

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

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,

take it. You don't have to be qualified. You just have to have the chutzpah to face all the possible downfalls."

Pepper went to work in a metalwork factory in north Italy and had the time of her life. "That was when I got my taste for factories," she says grinning. "I used to say, 'Other women want diamonds and fur coats. I just want to live in a factory."

'You don't have to be qualified. You just have to have the chutzpah to face all the possible downfalls'

What distinguishes Pepper from other artists working with similar materials is this time she has spent working in factories. Pepper says she was arguably the first artist ever to make sculptures from Cor-Ten steel, a brand of weathering steel, now very much in vogue. She describes working alongside metalworkers, who called her "Bev", in factories in America where she was the

only woman. "I was terrified most of the time," she says. "But I learnt to be bossy."

The factories were also where Pepper learnt how steel and iron behave. Her assistant, Giulia, tells me there is nothing Pepper doesn't know about her material.



"She can get it to do anything. I don't know how she does it." Some of Pepper's sculptures are 40ft high, such as her Manhattan Sentinels, which stand in New York's Federal Plaza. She incorporates steel, iron and stone into her huge, otherworldly "land art" creations too.

While she says she isn't spiritual, there is something so awe-inspiring about Pepper's art that it seems rooted in the idea of ancient totems or sacred sites. She also clearly relishes the challenge of creating something evocative from

> materials that are, ostensibly, devoid of emotion. She says that "too often, in the modern world, iron seems by definition something impersonal or corporate" and has described stone as "combative". Much of it must be down to the force of her personality. "You cannot be an artist and be dominated by your material," she says. "It's a dictatorship."

Her exhibition at Marlborough Fine Art in London is of smaller, but no less impressive, curved and rusted forms of steel. Pepper takes me through to her studio where Michele and Antonio, two sculptors who work for her, are wielding blowtorches and grinders. As Pepper

isn't strong enough to use the tools herself anymore, Michele and Antonio help turn her sketches into finished pieces. She shows me a c-shape of metal with what looks like a melted, corroded edge spilling out of its centre. "This is a breakthrough for me," she says excitedly. "You won't see anyone else doing this kind of thing." She shows Antonio where she wants more texture and he fires up the blowtorch again. Pepper talks me through the model for L'Aquila's amphitheatre, which will seat 1,000 people, then shows me a computer animation for a chapel she is designing in Todi itself. They are the kind of experimental, large-scale projects you would expect from the most cutting-edge

Why is it that her kind of art seems to be dominated by men? Richard Serra, Anish Kapoor, James Turrell - there are no living female artists with whom to compare her. Perhaps it takes a certain kind of woman to face down a hulking piece of stone, iron or land and believe she can make something beautiful from it. When I ask her why she thinks there

artists half her age.

aren't more female artists doing what she's doing, she says, "I can't answer that. I never thought of myself as a 'female sculptor'. Perhaps because I'm not in the art scene I don't know I'm not supposed to be doing this!" she says, laughing.



This is the irony of Pepper's career. By distancing herself geographically from the art world she has been able to carve her own path. Last year she was awarded the International Sculpture Center's Lifetime Achievement Award, but had she been based in New York, she would

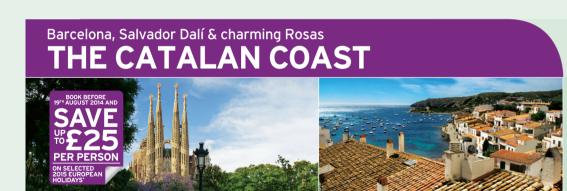
undoubtedly be one of the most recognised names in art today. Does she agree her career would have been different if she'd lived in New York? "Absolutely. But I can't work in New York. You feel everything happening. I like

> working in the country. I don't know what anyone else is doing. It's much nicer that way."

Looking at the landscape around us, it's clear why it has been so important to Pepper's creativity: the sense of space, the connection to an ancient land, "I tell you, it was very lucky that Bill didn't speak French", she says, smiling. "The French, everything is in

the front of their minds. The Italians are all about instinct and intuition, which is what art is about, you see." • "Beverly Pepper: New Works" is at Marlborough Fine Art, London W1 (marlboroughfineart.com), from Wednesday until 31 July





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