

ADRIAN NIVOLA'S ARTISTIC PROCESS • TIGRAN TSITOGHDZIAN'S WHIMSICAL EYE • WHAT TO READ NOW

CULTURED



"This piece is an homage to E. Lillian Todd, a self-taught inventor [and the first woman to design an aircraft]. She was a female Don Quixote—elegant and with enormous aspirations. In general, I'm trying to make abstractions that embody aspects of characters like her."

-Artist Adrian Nivola on the inspiration behind his work

MAN ON WIRE
Adrian Nivola's "Homage to E. Lillian Todd (1865-1937)" is constructed using wire, wood, copper, enamel and feathers.

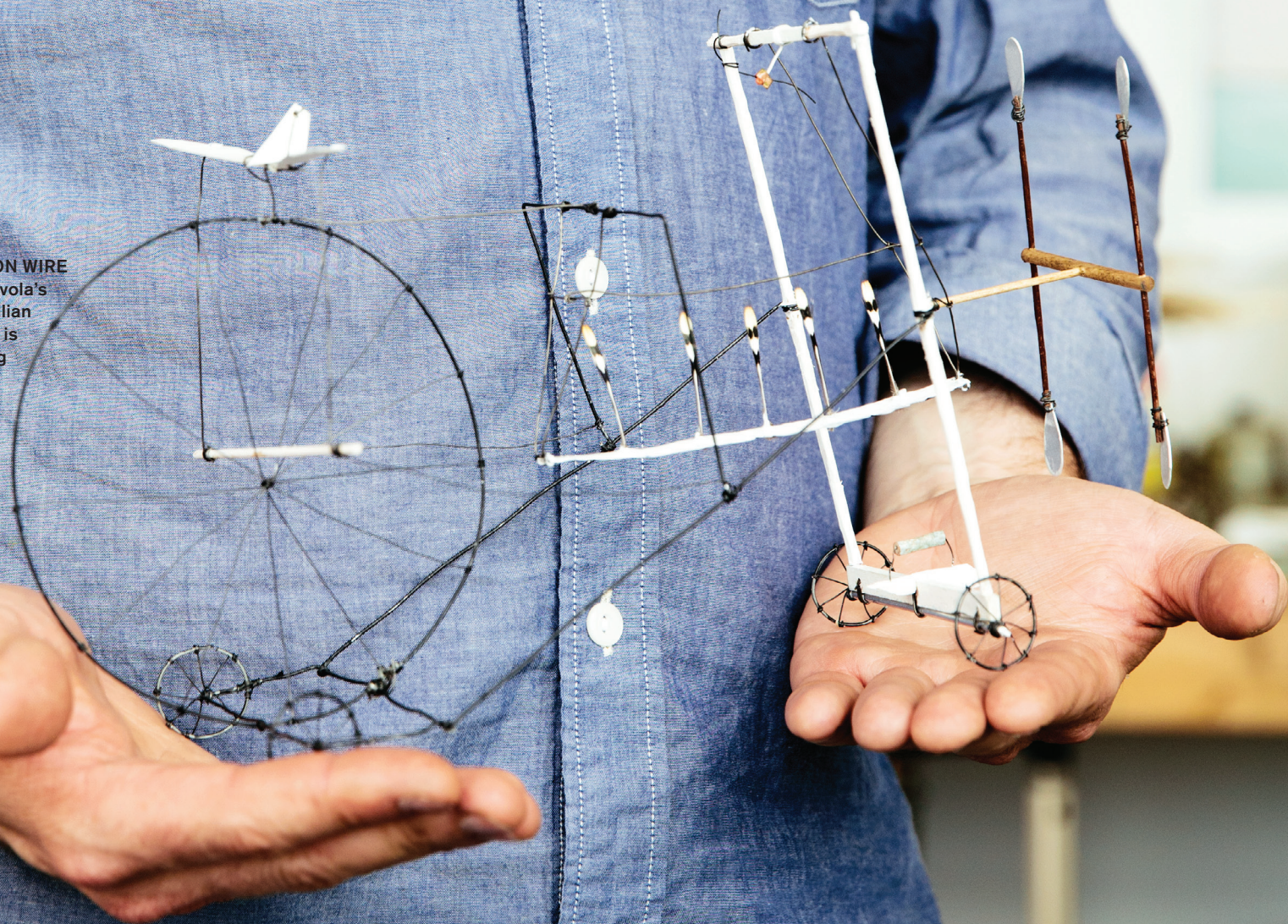


PHOTO BY CLAUERIN KORNFELD & ERICA ELLIOTT

FLIGHTS OF IMAGINATION

Adrian Nivola's sculptures look to be on the verge of takeoff. Made of wire, wood and feathers, the delicate pieces capture the nervy energy and irrepressible optimism of the early 20th century, when the once-impossible idea of flying was starting to seem possible after all. Nivola, grandson of renowned East End sculptor Costantino Nivola and brother of actor Alessandro Nivola, is displaying his work at The Drawing Room (66 Newtown Lane, East Hampton, drawingroom-gallery.com) through Aug. 31. He spoke with **Ross Bleckner** about inspiration and artistic lineage.

Ross Bleckner: You were primarily a portrait artist, but recently switched to sculpture. Why?

Adrian Nivola: In portraiture, since you're dealing with other people—your impression of their character, how they are physically and what's expressive about their presence—that comes into contact with your own emotional imperatives. I was feeling that somehow I was getting lost in all the navigating. So I shifted my focus a little bit, to sculpture.

Your grandfather, Costantino Nivola, was also a sculptor. Tell me about him.

He lived during the period of abstract expressionism. He was originally from Sardinia, but fled to the U.S. in the late '30s with my grandmother, who was Jewish. To escape fascist persecution, they came here and started over. They were only in their early 20s. He was starting from scratch, painting postcards on the street and selling them for 25 cents, and making drawings for department store advertisements.

He ended up becoming the art director for *Interiors* magazine, and through that got to know many of the important architects coming in to be interviewed. He developed a close relationship with Swiss-French architect and painter Le Corbusier, who was the most formative influence on his artistic development.



PILOTING THE CRAFT Adrian Nivola with "Flyer for a Dangerous Romp with JW's Sweetheart," a sculpture inspired by inventor J.W. Roshon

Le Corbusier was a mentor?

Exactly, and they shared a studio. When my grandfather moved out to the Springs in the late '40s—when artists like Willem de Kooning, Jackson

Pollock and Saul Steinberg were migrating from NYC to the Hamptons in search of a more ideal place to work—Le Corbusier came and painted a huge mural in my grandfather's living room.

Did they ever collaborate?

They collaborated on a sculpture. My grandfather pioneered a technique of working with sand-cast murals. Recently there was an exhibition of Le Courbusier at MoMA, where they featured one of the sand casts they made together. My grandfather had a special talent for understanding the way sculpture can transform spaces.

You studied art at the New York Studio School, which was founded by artist Mercedes Matter [a close friend of Jackson Pollock]. There's an emphasis on the figurative and drawing at the school, making it an heir to the tradition of what was going on in the Springs in the '40s. Was the memory of your grandfather's studio an important influence on your desire to be an artist?

Yes. I remember the atmosphere in his studio in the Springs, the way he worked and the attitude he had about his work, and that made a real impression on me.

We're all familiar with that abstract idea of how a serious artist approaches his work. There's a romantic mythology around artists, that they should have a certain severity, a somberness. But my grandfather wasn't like that. He had a playful approach. He used to listen to country-western music and joke with me about the desperate lyrics.

The house is still in my family. I don't work out there, but I visit. There was a period when I lived there with my grandmother, and that was a beautiful time for me. I was in my 20s, and she'd sit for me.

Your sculptures are very delicate and have a contraption-like quality not unlike sculptor Alexander Calder's.

I absolutely love Calder's work. I was influenced by his playful creations. I've made a series of flying machines based on ideas I got from the beautiful but ill-fated airships at the turn of the last century. But I don't think about them in terms of sculpture because I'm just trying to 'draw' with the wires.

That's like Calder, drawing with wires. There's even a sense of Zen to your sculptures, the way they seem like they'd move, but are very still. They have a sense of completeness, regardless of how small they are.

Thank you. This project began when I looked at the pre-Wright brothers flying machines that were made by inventors and aviators at the turn of the century. What attracted me were these early daredevil pioneers—they made me feel free, wild and courageous. When I started looking at their inventions, I saw a lot of possibility for sculptures.

The inventors put together things they thought might work—very intuitive and ad hoc.

They were staking everything—their sanity, their fortunes, their lives—on these really improbable designs. I wanted each of my

"This project began when I looked at the pre-Wright brothers flying machines that were made by inventors and aviators at the turn of the century. What attracted me were these early daredevil pioneers—they made me feel free, wild and courageous."



ABOUT A BOX The handmade wooden box cartoonist Saul Steinberg presented to a teenaged Nivola in 1995

sculptures to have the pathos that was in those inventions because it was very unlikely they'd ever fly, though that's what they promised to do. They're failures in a way; they're promising something they can't deliver. But in spite of that, they have a certain elegance that has the character of the inventor in it.

Your work is also influenced by [New Yorker cartoonist] Saul Steinberg. Tell us about that. My piece 'Airship for the Great Santos Dumont' was inspired by an image of Steinberg's, of a sans serif letter 'E.' There was a thought bubble coming out of the top of this E that showed

another E with an accent grave over it—a sort of a pretentious E. It was the concept of a person dreaming of being something more ethereal, elegant and elaborate. My piece is the same kind of idea, with this character who's aspiring to be something more ornate.

That's very Steinberg, because in his drawings everything seemed like it was together, but there was an illogic to it. But that's the joke of it. In a way, these are the means to get to this from there. It was absurd.

Absurd, that's a good word for it. Did you know him through your grandfather?

Yes, he lived across the street from my grandparents in the Springs. I'd stay with them in the summers. Throughout my childhood, Saul used to invite me over to the house and give me little presents. As a child, I never thought about why he'd do this, but in hindsight I suspect he thought of me as a character in his drawings. It was all for his entertainment, to see what a child would do when presented with a gift.

He was such a brilliant but opaque character. You wouldn't have gotten this impression, that he'd extend himself so warmly to a child.

I can imagine certain 'impenetrable' people liking children and animals more than their peers.

I agree. In a very ceremonial way, he'd present me with objects he'd made, laid out on a table. There'd be a wooden vase with a wooden flower in it, or a piece of wooden salami on a plate.

When he first gave one to me, it just said 'Saul, September '95,' and 'For Adrian' on the front of the box—but nothing else. I was disappointed at the time that he hadn't written a message to me.

Did you tell him that?

Yes, and he snatched it out of my hands, scratched and wrote 'Love, from Saul.' But I felt then I'd done something wrong, that he was defacing his own creation. I've turned it over in my head ever since because he was pointing out that I'd forced him to introduce some Hallmark element into something that was much more meaningful to begin with. **B**