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WITH BODY AND SOUL

The sculptural approach of Martha Sturdy.

by Celeste Moure

FYI DESIGN



The creative explorations of Martha Sturdy can best be described as clean and simple yet utterly bold, and range from earthy wall sculptures to giant cast-resin home accessories, massive-scale brass and steel furniture to sophisticated wearable art pieces. The internationally renowned designer's particular affinity for the oversize and the dramatic has served her well: her designs, sold in renowned boutiques and galleries around the globe, have graced the covers of fashion and interior design magazines alike. "I create everything I do because I want it for myself," she says. Her secret: "I listen to my soul, or what is within me."

Born and raised in Vancouver, Sturdy says the city, and specifically the influence of its Asian population, has had a big impact on her work. "I have always had a passion for Asian-driven things," she says. She recalls that, as a child, she coveted a pair of delicately embroidered Chinese slippers and that, as a young adult, the first piece of furniture she purchased was a little black Chinese wooden stool. "There is an influence in the simplicity of Asia that I love. And editing out everything and making it clean and simple is one of the things I strive for [in my work] but is also one of the things that I want." Her clients in places like Hong Kong recognize an Asian element in her designs. "It's not something that's in my face," she says, "but something that is within me that chose it."

A graduate of Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Sturdy established herself as a jewellery designer in the late 1970s. "You have to stop regurgitating what other people are doing and do your own thing," she says when asked about her approach to design and her quick rise to fame. "And not look over everyone else's shoulder. That is the kiss of death." For Sturdy, doing her own thing meant creations that were not strictly jewellery but wearable art. The designer's almost immediate commercial success gave her the opportunity to pursue other creative passions beyond jewellery. "I am lucky that I don't have to be locked into one medium or one direction," she says. But it is

her sculptural approach to making things that has always shaped her work. "I am comfortable with large-scale, oversize designs," she says. "If you take a lot of what I am doing now and you go back and look at the bracelets and jewellery that I used to make, they're not logical as far as jewellery, they're more sculptural. It's doing what I am."

In 2006, the designer founded the Martha Sturdy Studio, a unique gallery environment where she has been free to explore "the installation of art in a designed living space with a minimal aesthetic". Showing no signs of slowing down, Sturdy is currently focusing on painting and handcrafting sculptures in her favourite materials of steel, resin, brass, and wood. "I can't *not* make things. It's the way it is within me—I've always been a maker of things." She has also created a two-piece sculpture for the Vancouver General Hospital that is 8.5 metres high and weighs 5,000 kilograms, and she is working on three resin cubes, lit from within, that will also be displayed at the hospital's main entrance. "If you look at my work, it always looks like me," she says matter-of-factly. "Like it or not, I tell a story as I see it, which is vital to making [my work]."

Fusing elemental shapes found in nature with things that have inspired her, particularly from her travels throughout Asia, Sturdy's body of work is at once sleek and strong, dramatic yet minimal. "The thing about clean design," she says, "is that if it's not good enough it's brutal. It shows. Some design you can jazz it all up with a bunch of stuff and you can't tell if it's good or not. But with minimal concept, the proportions have to be better or it looks terrible."

In each of Sturdy's handcrafted pieces, the artist manages to tell a story not just of the piece itself but also of her own self. Her designs are meant to be experienced and interacted with. "When you're working the way I work, you just keep evolving and growing," she explains. For Sturdy, one thing leads to the next, then leads to the next. "It's a slow evolution." Constantly experimenting and trying different things is what keeps her art fresh. "You never get bored," she says, laughing. "But if it is not your idea, it has no strength and therefore it has no power." An expression of herself, Sturdy's designs provide a window into her spontaneous spirit or, as she puts it, what is within her. ●

FROM LEFT: Resin flower bowl and brass table; illuminated resin club chair, illuminated resin and steel round floating table, "X" sculpture, and resin on steel canvas artwork.

