



Martha Sturdy

A Perfect Balance of Contradictions

If beauty could speak, it surely would utter Martha Sturdy's name. Martha's designs have blazed a trail since their discovery in New York decades years earlier. And today, her creative explorations continue with equal delight and abandon.

BY JOHN LEKICH

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RAEFF MILES

It's

not the striking art that jumps out at you as you enter Martha Sturdy's

Vancouver studio but her two dogs — big-eyed labs, Rose and Jack — who sniff at you curiously before flopping on the bare floor to obligingly become the canine version of throw rugs. Within seconds, they're snoozing at Sturdy's boot clad feet. The internationally acclaimed designer of everything from jewellery to home furnishings and, most recently, wall sculptures gazes at her pets with

lingering affection. They've spent the weekend at her farm in Pemberton, BC — about 35 kilo-metres north of the Whistler ski resort — romping away the days the way dogs do when there's nothing but open space in front of them. "They come to work after their farm adventures just to lie down," says Martha with a smile. "They're one of my anchors."

By Martha Sturdy's definition, she has a lot of well-placed anchors in her life. They include an intimate circle of family and friends that keep her grounded in her ongoing quest for creative perfection. She confesses to being driven — the sort of person who gets up at three in the morning to make lists. "I throw

myself into everything," she confesses. "Charities ... designs ... everything I do has to look great." Laughing, she confides, "It drives everybody else insane."

It's the kind of intense focus that's paid off with a level of success that most designers can only dream about. Martha's jewellery has been featured in the likes of *Elle* and *Vogue* and modelled by everyone from Isabella Rossellini to Cindy Crawford. Working with such designers as Donna Karan, Calvin Klein and Escada, her creations have sold from New York to Singapore.

Asked to pinpoint what makes her designs special, Martha describes a certain duality that's present in much of her work.



"It looks aggressive, but it's soft," she says of a typical piece. "It's sexy, but it's strong. I love that kind of contradiction."

Art has always been a part of her life. Confronted with a learning disability at an early age, she recalls drawing the items on the grocery list when her mother sent her to the store. She attributes much of her success to a childhood that was both stable and uplifting. Her mother was a schoolteacher who won the Governor General's Award for best essay. Her father was a successful entrepreneur who dazzled her with stories about his buying trips to New York. "I was lucky," she says. "I was given a foundation and I chose to run with it."

While Study estimates that she travels at least fifty days a year worldwide, she has never left her home base. Born and raised in Vancouver, her local roots go deep. "I love the kind of outlaw spirit that Canada has to offer," she explains. "The kind of independence that says: 'I'm going to make it no matter what.' I think it's one of the best things this country has to offer."

Now entering her sixties, there's still a trace of the tomboy who used to build forts in the back lane with her brother. She was never the kind of little girl who played house. "We'd go down to the schoolyard and push around dirt," she recalls. "We'd build dirt houses and

have Popsicle sticks for trees. Ever since I can remember, I've been making things."

"I have to watch myself," she says of her passion for creativity. "It's easy for me to get sucked into the void of being perfect, which can edit out a lot of other important stuff. That's why you've got to have family. The children, the grandchildren. All the real things."

Spend any length of time with Sturdy and it's hard to believe that she's a grandmother. Her fresh face is well scrubbed and devoid of make-up, her eyes bright and alive. In jeans and her trademark square-toed Dayton's, she appears at least ten years younger than her actual age. She says it's the ongoing creative



challenges that keep her young. "I don't dye my hair yet," she laughs. "It's just naturally brown. I think it's from all the adrenaline."

How much adrenaline are we talking about? Sitting in front of a massive table that serves as her desk, she says out of the blue, "I could lift this table. If there's anything around here to be moved, I'm the one who moves it." Later, on returning to her art school roots, she will say, "I've just done some new steel sculptures that are fifteen feet high. It's so exciting because they turned out even better than my fantasies."

Such talk is the mark of a woman who is fiercely attached to the practical

elements that go into making her art. At one point in our conversation, she clasps her hands in mine. "Feel them," she urges. They are palpably rough and callused, like the hands of a stevedore. "That's from doing things," she says proudly.

She recalls a time as a struggling artist when she used to think: "Oh, if only I could buy those boots, I'd be so happy." With success, things have changed. "It's not about possessions," she explains. "It's about getting the right fix on ideas. Now, I'm thinking: 'Oh, if only I can make this into something fabulous.'"

Ask Martha about her personal style and she goes characteristically

deep. "I can't live with deceit," she observes. "Integrity is very important to me. I have to feel good about myself in order to function." The same ethics guide her work. "I never copy anything," she says. "Everything has to come from within me — from my soul. If it doesn't, I don't like it."

Talk turns to the pleasures of spending time with her granddaughters. In contrast, she says her work is so much fluff. "I mean who really cares if a pillow has the perfect tassels?" she asks. And then Martha Sturdy gives a knowing smile. "Well, I care," she admits. "I guess that's just always been me." ■



