



June LaCombe: Artist, Educator, Sculptors' Friend

For this artist and curator, exhibiting a piece of sculptural art is not a matter of setting it up on a pedestal in the middle of an otherwise empty room.

BY CARL LITTLE

ON A MORNING IN MARCH, June LaCombe was busy at her home, Hawk Ridge Farm, in Pownal near Bradbury Mountain State Park, preparing for the annual Portland Flower Show. LaCombe had already installed sculptures by Cabot Lyford and Constance Rush at the show, held at the Portland Company Marine Complex. Later in the day, she would stop by Paul Heroux's studio to pick up one of his stoneware water bowls to deliver to Ted Carter of Carter Design, who would integrate it into a meditation room he was creating for the show.



When it comes to siting sculpture in Maine, LaCombe is the go-to pro. Her knowledge of the field—she represents more than 50 sculptors—and her wide-ranging background in environmental art and education have helped make her an enthusiastic advocate for an often under-sung and under-appreciated field of art.

In the course of the past 20 or so years, LaCombe has managed to move sculpture from the gallery to the outdoors. Starting with installations at the Maine Audubon Society's headquarters at Gilsland Farm in Falmouth, she has made an art of animating the landscape with carved granite forms, shimmering lights, and kinetic inventions. With special shows at her home, plus guest-curated exhibitions at such sites as Cole Haan's corporate headquarters in Yarmouth, the Chewonki Foundation in Wiscasset, Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens in Boothbay, and College of

1. "Ahab," black granite, by Cabot Lyford, on exhibit at the College of the Atlantic. 2. "Seed of the Soul," installation at the Portland Flower Show by Constance Rush. 3. "Reunion," granite, by Gary Haven Smith 4. "Journey," marble, by Constance Rush, on exhibit at the College of the Atlantic in 2005.



"Codfather" by Stephen Lindsay.

the Atlantic in Bar Harbor, LaCombe has expanded the audience for sculpture.

People who venture through LaCombe's outdoor shows often react the same way: the setting increases their appreciation of the work; they are more comfortable in its presence. "I feel as though I have helped people see art," LaCombe says. At the same time, thanks to her sitings, they begin to understand how sculpture may fit in their own landscapes.

"If you want to draw attention to a place," LaCombe explains, "you can do that with a piece of sculpture. It acts as a focal point." She has had clients tell her how they had never visited a part of their property until they had set a sculpture there and it became a destination. During the Cole Haan installation, employees remarked that LaCombe's work inspired them to walk around the grounds for the first time.

At the same time, LaCombe has sought to knock sculpture off its pedestal. It seems incongruous to her that sculptors would place their work on bases and stands in an exterior landscape. Her goal is to integrate sculpture with the environment. Nowadays, she is proud to report, many of her artists are more conscious of creating pieces that have a natural fit with their surroundings and have bases that are integral with the work.

"I've tried over the years to show sculpture in living landscapes," LaCombe states, "where people are interacting with it and are able to see it over time." These opportunities for interaction enable the viewer to come to terms with more abstract work, as it gradually reveals itself. "You keep peeling back the layers, perhaps the metaphors that the artist was exploring, and it's richer and has more value over time," she says.

LaCombe is a shining example of Maine's creative

economy. Her most successful shows, as far as sales go, have always been at Hawk Ridge Farm—"Just a rural country landscape," she says, "but it's organic and I'm here and I'm able to help people make connections with the work." She had more than 100 pieces in her last show, the result of extraordinary legwork visiting sculpture studios all over New England. (When she works with non-profit organizations, LaCombe donates a percentage of the sales to them.)

LaCombe prefers that her artists be close enough so that, if called upon, they can accompany her to help site a particular piece. She is often asked by clients to consult on placement and frequently is present to help finesse the



"Fiddleheads," stoneware, by Sharon Townshend.

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installation. “There’s no ‘only one place’ for a piece of sculpture,” LaCombe asserts, but she will make suggestions for maximizing its presence. For example, she encourages clients to establish sight lines to the sculpture from within their homes, helping to “bring the outside in.”

From 1995 to 1998, LaCombe served on the Portland Public Arts Committee. She discovered that identifying places in the city where sculpture might be sited was a very different process from seeking to make a personal connection between an art collector and a sculptor’s work. “I’m trying to help people personalize their places with sculpture and you can only do that with one person at a time,” she states.

Over the years LaCombe has worked with individuals who are purchasing pieces for public places, often in memory of someone dear to them. Last year, a family chose an abstract piece of carved basalt by Steuben artist Jesse Salisbury for the courtyard of the Curtis Memorial Library in Brunswick. “It’s a very complex piece,” LaCombe says. “I admire the family for being bold enough to make that selection.”

LaCombe expresses unbridled enthusiasm for all the artists she represents, some of them for 15 years. Cabot Lyford, from New Harbor, has been in her shows from the beginning. “I have placed extraordinary pieces by Cabot in beautiful gardens all over the state,” she says. Noting the wonderful aging that one of his pieces, a whale’s tail, has undergone, she explains how sculpture can weather. She is meticulous about giving people instructions for caring for their pieces, but some clients like to see the work age.

Not only does LaCombe extol the work of her sculptors, she also purchases it. At her home she has a carved granite abstraction by Gary Haven Smith (“He has these saws that are able to peel granite like an apple”); a marvelous figural piece by Steve Lindsay cut from a single walnut branch; a granite and limestone shrine holding water by Stephen Parmely; and a stately raven with outstretched wings by Cabot Lyford.

In one breath LaCombe describes the beauty of a Celeste Roberge piece after an ice storm, in the next, the “genius” of kinetic sculptor George Sherwood. Other artists in her stable include Stephen Porter, son of photographer Eliot Porter; James Pierce, who once hosted one of her Maine Audubon field trips at his sculpture-accented farm in Clinton, Maine; Pandora LaCasse, creator of marvelous elliptical light sculptures, some of which hovered over downtown Portland last winter; and Andreas van Heune, who has a granite owl in her present show that doubles as an outdoor seat.

Pointing to a sculpture by Robert Lash that resembles an abstracted leaf, LaCombe notes that the work she exhibits has a reference to nature or a relationship to the environment. “I’m not just a sculpture dealer,” she states. “Everything I show has something that tries to deepen the connection between place and people.”

June LaCombe is a sculptor in her own right, working in clay and other mediums. This past winter she traveled to England to take a special art and ecology class at Schumacher College in Devon taught by two of her favorite environmental artists, Richard Long and Chris Drury.



“La Barca,” in granite and moss, by Gary Haven Smith.

LaCombe was born in Bangor, Maine, and lived the first five years of her life in Patten. “I grew up in the presence of Mount Katahdin,” she recalls. “My first years were spent on fishing trips, hiking, picking berries, collecting dandelion blossoms for dandelion wine. I was always close to the land.”

Her father, Vaughn LaCombe, was the principal at Patten Academy; he also was a Maine guide, and carved decoys and tied flies. For a time he worked for University of Maine art professor Vincent Hartgen. June LaCombe remembers spending time at Hartgen’s house as a child. “Vincent was a great educator, he touched so many people’s lives,” she says. LaCombe’s mother, Eleanor, painted, worked in clay, and is an environmental research associate at the Maine Medical Center. She is an avid equestrian and an organic gardener.

The LaCombe family moved to southern Maine, then much farther south when LaCombe’s father became a



"Earth Books," cast cement, earth, and peat, by Cat Schwenk.

professor at the University of Alabama. June attended the University's New College, earning a BA in environmental education and art in 1976. She balanced science and natural history classes with work in ceramics and sculpture. She also collected textile tools. "I was always interested in the process of art making," she says.

As a visiting student at the College of the Atlantic (COA) in 1975-76, LaCombe met her future husband, William Ginn. They have two children, Eliza, now 24, and Will, age 21. Ginn, class of '76 at COA, is director of the Global Forest Initiative at the Nature Conservancy and recently published *Investing in Nature: Case Studies in*

Land Conservation in Collaboration with Business.

LaCombe returned to studies in 2000, enrolling in the doctoral program at Antioch New England Graduate School to focus on environmental art and environmental education. She recently completed the program and is working on the proposal for her dissertation. She is already an established educator, guest lecturing on environmental art at Antioch, Bowdoin College, College of the Atlantic, and elsewhere.

Going back further, LaCombe served as director of education for the Maine Audubon Society. Dick Anderson, the society's director, asked her to produce art exhibitions related to natural history topics. With the brand-new white-walled center at Gilsland Farm to work with, LaCombe, aided by Annette Elowitch from Barridoff Galleries, organized exhibitions of contemporary artists, including Alison Hildreth and Edwin Gamble.

Gamble, who passed away this past January, was a special mentor and friend. LaCombe filled the Maine Audubon space with his wonderful abstracted bird forms. She credits that show with teaching her about "the essential form in sculpture and how one slight angle can make an extraordinary difference." Gamble also helped her appreciate how meaningful the sale of a work can be to a sculptor. "Every time Ed sold a piece, he felt he had made a personal connection with someone who appreciated his work and that thrilled him," she says.

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When her first child Eliza was a few years old, LaCombe went back to work part-time at a small gallery. Among its artists were Maine sculptors Cabot Lyford and Sharon Townshend, and their pieces rekindled LaCombe’s love for sculpture. She also came to the realization that sculptors needed more than what galleries were providing. “I felt as though they needed to break out of the white box and move to the land where they could interact with light, wind, and changing weather.”

Inspired by this vision, LaCombe arranged with Maine Audubon to place sculpture in the landscape at Gilsland Farm. From there, she began organizing shows around the state. Her exhibition at Meeting Hill Farm in Yarmouth in 1992, which featured 74 sculptural works, was the subject of a two-page feature article by Edgar Allen Beem in the now-defunct newspaper *Maine Times*. Attendance soared, as did LaCombe’s reputation as a sculpture curator.

“Sculptors are bringing elemental materials into our lives,” LaCombe says. “They have a greater appreciation of

the resonant energy.” From her perspective, these artists serve to reconnect us to the earth we live on, to “the soul of matter.”

Businesswoman, arts advocate, sculpture dealer, eco-artist —LaCombe wears her hats with a spirited panache. ✨

Carl Little’s most recent books are Paintings of Maine: A New Collection (Down East Books) and Ocean Drinker: New & Selected Poems (Deerbrook Editions). He has written about sculpture for Art New England and Art in America, and contributed an essay to the catalog for “Bernard Langlais: Independent Spirit” at the Portland Museum of Art. He is a Maine Boats, Homes & Harbors Contributing Editor.

For more information:

June Lacombe: Hawk Ridge, 90 Minot Road, Pownal, ME 04069. 207-688-4468; www.junelacombesculpture.com. LaCombe’s current show at the Maine Coastal Botanical Garden in Boothbay runs through October. MCBG, P.O. Box 234, Barters Island Rd., Boothbay, Maine 04537. 207-633-4333; www.mainegardens.org.