



The first thing you see as you reach the sculptor Beverly Pepper's house at the end of a rough, cypress-tree-lined track in Umbria is her studio, a metal hangar turned vivid green by the Virginia creeper that covers it. From inside comes the high-pitched whine of heavy machinery. The second thing you notice is the towering curve of smooth, rust-coloured steel that stands like a sentinel beside her front door. Both, rather like Pepper herself, seem completely alien among the gentle rolling hills of Italian countryside, and yet perfectly at home.

For more than 50 years, Pepper has blazed a trail in the world of sculpture, with work in major galleries and public spaces around the world. But, somehow, she is still not particularly well known in Britain. Able to transform the hardest of materials – steel, iron, stone – into beautiful, organic forms, she is often compared to her contemporaries Louise Bourgeois and Louise Nevelson. That Pepper is not only still working – her first ever show in Britain opens in London on Wednesday – but is still, at the age of 91, making “breakthroughs”, is enough to silence anyone who believes that old age is the enemy of creativity.

Pepper has the sharpness of wit and the intense gaze of someone far younger than her years. Sitting at her kitchen table in her house near the pretty hilltop

town of Todi, she reminisces about living in Rome in the 1950s where Federico Fellini, Marcello Mastroianni, Audrey Hepburn or Martha Gellhorn might pop round for a cocktail or two. She tells me about teaching herself to weld metal by working in factories, the only woman among hundreds of sweaty, bullish men, and about the new amphitheatre she is designing for the town of L'Aquila, in central Italy, which was devastated by an earthquake in 2009. “Life is all about luck and choice,” Pepper says in her rich, gravelly voice. “If you recognise your luck when it appears, you can *move*.”

Pepper moved first from Brooklyn to Paris, then to Rome, finally settling in Umbria in the 1970s with her husband and two children. Three weeks before I meet Pepper, her husband of 65 years, the American author and journalist Curtis Bill Pepper, died at the age of 96. Between them the Peppers knew a vast circle of artists, writers and politicians and the house has been filled with visitors. Pepper is tired – she spent the previous day in Rome planning her next show there – but has lost none of her spark or sense of humour. “Obviously, we were married forever,” she says. “In fact, it’s a miracle.” She strokes her dog, Cato, then says, “He was a perfect husband. He was never threatened by my work. He did everything to make it possible and I did everything for him. We were a good team.”

Steeling beauty

Photograph by **Jonathan Frantini**

The celebrated sculptor Beverly Pepper partied with the glitterati in 1950s Rome, learnt to weld alongside burly chaps in factories in the 1960s – and is about to open her first ever show in Britain.

Kate Salter meets the sparkiest of nonagenarians

The Peppers sold their first house in Umbria when the stairs became too much, and moved a few hundred yards down the road. Pepper had the new house built around her beloved studio. "I wanted to have it all on one level so I could work in a wheelchair," she tells me. "And after one month of living here I fell and worked in a wheelchair for three months. A perfect example of how clever I was," she says, chortling.

Though Pepper has lived in Italy since the 1950s, her voice still has a real twang of New York. She was born Beverly Stoll, to parents who were the children of Jewish émigrés. Her father imported Oriental rugs and after the war became a furrier; her mother was a housewife and a volunteer for the National Association



'I asked him what his name was and he said, "Keith." I said, "Keith who?" and he said, "Keith Richards." So I asked him, "What do you do?"'

for the Advancement of Colored People. "It was an interesting household," she says. "You see, I wasn't brought up thinking I had to be a 'feminine' woman." Pepper says it was her mother's and grandmother's strong personalities that convinced her she could make her own life and escape Brooklyn. "There was nothing I ever thought would limit me because my mother and grandmother were very strong women. I didn't know that's not how women acted!"

Pepper studied at the prestigious art school L'Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris, whose alumni include Bourgeois, Modigliani and Miró. She was introduced to her husband Bill by a woman with whom he was, in fact, supposed to be going on a date. "I asked her if she would introduce us and that silly girl said yes," Pepper tells me, giggling. "We were in the Hotel d'Inghilterra in Rome. She introduced us, then went off to pick up some clothes she'd ordered and the next time she saw us was in Paris three months later – the day before we were getting married."

When Bill became the Mediterranean bureau chief for *Newsweek*, based in Rome, it was the start of the Peppers' long love affair with Italy. Pepper describes



that time in Rome as "the Italian miracle. Everyone thought everything was possible and I did too." She says even now she'll meet people who say they came to their three-storey palazzo for a party, of which there were clearly many. Pepper describes one they held for the publisher Katharine Graham (the owner of *The Washington Post* and *Newsweek*). "We'd invited the who's who," she says. At the buffet table, she got talking to the man next to her. "I asked him what his name was and he said, 'Keith.' I said, 'Keith



From top Beverly and Bill Pepper and their children in the 1960s; Pepper working at the Italsider plant in Piombino, 1961-2; a sculpture at her Umbrian home

who?' and he said, 'Keith Richards.' So I asked him, 'What do you do?'

While living in Rome, Pepper started working with metal. A curator organising a show of sculpture in Spoleto, Umbria, had seen some of her wood works and asked if she'd like to take part. "He asked whether I could weld metal. I lied and said yes. Well, I figured I could learn between then and the show." The 1962 exhibition featured some of the most famous names in sculpture at the time – Henry Moore, Alexander Calder, David Smith, Eduardo Paolozzi – and Pepper was one of only three women involved. Was she intimidated? "I was terrified. But one thing I learnt growing up in Brooklyn is that if you're offered an opportunity,

