

Design doyenne Martha Sturdy's two fresh passions



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Being able to reverse gear in a camo-print ATV when there's a bear staring you down on a wooded path might not seem like an especially valuable skill to have when you're a globally acclaimed designer.

But for Martha Sturdy, it certainly comes in handy.

On a recent scorching-hot summer afternoon at her 250-acre farm in Pemberton, B.C., Canada's reigning doyenne of design rollicked through sky-high grasses while making hairpin turns through a cedar forest in which bears, hungry for the season's first crop of wild raspberries, had torn down trees now threatening to block her path.

But there was – or, rather, is – no stopping her.

Throwing the stick shift back a few aggressive notches, Sturdy, who had encountered her bear during a morning ride on one of her horses, turned and whirled and drove on past some of the ancient conifers that have inspired her new line of burnt-cedar furniture as well as various abstract sculptures and paintings. Sturdy produces all her work in her studio in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, just over an hour's drive south.

"Everything in life is either a positive or a negative," says the 72-year-old powerhouse, revving the motor and jerking forward in the direction of majestic snow-peaked mountains surrounding her sprawling property. "I think, just get on with it."

It's a philosophy that has served Sturdy well throughout a 35-year career that started in 1978 (when she graduated from Emily Carr University with a degree in visual art) with the making and selling of wearable art, Sturdy's description for the chunky, poured-resin jewellery that first made her famous.

Almost from the start, Sturdy's sculpted pieces were featured in leading fashion magazines from London to Milan to Tokyo, including Vogue.

Prominent fashion designers, among them Donna Karan, Oscar de la Renta, Marc Jacobs, Carolyne Roehm, Geoffery Beene, Gianfranco Ferre and Calvin Klein, all clamoured to have her work showcased on runways alongside their clothes.

Today, Sturdy still crafts spiralling brass rings and bracelets, but just for herself. "I did that already," the designer, who is dressed in her usual head-to-toe black, including short shorts paired with leather cowboy boots, declares of her early success as a jewellery maker. "Now I'm onto something new."

In recent years, Sturdy has returned to her first love, fine art, which she sells under a moniker, Martha Varcoe Sturdy, that includes her maiden name. Supporting that endeavour are the profits from Sturdy Living, her hugely successful Vancouver-based company specializing in maxi-sized furniture made of brass, wood, resin and steel, as well as home accessories such as sinks (some produced in collaboration with the U.S. manufacturer Kohler), vases, trays, serving bowls, light fixtures and utensils. Sturdy's design work will be showcased at New York's Boutique Design Show in the fall, followed by the Maison et Objet expo in Paris this coming winter and the Architectural Design Show in New York in March.

Major pieces include a \$20,000 castresin sectional with white leather seat cushions and a \$3,000 zigzag stool made of dramatically cut steel. While expensive – "my labour is Canadian labour, so it costs more," Sturdy says, unapologetically – her furniture and home accessories are in high demand. Among those commissioning them are commercial clients including luxury hotels (such as, most recently, the Four Seasons in Miami) and restaurants such as Vancouver's new Boulevard (where the champagne is chilled in one of Sturdy's oversized resin bowls) and Chambar (whose bathrooms are outfitted with her brass bowl sinks).

"I am very practical," Sturdy says of work as minimalist in form as it is materially rich. "I make things people can actually use."

Having opened her studio showroom to the public, people can come to buy directly from her now. On a recent afternoon, the visitors there included an interior designer and a backpacking design student who waited until Sturdy was off the phone to thank her in person for inspiring him. "I just love your work," he told her. Sturdy smiled from behind her trademark fringe of dark hair, offering a calloused hand for him to shake.

"The visual is very important to me," Sturdy remarked later. "What I do is I come with an idea and I never worry about cost, because the integrity of the creation is what is important; money is what happens after the fact. Integrity is what it's all about; if I design something that's too expensive, oh well, that's life. But in the end I feel good."

Feeling good when in your 70s isn't always a given. But Sturdy, who was born and raised in Vancouver among an upper-middle-class family that encouraged reading and education ("We

went once a week to the library with a wagon filled with books," she recalls), is blessed with good genetics.

Her mother, for instance, lived well into her 90s. Photographs of the woman Sturdy calls the Queen line the walls of the Pemberton farmhouse in addition to images, hundreds of them, of other family members, including her three grown children and five grandchildren. "I know what my priorities are," Sturdy says, pointing out the faces in every frame. "Family first."

But as she ages, staying creative is becoming increasingly important to her as well.

To ensure the creative juices keep flowing, Sturdy maintains a strict regimen of exercise and good living at her farm, including the eating of vegetables and garlic she plants herself.

Each morning, just as the sun is breaking through the sky, she does an hour of yoga, followed by another hour of horse riding around her property and in the ring of a 100-by-200-foot arena where she practices the jumps that have earned her a barn full of ribbons at equestrian competitions. Among them is the top prize she took at a recent event at B.C.'s Olympic-calibre Thunderbird Equestrian Show Park.

Not bad for a woman who didn't start her equine training until she was well into her 40s.

"I got myself a horse when I thought I knew everything and then I discovered I still had more to learn," she says.

"But that's what's great about life: You get to keep on learning. Once you stop, then it's over."