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ARTFORUM

Steeled Heart



Beverly Pepper at an Italian foundry, ca. 1960s.

Beverly Pepper's tensile, totemic sculptures often register an acute sense of contingency. Over her nearly six-decade-long career—which has evaded recognition commensurate with her contributions to the development of public sculpture since its proliferation in the 1970s—the American-born, Italy-based artist has bodied forth a semiotics of flux, one playing out everywhere from the precarious angles of her cantilevered steel to her mutable surfaces of rusted iron.

Already established as a painter, Pepper turned to sculpture in 1960, following a transformative visit to Angkor Wat, where the sinewy banyan trees enwrapping Khmer statuary spurred a fascination with surface and interior. Just two years later, alongside Alexander Calder and David Smith, she was one of three American artists to be included in "*Sculture nella città*" (Sculptures in the City), the definitive outdoor-sculpture exhibition curated by Giovanni Carandente at the Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy. Conceived at the height of Italy's postwar economic miracle—and intended as a response to the Fascist second wave of Italian Futurism—the project received support from the US Steel subsidiary Italsider, which granted Pepper access to a factory in Piombino to fabricate her work. There, Pepper cut her teeth managing a crew of steelworkers; for a month, she labored three shifts a day to produce twenty-three sculptures, all while navigating the complex politics of working in an Italian factory as an American woman. (She believes the festival's organizers sent her to a Communist town in the hope she'd be treated more equally there.) The project also found her using steel for the first time, a material she would continue to avail herself of as she reconceived the conventions of sculpture in the years to come.

Repeatedly throughout the 1960s and '70s, Pepper's work embraced, and at times prefigured, elements of American and Italian sculpture. In 1964, US Steel invited her to its Pennsylvania factory to experiment with Cor-Ten steel, then a fledgling

product; Pepper was likely the first artist to employ that most virile of materials, whose oxidized surfaces we now associate with Richard Serra and Barnett Newman. And in 1967—two years before Robert Smithson produced his *Yucatan Mirror Displacements (1-9)*—Pepper developed polished, mirrored structures and displayed them outside. These highly reflective stainless-steel surfaces, characterized by an interplay of disjunctive planes and voids, fragment the viewer's body and displace it into his or her environment, merging and undoing the sculptural field and pictorial realm, figure and ground, mass and absence. This aspect underscores the complex position that Pepper already occupied at midcentury and that grows ever more timely, the entangled space her work always asks us to insert ourselves into.

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In 1986, curator Douglas G. Schultz organized a five-museum traveling retrospective of Pepper's work—the most recent substantial institutional appraisal of her practice in the United States. When the exhibition opened at the Brooklyn Museum in 1987, critic John Russell panned it in a notorious *New York Times* review, charging her work with speaking "for a driving ambition of the kind usually described as 'macho.'" If Russell's choice of epithet is telling (and tiresome), it could also hardly be more wrong. Of course, the confluence of Pepper's generation and gender makes her engagement with industrial materials and processes remarkable, but her work exceeds such categories: Rather than embodying or subverting the heroic masculinity of her Minimalist and Land art contemporaries, Pepper's monuments articulate a position of indeterminacy. Take the towering *Longo Monolith*, 2006, a pair of Cor-Ten pillars locked in a seemingly unsustainable backbend, or the strange sprawl of *Thel*, 1976–77, an uneven grade of enameled-steel facets breaking through earth, as if for air. If these works possess any gendered quality, it is in the way they labor, the way they at once persist and yield.

Recently, Pepper's work has received a flurry of attention. This year, she was even included in the Fifty-Eighth Venice Biennale, following a string of gallery exhibitions in New York and Los Angeles and at the Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park in Grand Rapids, Michigan. To attribute the renewed interest in her oeuvre to the current wave of institutional and market reevaluations of twentieth-century women artists is to fall back on the very essentializations Pepper has long rendered moot. It is also to risk overlooking the very fact of her achievements.

An opportunity for reassessment will arrive on September 14, when the Beverly Pepper Sculpture Park opens in Todi, Italy, the Umbrian hill town where, in 1972, Pepper took up residence in a restored medieval stone structure in an area now known as "Beverly's Hills." Designed by the artist herself, who turns ninety-seven this year, the park will feature a permanent installation of twenty of her works in iron, stainless steel, and marble, dating from the 1960s to the 2000s. It will span five acres, connecting the sixteenth-century Church of Santa Maria della Consolazione, just beyond the city walls, with the Church of San Fortunato. Among the pieces on view will be a new iteration of the massive cast-steel *Todi Columns*, 1979/2018, a quartet of dense, ritualistic monuments based on the drill bits Pepper first installed in this historic center forty years ago. From *Embrace*, 1963, and *Ingresso* (Entrance), 1967, to *Exodus*, 1972, we will see the artist's rapid evolution of a stainless-steel lexicon. But perhaps *Trevignano*, 1970—planes of steel that modulate and imbricate tectonically, climbing gently over the ground—best conveys Pepper's project. With this crawling, earthbound form, Pepper points to something lying below the surface: a root structure, a shifting chemistry, a system of support or enervation. She conjures a sense of unfolding that allows us to at once sustain and suspend our belief in monumentality itself.

- Annie Godfrey Larmon