

Computer Pioneer Finds His Passion In Sculpture



Sculptor Gerry Stahl. COURTESY PHOTO

by Debra Lawless

About five years ago, after Gerry Stahl of Chatham retired from his career in academia, his second career as a sculptor really took off.

“It’s been an intense thing for me here working on the sculpture,” he said during a Zoom interview last week. “I’ve learned a fantastic amount about sculpture.”

He estimates that during the past three years he has created 130 sculptures, or an average of about one a week. While large sculptures in wood can take up to a month to complete, a small clay sculpture can take a day or two.

But don’t look to buy one of Stahl’s beautiful sculptures in wood or clay — “I’ve never sold any sculptures,” he says. “I don’t like to part with it.” He has given pieces to

his friends, his two sons and three granddaughters. He has also donated a bronze casting of a clay mask of Josiah Mayo to the Chatham Conservation Foundation, Inc. and a similarly made mask of William Nickerson, the founder of Chatham, to the Nickerson Family Association, Inc. Other examples of his work adorn his house.

By the time Stahl, 75, went to college, his family had lived in seven different states. Stahl earned his undergraduate degree in humanities and science at MIT in 1967. He eventually earned two Ph.D.s — the first at Northwestern University in philosophy and the second, at the University of Colorado, in computer science. (His brother, Alan Stahl, also went into academia. Alan is currently curator of numismatics at Princeton University.)

Stahl was a pioneer in computer programming when the field was in its infancy, and he taught at Drexel University’s College of Computing and Informatics. Since September 2014 he has been a professor emeritus at that school.

Stahl’s wife Carol Bliss’s family visited the Cape in the summers back in the 1960s, and it so happened that her parents bought a piece of land in Chatham. That is where Stahl and Bliss decided to retire and, keeping with their custom, they co-designed their own house, their fourth. Stahl hired a local draftsman to draw up his custom plans, and then worked with a local contractor who was used to custom work.

“It worked out great,” Stahl says. One of the house’s outstanding features is Stahl’s nod to Cape Cod — a two-story lighthouse that has been incorporated into the left front of the house. On the second floor of the lighthouse Stahl has his study.

“We didn’t want it just a box — we wanted interesting massing,” Stahl says. With his bent for sculpture, Stahl learned a great deal from the finish carpenter and designed and made many of the house’s built-ins. During the Zoom session he sits in front of the 20-foot long mantelpiece that he created from a single piece of cherry wood. The mantel wraps the entire central chimney in four rooms.

Soon after the pair arrived in Chatham, a neighbor asked Stahl to look at the faded wood paneling in the 1820 Josiah Mayo House at 540 Main St. He oiled the wood and “made it look like new” — and that was the start of his relationship with the Chatham Conservation Foundation, Inc. (CCF), which owns the Mayo House and uses it for its office. Stahl drew on his computer expertise to set up a donor tracking system for the non-profit and he now serves as the group’s treasurer. He also leads its salt marsh task force, a vital group as about half of the property the CCF owns is salt marsh. Salt marsh grasses absorb carbon, an important function during a period of climate change. “They help prevent damage from sea surges and sea level rise,” he says. “A healthy salt marsh can be a huge benefit.”

But Stahl’s passion remains sculpture,

something that he works at every day. Particularly when he works in clay, he can’t abandon a project for a time as it will dry out.

Stahl often works from live models, and has exhibited his work at the Creative Arts Center in Chatham. In his e-book “Works of 3-D Form” — he has written 21 e-books — he catalogues his wood sculptures dating from 1976 to the present, his clay sculptures and pottery from 1970 to the present, and follows that with chapters on his houses, organic forms from nature, thoughts on opening up space and sculpting 3-D forms in wood, and a chronological catalogue of all of his works. A 2014 work in wild cherry, “Spirit of Cape Cod,” was “inspired by the Cape Cod seashore waves and creatures.” “Sunbathing on Ridgevale Beach” features a young boy and a woman in clay fashioned from live models during a two-day pose at the Cotuit Center for the Arts. Many of his wooden pieces are sinuous and sensuous abstracts while others have South American and other influences. A 2018 piece called “Mrs. Mayo” was carved from the Bradford pear tree that once stood in front of the Mayo House.

He has also cast horseshoe crab shells in a mold. He calls them “Survivors of Extinction.”

“That’s what you’re looking at,” he says. “Horseshoe crabs and cockroaches may be all that’s left with climate change.”

To view Stahl’s sculptures, visit gerrystahl.net.