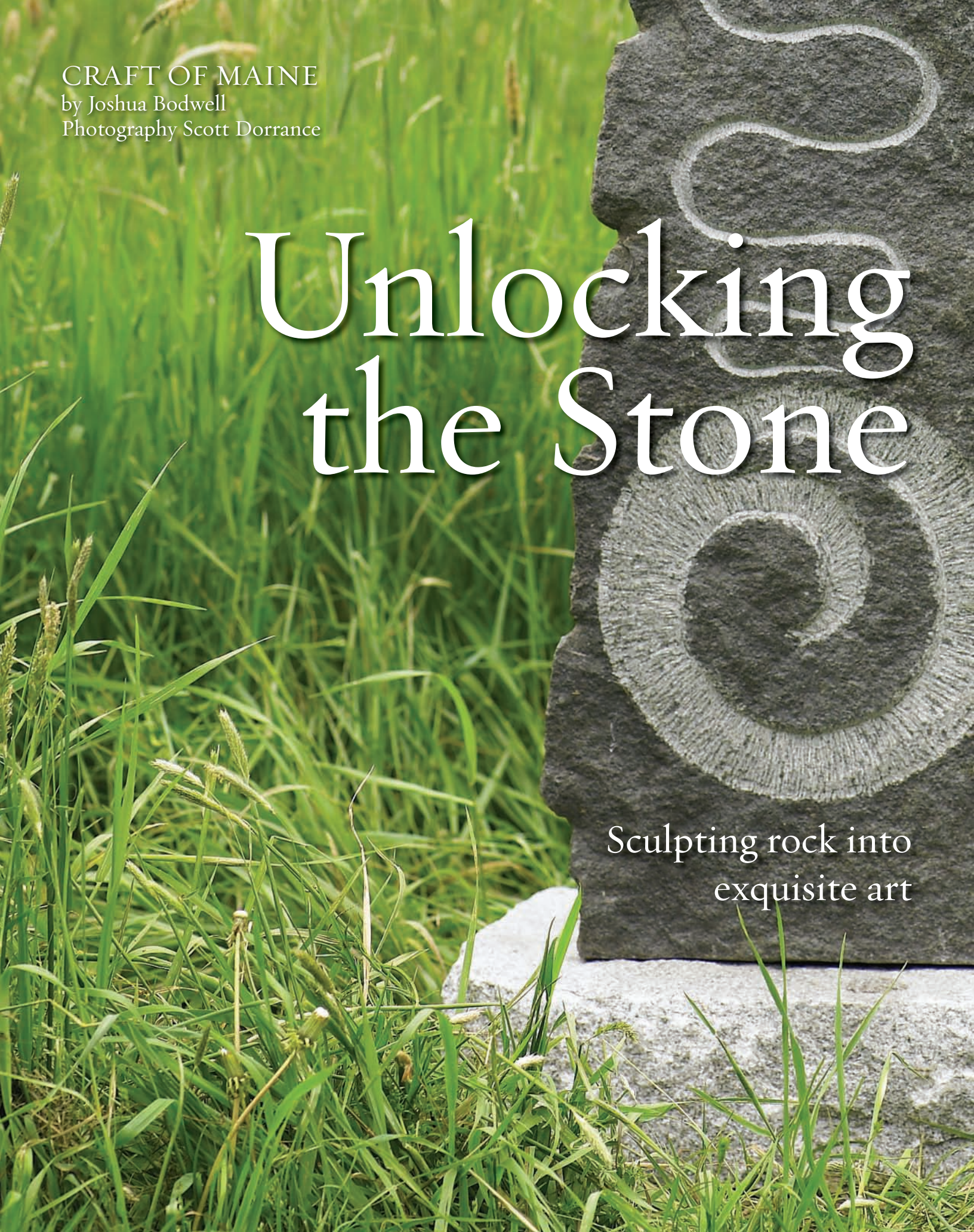


CRAFT OF MAINE
by Joshua Bodwell
Photography Scott Dorrance

Unlocking the Stone

Sculpting rock into
exquisite art



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Maine is misunderstood. Blame it on geography.

Over the years, Maine has been perceived—unfairly—to be something of a cultural wilderness. This persistent misconception can be attributed to many factors, but chief among them is Maine's location at the far northeastern tip of the United States. As the only state in the country bordered by just one other state, Maine is often considered to be out of the way and out of the mainstream. Despite, or perhaps because of, Maine's secluded setting, the state has nurtured a surprising number of world-class artists over the past century. In fact, Maine is awash in a sea of cultural happenings led by innovative contemporary artists who



Mark Herrington

"Night Portage"
basalt, granite base
54" x 8" x 8"

are creating literature, music, and art of exceptional quality.

In Maine's artistic community, sculptors are currently experiencing a zenith of sorts. Frequently seen as the younger sibling to painting, sculpture has pushed its way out of the shadows and taken space at center stage, where it is now receiving some overdue and much-deserved attention. And when it comes to what those sculptures are made of, if easy access to a particular material is reason enough to master it, no one should be surprised that Maine sculptors have acquired a prowess with stone.

"We're in Maine...the granite is right here!" says June LaCombe, a Pownal-based art consultant who specializes in sculpture. Though LaCombe represents a large stable of artists working in a variety of materials, stone sculpture holds a special attraction for her. "I'm immediately drawn to stone," she says, "because it comes from the earth and therefore always maintains that quality and history."

For the past 19 years, LaCombe has made it her mission to educate people about sculpture. In addition to serving as an education director for the Maine Audubon's Gilsland Farm in

Jesse Salisbury

Untitled
Jonesboro granite
60" x 36" x 24"



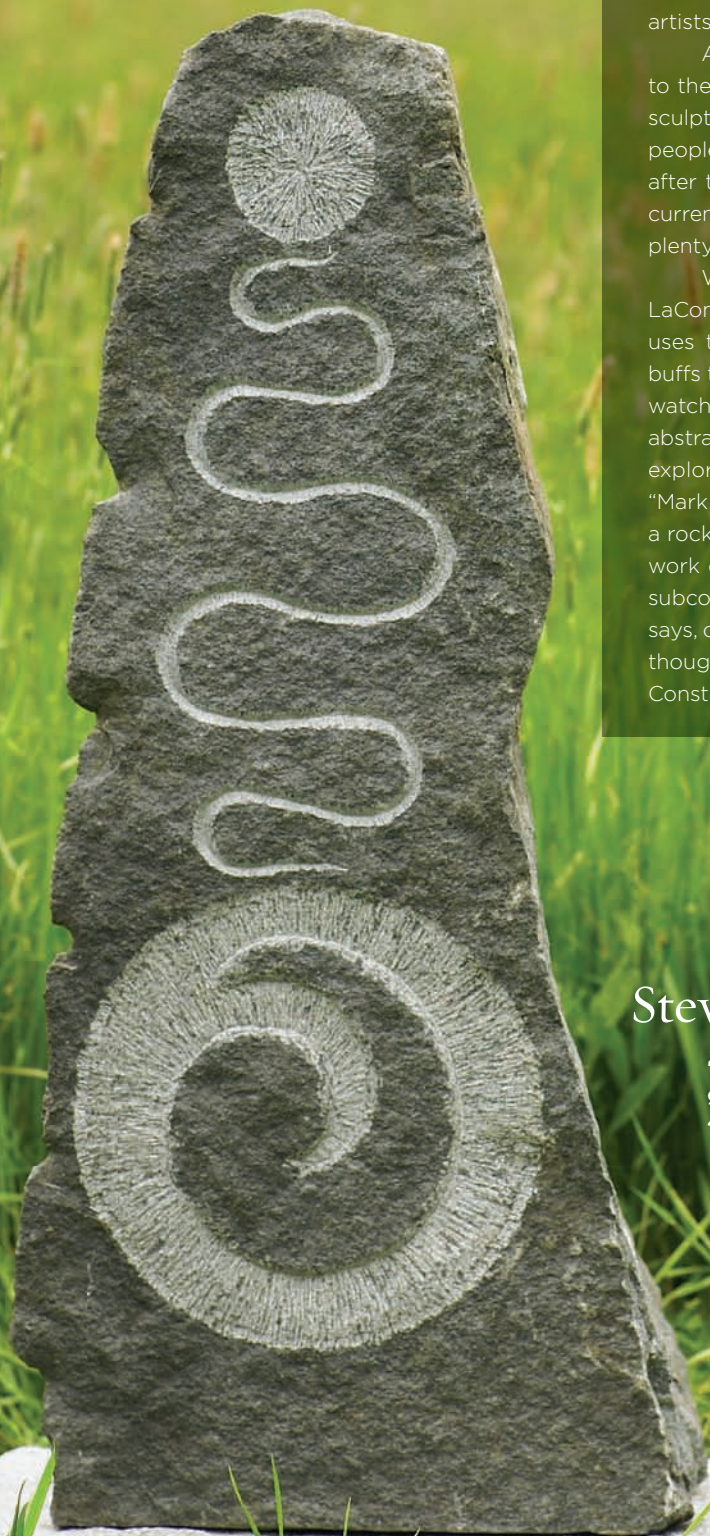
Falmouth, she has curated numerous sculptural exhibitions, including last month's exhibit at Gilsland Farm that featured 118 pieces by 27 artists.

A vocal advocate for how sculpture can heighten our relationship to the land around us, LaCombe strives to teach people about how sculpture can enhance their everyday life. "I hope that I can help people become more comfortable with sculpture," she says, "because after the artists have done their work, it's all up to the viewer." The current breadth of sculpture in Maine, LaCombe says, leaves her with plenty to talk about.

When discussing the stone sculpture of Roy Patterson, LaCombe points out how the skillful chiseling technique Patterson uses to create shading contrasts beautifully with the portions he buffs to a high polish. For a decade and a half, LaCombe has relished watching Patterson's ceaseless examination of the human figure in abstract. Mark Herrington is another artist, LaCombe says, whose explorations into abstract forms have captured her imagination. "Mark has a wonderfully interesting way of cutting away sections of a rock and then polishing it to reveal its inner beauty," she says. The work of artist Steve Lindsay, LaCombe says, can awaken a viewer's subconscious inner history. Lindsay's subtle etching technique, she says, conjures the feeling of "ancient petroglyphs." Expanding on that thought, LaCombe explains how the elegant, totem-like sculptures of Constance Rush feel like markers for the passage of life's journey.

Steve Lindsay

"This Way"
granite
42" x 24" x 24"



"Connie is also a jewelry maker," she says, "and she brings that same level of attention to detail to her sculpture." When it comes to the details of imagination, LaCombe is quick to marvel at how sculptor Lise Becu is able to look at an organic form and see the shape waiting to emerge. "Lise will pick up a rounded beach stone and transform it into a turtle," she says.

Another Maine sculptor whose work LaCombe loves for its bold interpretations of nature and the female form is Cabot Lyford. "Cabot is the master of Maine sculpture," says LaCombe, who both represents and collects the work of the 82-year-old New Harbor resident. "I live with his work and I feel that it enriches my life every day." Appropriately enough, it was while studying in Maine that Lyford, a native of New York, made his first foray into sculpture. During a summer break from Cornell University in 1947, where he eventually earned his bachelor's degree in fine arts, Lyford came north to Maine and took classes at the then-fledgling Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Lyford's first piece of sculpture, carved under the tutelage of the late Charles Cutler, was made from a hunk of granite he had pulled out of a lake in Skowhegan.

In 1963, as Lyford transitioned from a career in public television to teaching art at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, he and his wife bought a summer home in New Harbor. In a remarkable burst of creative energy, Lyford carved

80 pieces in a four-year period while working in both his Maine studio and under the carport of his New Hampshire house. "And I only sold one of them," he says with a chuckle. Lyford can laugh today because his sculptures are now among the most sought-after in Maine.

Back when Lyford was first trying to establish a reputation and sell his work, he says that the few galleries in Maine at the time tended to marginalize sculpture. "They'd put one or two pieces in the back corner sometimes," he remembers. That's just the sort of perception that LaCombe has sought to overturn. She has long advocated that large, outdoor stone sculptures must be seen in a "living landscape" to be truly appreciated. "People often have a hard time imagining a piece of sculpture from the gallery in their garden," says LaCombe, "so I get it out of the white box of the gallery."

Lyford says that it is thanks to the support of art aficionados like John Whitney Payson, and the passionate endorsements of LaCombe, that stone sculpture in Maine is now a world apart from what it was in 1947. Lyford moved to Maine permanently in 1986 to sculpt full-time after retiring as the chairman of the art department at Phillips Exeter Academy. "The whole thing has utterly changed," Lyford says of the art scene in Maine, "and it's changed for the better." Today, the agile-minded octogenarian still works almost daily in his studio, mostly with granite, and is

Cabot Lyford

"Remember"
black granite
18" x 30" x 18"



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Roy Patterson

"Two"
granite
52" x 32" x 16"

considered by many to be the foremost sculptor in the state.

At the other end of the stone-sculpture spectrum is the up-and-coming 35-year-old Jesse Salisbury. Born in Steuben, Salisbury moved with his family to Tokyo, Japan, when he was just 15 years old. Interested in sculpture from a young age, Salisbury apprenticed in a Bizen pottery studio during his high school years in Tokyo. Those adolescent experiences solidified two passions that remain strong in him to this day: Asia and art. Salisbury graduated from Colby College in 1991 with a major in East Asian studies and a double minor in Chinese and art.

Salisbury, who is also represented by LaCombe, has quickly garnered a reputation for creating monolithic granite sculptures that elegantly combine the raw power of the stone with carved compound curves. "When Jesse splits rocks," LaCombe says, "he does it in a way that exposes the inner nature of the stone."

"Splitting is about movement," Salisbury explains. "Stone seems still, but really it's a living, moving thing." He's fascinated with how beach rocks are transformed by the sea and how oceanside cliffs crumble to expose new colors and textures. "I'm very interested in the movement of nature and time."

Though captivated and influenced by Japanese stone-splitting and carving techniques, Salisbury finds great solace in the fact that his materials of choice are so abundant in Maine. "It's coming up out of the ground everywhere," he

Constance Rush

"Musical Notations"
marble, stainless steel
65" x 5" x 2"



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says with a laugh. All of the dark basalt rock that Salisbury uses for his sculptures is quarried from his own 60-acre spread in Steuben, and he buys granite within a half-hour drive from his doorstep.

Salisbury is also working hard to draw not just national but international attention to the craft of stone sculpture in Maine. In 2004, he helped arrange an international sculpture symposium in Damariscotta, and this year he organized the Schoodic International Sculpture Symposium. Running from July 25 to September 10 in Acadia National Park, the Schoodic Symposium brings together seven artists—three from Maine and one each from Germany, Poland, Sweden, and Japan—to create seven granite sculptures that will eventually be public art installations in communities across Hancock and Washington counties.

While Salisbury's work is quite different from Lyford's, both in execution and end result, LaCombe believes that whether

traditional or abstract in form, the most successful sculptures have an intangible yet enduring profundity to them. "The very best sculpture doesn't completely reveal itself immediately," she says. Great art, LaCombe has written, divulges its secrets over time and celebrates "the beauty of the material, the sensual appreciation of form, and its setting."

It could be argued that when it comes to stone sculpture, Maine's geography isn't a weakness but one of its greatest strengths. "Because of its resonant energy," LaCombe says, "sculpture often takes up more space than its physical space." With so much wide-open land in which to work and contemplate, and with so many raw materials close at hand, artists from all over the world are gathering in Maine to share ideas.

They are coming here to the far edge of the country, where anything feels possible. **MH+D**



Lise Becu

"Mother Bird"
granite
20" x 16" x 15"