

By STEPHEN TODD Photographed by CARLOS CHAVARRÍA

“YOU SHOULD
LOOK IT UP
ON INSTAGRAM”

Deer in the headlights, bears on the prowl...
this is the incredible rugged beauty of the life

Canadian designer and artist Martha Sturdy
has made in the spectacular surroundings
of Pemberton, British Columbia.

Martha Sturdy outside her barn/studio with her 15-year-old Dutch Warmblood, Porter (“He has a major ego, I call him ‘Curious George’ because he is so snoopy”). Mount Currie (above) is just one of the magnificent views from the artist’s home.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *in the bedroom, a collection of antique silver objects. Rebar steel spherical sculptures by Sturdy. A new series of wall works in layered resin. In the kitchen, an assortment of knives from around the world, and (left) stools by Sturdy. On the patio, brass dish over fireplace by Sturdy. In the main living room, the artist stands by a low black resin table and wood doors with stained glass from a Chinese church; artwork seen beyond by Canadian artist Richard Attila Lukacs.*



Pemberton, British Columbia, is a small town just north of the Whistler ski slopes in western Canada. Occupying a fertile flood plain overseen by snowcapped mountains, the 2500-soul settlement is widely known as 'The Seed Potato Capital of the World'.

Of late, it's also gained notoriety as home to Canadian artist and designer Martha Sturdy. Well, actually, one of her homes, since Sturdy lives here four days a week. The other three are spent at her expansive oceanfront villa outside Vancouver, around 160 kilometres to the south. Oh, and then there's her two-hectare island some 30 kilometres north-west of Vancouver, where she goes to unwind.

Often referred to as 'the other Martha' in deference to Martha Stewart, Sturdy is similarly a creative force in all things life and style. But whereas Stewart is too readily ridiculed for her extravagantly earnest WASPishness, Sturdy is quiet in her achievements. Which are considerable.

A graduate of Vancouver's Emily Carr University of Art + Design, Sturdy began making her 'wearable sculptures' in the early 1990s. These were bold and graphic wrist, arm and neck pieces in a reduced palette of tough, industrial materials — metal, timber, resin. "Of course, it's not as if you can graduate and simply set yourself up as a sculptor," she says. "I needed to start small. But the whole while, in my mind these were sculptures, not just jewellery."

Her Pemberton home, when she is in residence, also houses her second husband, David Wardle, a retired timber merchant, their labradors and horses, and any of the children and grandchildren who come to stay. It's a massive structure of a strangely industrial allure given its pastoral surroundings — it is set on 101 hectares of land. "It was a sawmill," Sturdy says. »

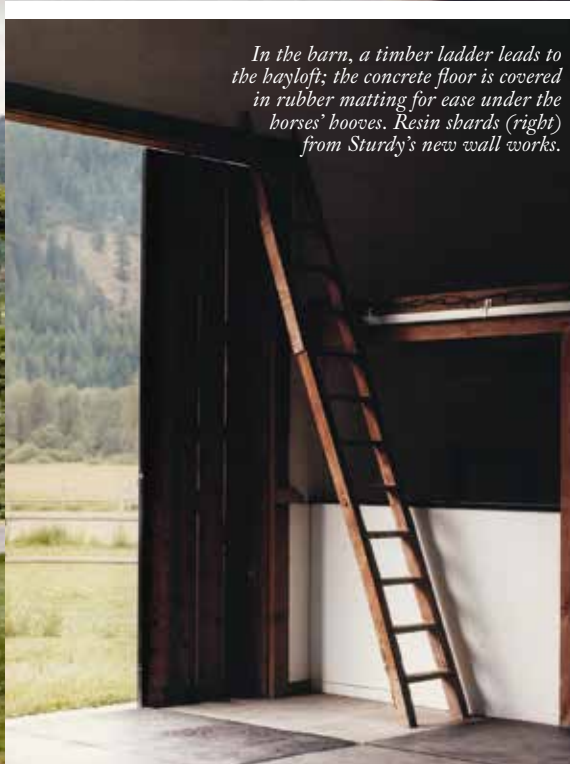


In the living room, a massive canvas from Sturdy's Eclipses series (2016) sits above grey leather cushions designed by the artist for Donna Karan. On the low table, cattle skulls and other artefacts gathered from around the property.

Sturdy on the living room staircase leading to the mezzanine bedroom; the artworks are Chinese ancestor paintings. The artist's cedar sculptures (right) have been split, burnt, scraped and lacquered to "bring out their inner beauty".



CLOCKWISE, FROM BELOW: the arena where Sturdy rides her horses in winter; the roof is white canvas, to maximise light. Designed for indoor/outdoor living, the patio is furnished with refurbished 1930s wingback armchairs and Moroccan rugs; powder-coated aluminium bench with white resin seat, red stools and chairs and amber pendant light all by Sturdy. Outside the barn with her 15 year-old Dutch Warmblood, Porter. The patio as seen from outside the house.



In the barn, a timber ladder leads to the hayloft; the concrete floor is covered in rubber matting for ease under the horses' hooves. Resin shards (right) from Sturdy's new wall works.





Another view of the patio; the drapes are made from massive rolls of calico used to make Indian turbans. The blue and white resin shards (below left) will be integrated into a new sculpture. "They depict ice and snow," Sturdy says. "They are about winter here on the farm."



« "When we first saw it, all that was here were the uprights and the roof. It looked fabulous, this huge emptiness. And so we decided to build our home in it." The house itself is effectively encased within these strident struts, crowned by a gently pitched roof; confident in its own amplitude. Slender fabric banners suspended from the awning flutter in the breeze.

"It has an indoor-outdoor feel, which we love," Sturdy says. "We enhanced this feeling by creating really big windows. The farmers around here think we're crazy, building a house with huge windows when temperatures drop to -20 degrees celsius in winter and can go up to 40 in summer."

Sturdy's work is elegantly rugged, tranquil. Her sculptures are large in scale. Her brass is torqued, her cedar charred, her steel likewise patinated. She handles temperamental resin with extreme ease — although she swaps her trademark Ann Demeulemeester-designed garb for overalls and industrial goggles when she does so.

Today, aged in her early 70s, Sturdy lives up to her name. If she appears indomitable now, one can only imagine just how fierce she was when she graduated from university — a mature student at 35, a single mother and struggling to make ends meet. Perhaps the raw honesty of her work is a result of having had to face the world front-on from an early age.

"I'm not an angry person," says Sturdy with a shrug. "And with age and understanding, I know what I want my environment to be. Graceful and elegant... yes, of course. But also comfortable and restful. It's a home. We have dogs, kids, grandkids. We spill our wine from time to time! What I do know is that if it's not right, it's not okay."

She's referring to her unerring sense of balance and rhythm; stirred not shaken, with a dash of wabi-sabi. You can sense it in her furniture designs, which are typically blocky, somewhat rudimentary, even primeval. There's no time for unnecessary embellishment, in Sturdy's designs or her life.

"You should look at my Instagram," insists the artist. "I was out on the tractor a while back, and discovered a paddock I'd not known. So I decided to make a road. It goes nowhere, but it is so beautiful. And when I go down there, I often see deer, even bears, just hanging around." Martha Sturdy's Instagram shows all the signs of a wild life — the deers in the headlights, the bears on the prowl, the incredible rugged beauty of the life she has made in these most extraordinary surroundings. *VL*

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