

The creativity

GIENIE

The Phipps family is known for land development, but many members have staked their claim in the art world

BY MARY MURRAY

Susan Phipps Cochran, the heiress to the Phipps family fortune, is scrubbing the foot of a gigantic ant. At more than 8 feet tall, the ant towers over Susie, who is hovering inches above the ground. She has named him *Atlas Ant*, and he sits erect, his arms raised to the heavens ready to receive his globe.

Atlas Ant is her latest large-scale bronze sculpture—one she is scrambling to complete for its reveal at the Palm Beach Jewelry, Art & Antique Show. But no matter how busy she may be, Susie always has time for laughs.

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LIKE THE MYTHICAL HERO WHO INSPIRED IT, SUSAN PHIPPS COCHRAN'S ATLAS ANT CARRIES A GLOBE ON HIS BACK.

“There’s always a little bit of humor in every piece I do.”

—Susan Phipps Cochran



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NARCISSIS

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“I’m great with a scrub brush,” she jokes. She’s not cleaning the ant’s feet but coating them with acid in preparation for the coloration, or patina, phase. Kuku, the resident cat at Robert St. Croix Foundry in West Palm Beach where Susie works, approaches the ant with anticipation. “Do not lick the surface,” she quips, revealing a Cheshire Cat grin.

Her sculptures, which range from oversized insects to vacant clothing transformed into chairs, are an outlet for her self-described warped mind. “I get an idea in my head, and I get chuckling to myself,” she says. “There’s always a little bit of humor in every piece I do.”

Another new piece, *Narcissis*, encapsulates her humorous approach to fine art. Although it’s smaller than *Atlas*, *Narcissis* is equally proud. He sits atop four stacked rocks, peering over the edge to admire himself in a reflective surface.

Atlas, *Narcissis*, and a selection of Susie’s other works are on display through May 15 at Ann Norton Sculpture Gardens as part of “Art in the Family Tree.” The exhibition also comprises pieces by other members of the Phipps family, including Susie’s son, Jay Cochran, her grandson Rafe Cochran, her cousin Hubert Phipps, her late father, Michael Phipps, and her late cousin Diana Guest. Varied in approach and materials, the featured works illuminate a thread of artistic expression in one of Palm Beach’s most influential families.

“We thought it was a fascinating idea that there are so many members of the Phippses and extended family who are artists,” says Ann Norton Sculpture Gardens Interim Executive Director Karen Steele. “Ann Norton herself came from

SUSIE AND HER HUSBAND, ROBERT EIGELBERGER, LIVE AT THE PALM BEACH ESTATE SUSIE’S GRANDFATHER, JOHN PHIPPS, BUILT IN THE EARLY 1900S. THEIR GARDEN ACTS AS A MUSEUM FOR MANY OF SUSIE’S SCULPTURES, INCLUDING *OFFENSE AND DEFENSE* (RIGHT) AND *OLD OBSERVER* (BELOW) FROM HER *STICK FIGHTERS* SERIES.



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a family of artists. The Phippses have been in the area a long time [so] we wanted to showcase their work as a family, even though it’s extremely different.”

This family tree took root with Henry Phipps, who partnered with his friend Andrew Carnegie to form Carnegie Steel. When the duo sold the company in 1901, Henry was left with a newfound fortune and did what many millionaires do: He bought land in Palm Beach.

At one point, the Phipps family owned about a third of Palm Beach. Henry’s sons established the Gulf Stream Golf Club in 1924, as well as the Gulf Stream Polo Club, a southern sanctuary for Long Island’s polo elite. The Phippses also developed Everglades Island, and Henry’s son (Susie’s grandfather), John “Jay” Phipps, conceived, organized, and named the El Cid neighborhood in West Palm Beach. Today, the family’s legacy is enjoyed at Phipps Park in West Palm Beach and Phipps Ocean Park in Palm Beach.

“The Phipps family started coming here very, very early on,” says Debi Murray, chief curator at the Historical Society of Palm Beach County. “Through land ownership and then giving back land for parks and recreation, they’ve helped to grow this community in many different ways. The Phippses started the trend of creating a public space for people to access the beach or spend time together. They saw the importance of the quiet space.”

“Grandpa always said, ‘Think 50 years ahead when you think of anything,’” Susie says. “If you’re going to do something, always think about the consequences or what it’s going to be in 50 years.”

While Henry Phipps’ heritage is steeped in steel and development, many of his heirs have pursued art. Susie says childhoods spent pursuing hobbies helped hone that calling. In addition to playing the piano and the bagpipes, her father, Michael, was a painter and illustrator who studied under Augustus John. Michael’s portraits in “Art in the Family Tree” exude a haunting beauty that embodies a high level of mastery as well as a tender attention to facial expressions.

Michael stressed the importance of cultivating artistic interests to his children. “We didn’t have televisions, and we were only allowed radio for a half hour on Friday if we’d been good,” Susie says. “We were never allowed to sit idle—thank goodness.”

Susie loved to knit and sew and would spend hours outside with her father identifying flowers, insects, and wildlife. Although she practiced beadwork, she didn’t take up art seriously until she was in her sixties, when artist Helmut Koller asked her to make a chair for a fundraiser. She forged a pair of floating overalls, an homage to American folk musicians. “I’d been watching some musicians up in North Carolina, and they all wore overalls and played music and it was great fun. I said, ‘Oh, I can float that.’”

This work, which she describes as “practical art you could sit on,” sparked her love affair with bronze, in part because it allowed her to sculpt larger-than-life pieces. “It’s big, it’s bold, and I guess in my old age I want to be big,” she says.

“Susie has been an immense inspiration,” her cousin Hubert Phipps remarks. “I think it’s so interesting that she decided to go large with her ants. It takes a lot of guts to go large. It’s so courageous.”

As a young boy, Hubert came to live with Susie’s family after his father passed away. Initially interested in illustration, he eventually turned to

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 –Susan Phipps Cochran



SUSIE’S WIT IS ON FULL DISPLAY WITH *IN AND OUT*, A TWO-PART SCULPTURE. OF HER PREFERENCE FOR ANTS AND INSECTS, SUSIE SAYS, “I HAVE GRANDCHILDREN, AND IT’S ALWAYS FUN TO GROSS THE GRANDCHILDREN OUT.”

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small bronze horse by her cousin Diana Guest, who could claim lineage in two prominent Palm Beach families. Diana was Henry Phipps’ granddaughter, and her mother, Amy, married Frederick Guest, a British politician and polo player. Diana was committed to her artwork and made many sculptures in alabaster, granite, marble, and bronze before her death in 1994. Diana, Hubert, and Susie are the most prolific artists in the family, and their pieces in “Art in the Family Tree” are presented individually. Michael Phipps’ creations, on the other hand, are grouped with those of his grandson, Jay Cochran, and his great-grandson, Rafe Cochran.

abstract expressionism. His pieces in “Art in the Family Tree” reflect a fascination with nonrepresentational forms that evoke a sense of mystery.

“Hubert does pretty modern stuff, [and] I love it,” Susie says. “It’s very angular, but I cannot do that. I don’t think in angles, so I like the way his mind thinks.”

Hubert also diverges from Susie in why he believes the artist gene runs in his family. His simple answer: money.

“I think the socioeconomic situation of this family allows members to choose, possibly, what they might go into that may not be economically driven,” he says. “Very few people make money in the art business, as far as [being] artists. ... Having said that, I think if there is a strong motivation to be an artist, to be expressing oneself through visual art, you could toss economic situations out the window.”

Family fortune is probably the most crucial factor in the question of art as commodity. In both Hubert and Susie’s opinion, they are the only ones they need to please.

“I’m the customer,” Hubert says, “and if I’m feeling satisfied with the artwork, with what’s coming out of my studio, with what I’m involved in and my finished project, bottom line, that grounds me.”

Adds Susie: “I do it because I like it. It’s fun for me. ... I don’t worry about other people. I mean, I worry about you if you’re sick, but I don’t worry about what your opinion is because I’m doing it for me.”

Susie did act as literal customer in the 1960s when she purchased a

Perhaps best known as a racecar driver, Jay is also a skilled woodworker. He became enamored with the craft as a child tinkering in his grandfather’s shop and fostered an early appreciation of fine furniture. When not cutting lanes on the racetrack, he makes everything from cradles to tables.

In “Art in the Family Tree,” some of Jay’s most exquisite tables hold sculptures by his son, Rafe. A fifth grader at Palm Beach Day Academy, Rafe is a golfing prodigy, but his grandmother, Susie, takes responsibility for introducing him to art.

One day when Rafe was 3, he was visiting Susie’s Palm Beach home and noticed a small armature on her coffee table. Explains Susie: “I said, ‘Go for it. Here’s the clay, put it out in the sun, warm it up.’ He hasn’t stopped. He just loves doing it.”

Rafe describes his work as abstract, modern, and symbolic. To see his creations juxtaposed with portraits by his great-grandfather—a man he will never know—is to see this family tree in full bloom.

The Phippses may differ in sensibility and approach, but they share an affinity for nature. Michael drew and painted realistic portraits of animals, particularly polo ponies. When Rafe sculpts the natural world, he adds otherworldly texture, as seen in his small sculpture *Rhino*. Jay shows reverence in his choice of material, often opting for northeastern American walnut, Cuban mahogany, and curly cherry. Like Rafe, Hubert’s modernist style skews his vision of nature. His *Serpent* sculpture, for example, combines a recognizable form with heightened



PIECES FROM “ART IN THE FAMILY TREE,” CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: *FRIENDS*, SUSAN PHIPPS COCHRAN; *SAFARI CHAIRS*, SUSAN PHIPPS COCHRAN; *ROOSTERS*, MICHAEL PHIPPS; *ALPHA*, HUBERT PHIPPS; *BALI BIRD*, DIANA GUEST; *BLOSSOM*, SUSAN PHIPPS COCHRAN.

planes not found in the average snake. Diana was the biggest nature lover, with most of her output dedicated to flora and fauna. “Art in the Family Tree” showcases her many interpretations of animals, but her *Water Lily* in pink alabaster trumps them all.

And then there’s Susie, who at 75 has made her mark in the art world with her playful take on the insect world. *Atlas Ant* took more than a year to build and, with a final weight of 1,740 pounds, will prove to be one of her largest and most extraordinary accomplishments. But it all started with Susie’s quest to upstage Lee Lawrie’s *Atlas*, which sits outside the Phipps’ Manhattan offices in Rockefeller Center.

“Every time I went there, I’d look at him and go, ‘Huh, I could make you,’” she says. “I did my version of him.”

Despite her confidence and her status, Susie calls herself a “local yokel” who prefers the studio to the society scene. She’s happiest at Robert St. Croix Foundry, clad in an Andy Warhol T-shirt and surrounded by artisans who help bring her vision to life. In this moment, eclipsed by *Atlas Ant* and awaiting the convergence of her loved ones’ works, she reflects upon her own legacy—but not without some humor.

“I’m on the base leg of my journey on Earth, let’s face it,” she says. “It thrills me to see it continuing with the rest of the family, with the younger generation.” ◀◀

