?

Gund hopes so. ♦

*Elizabeth Stanck is a freelance writer living in Boston. She writes often for Nantucket Today.*

# LESLIE HEIDEN

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