To page through the biography and bibliography of Beverly Pepper is to find a lexicon of major art world players spanning the last half decade. Critics and authors such as Frank O’Hara, Hilton Kramer, Barbara Rose, and Rosalind Krauss have all written about her work, many repeatedly. As early as 1952, *Time* included a feature on her; and as recently as last year, Robert Hobbs published a monograph devoted to her career. Pepper’s sculptures and large-scale commissioned works ring the globe—from Sydney to Houston, Tokyo, Stockholm, Jerusalem, and Calgary.

Just as Pepper releases life from stone and coaxes form from the elements, she has elevated my pedestrian questions into meaty observations about her work, art-making, and the role of the artist. Her responses reveal the depth of her thinking and feeling, as well as the tenacity of her commitment.

**Space Is a Living Thing**

A Conversation with Beverly Pepper

BY JUDITH HOOS FOX
Judith Hoos Fox: The sites where you’ve been able to work range from the dense complexity of New York’s Park Avenue to open grassy swaths and fields. Yet a consistency in your formal vocabulary links all of your projects. Could you talk about the role of site in your process?

Beverly Pepper: Certain formal elements are constant within my work—and they do constitute a vocabulary. But in site-specific works, this vocabulary comes to include physical forms, lines of force, and other considerations, which create a conversation between design and place. For example, if the given space has strong vertical dimensions, I might balance them by introducing horizontal planes or structures. In *Manhattan Sentinels* at Federal Plaza in New York, I was faced with the verticality of the federal buildings and a reduced amount of horizontal space. So, in approaching the project, I sought to avoid a confrontation between the work and the environment by setting the sculptures inside a circle of trees. Then, I realized that the Thomas Street corner could contain a fourth sculpture, which would integrate the installation. Of course, the natural light and the topography—even the physical properties of the soil, the vegetation, and the surrounding materials and the physical and historical culture of the place—all have an important part to play in my overall process. Civic, religious, domestic, theatrical, geological—the matter of context is both an opportunity and a challenge, an interlocutor with whose “genius” (as in *genius loci*) I seek to co-operate. I think, too, of the persons and possible communities that might come into being within and around site-specific installations. If space is a living thing, how can we make its life—and the lives of those who inhabit it—more manifest?

JHF: Geometry meets organic form throughout your work. Could you talk about the interplay of these opposing forces and concepts?

BP: Opposing forces are integral to any serious work of art, especially when using organic forms within geometric ones or vice-versa. These opposing forces give a dynamic to the work, with an internal dialogue. They are also integral to our lives spent immersed in urban landscapes where geometry dominates, just as they respond to tensions between experiential material and abstraction or conceptual thought, between extremes such as chaos and order, chance and regime. As a maker, of course, my energies flow from and toward forces that exceed any imposed system of analysis. And always, these forces are inseparable from the materials themselves—stone, iron, grass, trees, the contours of a geological stratum.

I turn to the organic in my work knowing that I will encounter unexplainable elements. Something always enters my process without my having any conscious idea where it came from. Also, whereas geometry is cerebral, the organic carries emotions with a contrappunto opening into a second reality, which is at the heart of painting, sculpture, poetry, and music.
JHF: “Totemic,” “hieratic,” “primal”—these are images/words that come to mind when I think about much of your freestanding work. How do these notions fit with your intentions for the work?

BP: My “intentions” in creating a new form or concept inevitably include going beyond the known into the unknown. I work with the back of my mind, while editing with the front. If I have any “intentions,” they are to allow me to feel the work as much as see it.

Critics frequently refer to my work as “spiritual.” Yet I’m less interested in spirituality than in the unexplainable, which you feel more than see. To be clear, I’m not trying to be mystical, nor am I consciously avoiding it. And though I am very concrete and use very concrete materials, I do not intend my work to be “explainable.” Feeling is more important for me than anything formulaic.

As for the terms “hieratic,” “totemic,” or “primal,” I’d say my work both responds to and tries to reinforce the human capacity for wonder, for reorienting ourselves in relation to powers or fields of force (whether internal or external) that are greater than our merely biographical or social selves. Obviously we can’t rebuild the monuments of the ancient world, but we can aspire to re-evoking, in however modern a world, some of the enduring and perhaps renewable sensations of amazement, even awe.

JHF: You have spoken so eloquently about the power and properties of iron.

BP: Everything in the world slowly converts into iron. It is everywhere, even in a teardrop. Perhaps an awareness of this final, imperishable destiny plays a role in my feeling for its power and potential. I admire the sheer resistance within iron, its stubbornness, even as it participates in slow processes of corrosion or patination. And it’s always gripping to work in a material that has been such a crucial part of human culture from the literal Iron Age to the great periods of industrial construction and beyond. Too often, in the modern world, iron seems by definition something impersonal or corporate—so there’s a very particular satisfaction in bringing an individual sensibility and an act of individual human making into some ever-new rapport with it.

JHF: Do other materials elicit other kinds of responses and attractions?
BP: Clay has a malleability that can change or even repossess a creative moment. Stone, wood, and the use of earth offer other kinds of properties. I like stone because it’s more combative yet open-ended. You can change direction, “following” the stone while working to accommodate a thought or a new perception from the stone itself. Metal is more easily controlled, whether casting iron, making a mold, fabricating iron, or forging steel. And, inevitably, every material has its own innate being. Michelangelo believed there was life in stone, waiting to be released by the “rude hammer.”

JHF: Can you offer some observations about what has transpired in the world of art during the course of your prodigious career—still in full swing—in terms of economics, the gallery and museum landscape, and changes in attitudes toward urbanism, art, and art-making?
BP: The 20th century’s emphasis on iconoclasm and “story” has affected our current art world—Warhol looks conservative, Picasso seems a realist painter, Man Ray a formal photographer. Frankly, it’s difficult for me, at 90, to judge today’s aesthetics. It feels as though we are at the end of the Roman Empire. There’s a sense of freedom, that anything goes, with no inhibition; everything is possible—from the very worst to the sublime. Regarding today’s art world, I really am a “virgin.” I have only been represented by two galleries in my life, André Emmerich and Marlborough. As a result, I am not familiar with the overall gallery landscape.

As for attitudes toward art and art-making, it’s like after man went to the moon: there are no more boundaries in space or on earth. However, I do believe that there should be more emphasis on art education—art history in particular—to realize the essential reality within serious art, no matter how abstract or diffused. I am not sure of how, but I know that in our wild, untamed atmosphere, we have to look at art differently. Idea and concept have become primary, frequently more important than the total work.

I keep thinking of Gulliver, the giant tied to the ground by many little people. But I can’t figure out whether art is the giant, bound by forces of the market, or if the market is hobbled by today’s endless multiplicity of art forms. Perhaps it’s otherwise. While artists claim to be freer than most, they remain slaves to themselves and their dreams.

JHF: Whose work or what works have moved, inspired, miffed, or angered you?
BP: I live in Italy, where the past and the present coexist; in fact, they inform each other. The world seemed to have ended here many times, but it keeps on going. There is a grim joke that, after a nuclear holocaust,
Italy will still be there, alive and well, with its Renaissance of the human spirit. I live in the medieval town of Todi, where time frequently seems to have stopped with the 13th-century friar and poet Jacopone da Todi. Previously I lived in Rome, where time is layered, so you go from the Caesars to the fascists to contemporary architecture.

My influences are historical: Trajan’s column, Cleopatra’s obelisk, the Roman forum, amphitheaters in Sicily, Greece, and Turkey—and beyond the Mediterranean. The Cambodian temple site at Angkor Wat influenced my early wood and steel sculpture. Gaudí and Miró informed my Sol y Ombra Park in Barcelona. The Russian Constructivists were fundamental to my growth. Bauhaus geometry came into my work during the early ’60s. And for many years, I brought African art and antiquities into my studio. It’s hard to pinpoint a determinant influence. Philosophers have been important in finding my way—especially Henri Bergson and his thoughts on time, memory, intuition, and kinds of organic continuity within an otherwise increasingly fragmented world.

There is a lot of garbage out there, but you can’t let yourself be angry. There are some works I dismiss, others I do not understand, but I keep on looking and reading.

**JHF:** Are there artists today who hold your interest?

**BP:** Many continue to hold my attention, including Richard Serra, Michael Heizer, and James Turrell. I’m interested in a reflected history within their work. Invention, scale, surprise, even magic, certainly transformation—appeal to me.

**JHF:** What do you see as the future of sculpture?

**BP:** I live in the present but draw from the past, both within the back of the mind and within the substrates of history. Counting on a future is too problematic. In these controversial times, it’s hard to believe that we will survive. So I focus on the present as projected from the past. I think that my works end up “knowing” more than I can about the future—and clearly I’m interested in materials that endure, that might have something to say to those who come after us.

**JHF:** If artists reflect the zeitgeist of the time, can you articulate what is going on in your work?

**BP:** Once, as a painter, I tried to portray social problems. It was a failure. In this century, when almost everything is possible, and most any problem raises multiple possible solutions, I don’t look for an answer. Hopefully my work creates questions, and the answers should lead to more questions. It’s one of the exciting aspects of still being alive, with the prospect that our collapsing planet, with its infinite wonders and remnants of hopes and dreams, may still be saved.

Judith Hoos Fox is a writer and curator based in Boston.