

Here and There By Philippa Chaplin

# New Jersey's land of giants

**HERE AND THERE** from N1 across the street; a father teaching his daughter to ride a bicycle; four amigos; and more.

With each passing sculpture, I wanted more. But, alas, the place was about to close.

Fast-forward to May 7.

We were giddy driving up the highway, excited to be on a road trip in the middle of a workday.

In 1984, J. Seward Johnson, a sculptor and philanthropist, came up with an idea to make contemporary sculpture more accessible. "Grounds for Sculpture was conceived as a place where audiences could experience sculpture in a familiar, accessible, and informal setting," its website says. By 1992, it was open to the public.

There are upward of 270 sculptures, by more than 150 artists, on 42 acres.

The grounds themselves are art. Every tree, every shrub contributes to the aesthetic. Look closely, because sculpture may be in there, too — the men, for instance, in the tall grass surrounding Johnson's *Erotica Tropicallis*, based on Henri Rousseau's *The Dream*. Are they guards? Voyeurs?

As we experienced the works, we found great in-

teraction among the visitors. Unlike a gallery where people silently absorb the art or chat quietly with companions, the sculptures elicited comments; visitors shared their views.

I enjoyed standing under *Sagg Portal* by Hans Van de Bovenkamp and hearing my voice echo off the stainless steel.

One thing about Grounds for Sculpture: It has rules. Signs tell you which sculptures you may touch — and many may be. Picnics are allowed, and there are several dining options.

We stood a long while at Johnson's 2011 sculpture of bronze and aluminum. Seemingly, it depicts three witches standing near a smoking cauldron filled with human body parts. The site map says, "Title being determined through audience interaction. Suggestions welcome." An older couple joined us in trying to figure out a title, but raindrops were starting to fall.

By the time the skies opened up, we had made it to a covered patio. From there, I was mesmerized by *Carmelita*, a creature appearing to rise from a lagoon like Poseidon. An LED light in the fiberglass work gives it an other-



**At Grounds for Sculpture in Hamilton, Mercer County, "Carmelita" (2008), by Autin Wright, is a creature appearing to rise from a lagoon like Poseidon. Grounds for Sculpture opened in 1992 to make contemporary works more accessible.**

worldly essence.

There was so much more to see, but the weather wasn't cooperating. After about two hours, we hightailed it to the car.

We still had a little time to enjoy our midweek adventure, so we decided to see what was down the road. We passed a multiplex theater, fast-food and chain eateries, a shopping center. Wait. What's that? Ice cream!

Abbott's was a real find. A couple leaving as we entered extolled its virtues

as they licked their lips like Cheshire cats. Founded in 1902 in Rochester, N.Y., Abbott's has frozen custard made daily on the premises. I thought I'd had good frozen custard before, but nothing like this creamy treat. I went for vanilla and chocolate custard in a hot-fudge sundae with wet nuts. Heaven must taste like this.

The manager, Lisa Fleisch, gave us the Abbott's story. It still has its headquarters over the Rochester store, and any

branches outside of that city are owned by people connected to Rochester. The Hamilton store, the only one in New Jersey, is owned by Tess Axelrod, a Rochester native who moved south.

Fleisch is from Hamilton. When we told her where we'd been, she said that she and her friends, on their wedding days, had taken photos with their favorite sculptures. Hers was with a dancer outside the train station. Her friend took one at the gi-

ant tooth just off I-295. Well, they always thought it was a tooth, she said, till the bride told them it was really an elephant's rear end.

After our sundaes, and before getting onto I-295, we stopped at the sculpture. Yes, we agreed, it could be an elephant's posterior. So, I walked over to read the sign: *Tooth*, 1982, by Seward Johnson.

E-mail Travel editor  
Philippa Chaplin at  
pchaplin@phillynews.com.