



Curved Wings

“I always wanted to do something with my hands,” says Bertalan Andrasfalvy, with a quick grin. That much is easy to believe. His long fingers seem perpetually busy—tracing the white granite edges of his butterfly sculpture at HHMI’s Janelia Farm Research Campus, poking the air in philosophical emphasis, or pointing out the lab where he works with Janelia Farm group leader Jeffrey Magee.

Born in Hungary, Andrasfalvy is 40, with swift dark eyes, a chiseled jaw, and a casually athletic frame that stretches well over six feet. He exudes a quiet restlessness. He holds an M.D., a Ph.D., and two curricula vitae—one that lists eight peer-reviewed publications on neuronal physiology, and another that describes 20 sculptures, several of them commissioned and many gifts.

The pivot between art and science started early. When Andrasfalvy was 10 years old, his father gave him a woodcarving set. By age 20, he had completed his first stone sculpture—and was on the path to medical school. Ever since, he’s spent weekends sculpt-

ing leftover granite or marble salvaged from graveyard and construction suppliers and weekdays doing research and crafting tools for scientists studying the brain. He recently developed, with Janelia Farm physicist Alipasha Vaziri, an optogenetic technique for precisely activating neurons.

“My philosophy is that there are only two things you can do to keep creative, like a child: art and science,” Andrasfalvy says. “In these fields, you can follow your curiosity. How does this work? What does it look like? Everything else is a job.”

Andrasfalvy has worked in academic research labs in Budapest, Tokyo, and New Orleans. In 2006, he arrived at Janelia Farm to work with Magee, who studies how neurons work. He also acts as a consultant to the physics group at Janelia. And as resident artist.

In 2008, he approached Janelia Farm director Gerry Rubin about creating a sculpture for the campus. Rubin agreed, and Andrasfalvy placed his order for raw stone: a massive 15x5-foot slab of white granite, a foot

thick, from Vermont. Over a year of weekends, working in a studio owned by stone carver Malcolm Harlow, he took a diamond-disc saw to the slab, transforming it into a modern, milky white butterfly, with curved wings 7 feet tall and 3 feet wide.

A butterfly is fitting, he says, given HHMI founder Howard Hughes’ love of flight. The smooth, rounded piece also softens the spare architecture and the metallic sculptures on campus. “Besides, with Rubin’s developmental biology work inside, half the building is working on flies,” jokes Andrasfalvy. “This is *such* a nicer insect.”

Today, the butterfly sculpture sits high on the horizon, just outside the main building, watching over a cluster of willow oaks and feathery grasses. It rests on a giant rock, evoking a quiet energy, as though—with the right wind—it might take to the air.

—Kathryn Brown

 **WEB EXTRA:** For a photo slideshow of Andrasfalvy’s butterfly sculpture, visit www.hhmi.org/bulletin/feb2011.