

Marlborough Galleria d'Arte Roma
Beverly Pepper exhibition
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Beverly Pepper

by Milton Gendel

Photographs of Beverly Pepper making her sculptures show her in the midst of a hand to hand engagement with strips of steel plate which she finally bends to her purpose or, masked and seemingly detached, cutting a path with an incandescent welding torch through what might otherwise have been a bank-vault door. The sculptures that are the result of these processes, however, do not wear a submissive or mechanical air, but exuberantly reach out and up, measure, clasp, embrace, appear to stand and balance on air.

The gusto of their making carries back to their creator's thick impasto paintings of years ago whose plastic images also performed a dance, though static and limited, with space. The sculptural paintings were followed by wood sculptures that retained a romantic pictorial quality in their organic forms and epidermal nuances; their relationship to the ground was that of something that had grown out of it, and they had an earthy look, with their dark olive skins and their bronze nodes and accretions. Then came the most recent and exalted years of vibrant and high-toned works that cut a figure in the air.

This progress repeats on the personal level the broad movement of modern sculpture from Rodin's and Medardo Rosso's thumbled clay, which was then cast or pointed into something more permanent by others, to the between-the-wars ideal of the sculptor as his own craftsman, beautifully embodied by Noguchi, for example. But at the same time that the sculptor's hand was required not just for the genius touch but for the hard work of making and finishing, the ground was disappearing under the feet, no longer clay, of the sculpture itself, The separate songs of Gabo and Gonzalez and Archipenko became an international chorus. If sculpture had already taken to space then, it left the ground with Calder, and the new problem, shared by architecture, was how to keep the new aspiring lightness without losing the big effects of the solid old monuments.

The new masters of metals and space, among them Noguchi again, Calder himself, Muller, Lardera, David Smith, Pomodoro and Colla, provided the answers, and it is in the context of their work that Beverly Pepper's sculpture finds its natural environment.

Like every artist Beverly Pepper acts at the center of her own stage, and gets as much satisfaction out of the performance as from the audience's reaction, As the photos suggest, her appetite for life is enormous, and her sculptural monuments reflect this in their own happy and fierce involvement with their surroundings. Their statements are clear. A womanly form has benign curves that say, "I support you, I enlace you, I cradle you". A nobly aloof figure expresses distance and height: "I am above and beyond the plane that you are on". And the latest series includes the epitome of visual desire and appetite. "I have you in my mind's eye", is addressed to the viewer and the landscape at large, as everything in sight falls within the sculptures frame. The message of a steely shark's grin is: "I could eat you up".

It is easy to personify these works because their character is definite, and these sounds of the mind are evoked by big, bold, reliable bodies. The burnished surfaces flash and glitter in an unsubstantial way, but the tension and the vibrations come from a hard steel frame. Sometimes vibration has been

deliberately contrived so that the work quivers in response to a footfall, but all the sculptures have the vibrancy of tensed metal.

In a few recent works, along with what the form tells, the metal itself has something to say. Cor-ten, a new alloy, is the metallic protagonist of a contemporary pathetic fallacy. Works made of Cor-ten turn blue when they find themselves in an industrial area, and red where the scene is rural. Color, however, has not been left only to the temper of the metal. The bronzes for long have explored the possibilities of acid greens and blues, and recently the colder steels have been more and more warmed with linings of girder-red, black and light blue enamel. The hard cutting edges of steel-lath forms are softened with seared drips and nodules. Bends and folds that seem effortless compared to the barrel-stave curves that must have been shaped on a giant's knee, are more the jaunty effects of illusion, having been fitted and welded. The how of Beverly Pepper's forceful work is interesting to study, but the why can be understood only as a wrapt interlacing of work and living.

These feral creations are enduring expressions of a great appetite and talent for life and art.