

Arnaldo and Beverly: Parallel Lives

Francesca Valente

Curator, Festival of the Arts, Todi

Arnaldo Pomodoro (Morciano di Romagna, 1926) and Beverly Pepper (Brooklyn, 1922) both began their artistic careers at the beginning of the 1950s, during a time of great political and cultural ferment in the United States and Europe.

Arnaldo, along with his brother Giò, showed his work at the Galleria del Naviglio in Milan, – with critical notes by Giò Ponti – attaining recognition in 1956 after being invited by Rodolfo Pallucchini to the Venice Biennial.

Based on their experience as goldsmiths, the two brothers presented small sculptures and reliefs in silver which proved to be a resounding success. Around the same time, Beverly Pepper debuted in Rome at the Galleria dello Zodiaco with a show presented by Carlo Levi, followed by an exhibition of small forms in wood and clay at the Pogliani Gallery, presented by Giulio Carlo Argan.

From the beginning, both artists benefitted from the backing of prominent personalities on the Italian cultural scene who believed in their talent. Among the masters they looked to in those years were Alberto Burri and Lucio Fontana, and it was with the latter that Arnaldo and Giò founded the group *Continuità* in 1960 together with Pietro Consagra, Piero Dorazio and Achille Perilli, artists regularly frequented by Beverly Pepper as well.

It was Brancusi, however – whom Beverly had met during her apprenticeship in Paris and whom Arnaldo had admired after being “amazed in a gallery at MoMA” - who gradually became a constant point of reference for Beverly and a father figure for Arnaldo.

Arnaldo and Beverly met for the first time in Spoleto in 1962. They had been invited by Giovanni Carandente to participate in *Sculture nella Città*, a historic international and intergenerational exhibition that included Alexander Calder, Eugenio Carmi, Pietro Consagra, Leoncillo, Giacomo Manzù, Marino Marini, Henry Moore and David Smith. It was an epiphany for both of them: they made a permanent shift from small- and medium-sized works to the large format that characterized their work going forward. They learned to experiment with new materials and to dare, creating work that had previously been unthinkable.

The experience in Spoleto marked a turning point in the history of twentieth century art, giving the artists an important incentive to experiment and an opportunity to measure themselves against the field with a new, monumental scale, in an unprecedented moment of synergy between culture, art and industry. In this context, Italsider – thanks to the contribution of Eugenio Carmi – played an exemplary role as an enlightened manufacturer, sponsoring the production and transport of the artworks and facilitating collaboration between workers, artisans and artists. It was in the Lovere (Bergamo) plant that Arnaldo Pomodoro produced the work that would definitively mark his move to volumetric sculpture: *La colonna del viaggiatore*, which was **almost 5 meters in height** and was

produced in iron using a sand-casting process for which he patiently developed a new technique, together with the technicians, that differed from the one used for sculpture in bronze. In the same way, Beverly Pepper collaborated with the workers in Piombino (Livorno) where she learned to weld large slabs and bend inflexible inox, cor-Ten and smooth steel “challenging the laws of gravity” (particularly evident in her dynamic ribbon sculptures of the 1960s). From that point on, she continued to work boldly with these materials and, like Arnaldo, developed an instinctive penchant for the monumental. To commemorate this extraordinary experience, the artists generously donated *Gift of Icarus* and *La colonna del viaggiatore* to the City of Spoleto. They can still be admired in the historic center today.

The meeting between Pepper and Pomodoro in the Umbrian town of Spoleto marked the beginning of crossed destinies that would unfold across two continents following similar artistic pathways – caught between past and present, constantly informed by layers of history, they continued their complex and restless search, exploring materials and spatial relationships in dialogue with nature and the environment.

The synergy between artistic creation and manufacturing in the years of the so-called “industrial miracle” motivated Pepper and Pomodoro to forge and mold different metals, finally freed from limitations of size, shape and proportion. From the first volumetric sculpture in Spoleto to the *Sfera grande* at the World Expo in Montréal – which now stands in front of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome – the shift to monumental scale was definitive for Arnaldo, as was the choice of pure forms such as spheres, cylinders, cones and parallelepipeds. Beverly, too, after having measured herself against the major sculptors of the day in Spoleto – including David Smith, an admirer, and her close friend Alexander Calder – moved further and further toward geometric forms and environmental projects in her subsequent work, using materials that were extremely diverse, such as grass and sand.

The constant yearning to search and experiment animated both artists, bringing them to abandon tradition and academic realism for new horizons. At different times, they were both invited to the Venice Biennial (Pomodoro in 1956, 1964 and 1988; Pepper in 1972, 1996, 2011 and 2019) as well as to Documenta in Kassel (Pomodoro in 1959 and Pepper in 1977). They showed in the same galleries, such as Marlborough in New York and Rome. Both would receive honorary degrees and the prestigious *Lifetime Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Award* (Pomodoro in 2008 and Pepper in 2013).

They both travelled a great deal and acquired vast amounts of knowledge and international experience. In the United States, Arnaldo Pomodoro met the poets of the Beat Generation and major figures of Abstract Expressionism, such as Jackson Pollock, and taught for extended periods in the art departments of Berkeley, Stanford and Mills College. After numerous trips to Paris and Cambodia to study, Beverly discovered a dimension in postwar Italy which could be “found nowhere else”, and which deepened her appreciation for the memory of places and their inhabitants.

Since the 1960s, their sculptures have been shown all over the world. Arnaldo’s can be admired from Milan to Copenhagen, from Dublin to Tokyo, and from Los Angeles to the United Nations in New York; Beverly’s work can be seen from Barcelona to Dallas, from Venice to New York, and from

Zürich to Vilnius. Still, neither artist ever forgot their initial impetus in Spoleto, so deeply embedded in the artistic and natural environment of Umbria, which remained a constant point of reference for them both: Beverly would move to Todi definitively in 1972, and Arnaldo would place work in various towns throughout Umbria as proof of his attachment to the landscape and its context.

At the height of their careers, both artists would arrive at Forte Belvedere, a high point in recognition of a significant career (Pomodoro in 1984, Pepper in 1998).

Both artists would gradually make their way to the world of theater, albeit in completely different ways: Arnaldo, after his first professional experience in Pesaro in the 1950s, created important set designs as well as actual theatrical machines for various works, from Greek tragedy to dramatic productions and contemporary theater. Beverly, in the final phase of her life, made the so-called *Amphisculptures*, environmental works of various dimensions which became actual open-air theaters, such as those in Celle (Pistoia) and L'Aquila and in Panicale, where the work remained unfinished.

The two artists also distinguished themselves through their long-standing commitment to urban renewal: Arnaldo was committed to the restoration of Pietrarubbia, a small medieval town in the Appennines between Romagna and Montefeltro, producing the environmental work *The Pietrarubbia Group*, begun in 1975 and completed in 2015, which stands today in front of the Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca; with equal dedication, Beverly left a 3000 m² open-air sculpture theater to the Parco del Sole in L'Aquila after the terrible earthquake of 2009, an example of land art with strong social significance in which she reused the paving stones from the Basilica of Collemaggio, creating an itinerary of cultural rebirth of rare beauty.

With the passing of time, both artists realized that the moment had come to create a foundation able to promote events that advocated for contemporary art and its appreciation at every level of society. Arnaldo set up his foundation in 1995 with the aim, beyond that of safeguarding and promoting his own work, of giving birth to a visionary idea: a creative space, almost experimental, for study and comparison of the themes of contemporary art through engagement of the public on a global scale. In 2018, only two years before she passed away, Beverly attained her long-held desire of setting up the Beverly Pepper Project Foundation for the proper dissemination and conservation of her work and that of other artists in collaboration with national and international institutions, especially in the fields of environmental and public art.

We can still see a close affinity between the two artists in the emblematic projects that occupied them in recent years: Pomodoro's work *Ingresso nel labirinto*, and Beverly Pepper Park in Todi.

Ingresso nel labirinto (1995-2011), which began as a work-in-progress in the 1990s, is an environment of almost 170 m² housed in the underground space of the ex-Riva Calzoni in via Solari in Milan, the former headquarters of the Arnaldo Pomodoro Foundation. It represents the culmination of Pomodoro as a person and as an artist, the final destination of an engaging sensorial journey, a short circuit in space-time that aspires, as Italo Calvino once suggested, to be a challenge rather than a resignation (Italo Calvino, *Una pietra sopra*, Arnoldo Mondadori, Milano 2016, p. 101).

The sculpture park in the center of Todi that bears Beverly Pepper's name and to which she gave care and attention until her final days is, in her own words, "a giant door offering many possibilities to those who open it."

Ingresso nel labirinto and Beverly Pepper Park: both are spaces for reflection that spark public creativity, whose creators willingly took a step back to offer viewers an opportunity for constant experimentation and the exploration of alternative pathways.

Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro

Via Vigevano 9 - 20144 Milano
tel (+39) 02 89 075 394
info@fondazionearnaldopomodoro.it
fondazionearnaldopomodoro.it

Lara Facco P&C

Viale Papiniano 42 - 20123 Milano
tel (+39) 02 36 565 133
press@larafacco.com
larafacco.com