

ART
BARBARA
HEPWORTH
pursued her
life's vision with
unbending
resolve. On the
eve of two new
shows of her
work, the
British sculptor
REBECCA
WARREN pays
homage to her
creative legacy

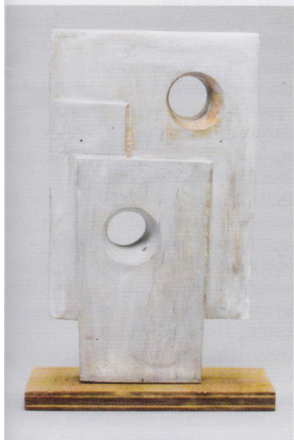
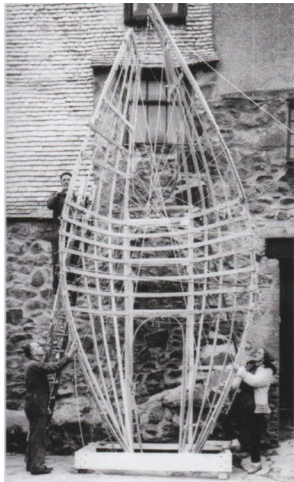


*British sculptor Barbara Hepworth was possessed of a formidable talent. Try to describe one of her abstract sculptures – a work such as her hollowed-out wooden ball, with tight strings, *Pelagos* (1946), for example – and you find yourself becoming entangled in a net of such complex explanation that the lovely simplicity of the piece gets obscured. This is the sort of work that must speak on its own terms. It talks in the sensual language of sculpture, in the vocabulary of materials, textures and shapes.*

And yet Hepworth's art is too often approached less directly. During her lifetime (1903-1975), she was assessed principally in the context of other people. She was pitched against Henry Moore who, like her, came from Yorkshire, but who, being a man and five years older, presented himself as her mentor (and claimed to have been her lover). She was compared to her two husbands: first John Skeaping, a sculptor of animals, and then pioneering British modernist Ben Nicholson. And she was repeatedly suspected of imitating such admittedly influential European modernists as Constantin Brâncuși and Naum Gabo.

Even after her death – in her bed, which caught fire from a discarded cigarette butt – she fell prey to feminists





WORK OF ART
Clockwise
from top left:
Hepworth in
St Ives with
her cat Nicholas
and sculpture
*Reclining Form
(Rosewall)*, shot
by Ida Kar, 1961;
Hepworth's
Winged Figure,
work in progress,
1962; *Maquette
for Monolith*,
1963-4;
Hepworth
making a walnut
carving in her
studio; as a
young woman in
Italy in the 1920s

private views

How Barbara Hepworth inspired me, by Rebecca Warren



PORTER: When did you first encounter Barbara Hepworth's work?
REBECCA WARREN: It has always been present, but I came late to looking at it more directly. About five years ago, my gallerist Maureen Paley gave me a little, old-fashioned, black and white Hepworth catalog. In many ways her work is always somewhere nearby seeping into my head.

PORTER: What do you most like about her art?

RW: The simplicity of her work is compelling. I especially like the smaller, table-top pieces; their interconnecting shapes, holes and strings. They show the possibility of abstraction blended with human anatomy. Compared to her rival, Henry Moore, she is the better artist. She has been a role model to me. Her determination, sometimes against the odds, is a good lesson. The density of her work is tempting to emulate, though fiendishly difficult to achieve. And her forging ahead has made it easier for subsequent generations like me.

PORTER: What are your favorite Hepworth works?

RW: *Winged Figure* (1963), on London's Oxford Street, with its wing edges that give the sculpture the illusion of floating. Also *The Family of Man* (1970) in the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield. I find her sculptures admirable rather than lovable. They're difficult for me to grapple with. They're not at all humorous. This may be >

who, although they sought to free her from the snares of male association, presented her as a quintessentially female artist. But Hepworth, who detested the term 'sculptress' and believed that the "dictates of work are as compelling for a woman as for a man", earned the right to be assessed not as a female artist, but simply as an artist.

This daughter of a civil engineer from Wakefield – who, by the age of 17, when she enrolled at Leeds College of Art, was already sure of her course – possessed a stony determination of character. Moore, her fellow student, with whom she remained linked in a friendly artistic rivalry all her life, may have persistently been given greater public precedence, but it was Hepworth who was the first to create the pierced forms that characterized both their work and so greatly enriched modern sculpture.

Hepworth was constantly prepared to break precedents. Having gone on to study at London's Royal College of Art, she traveled to Italy in 1924, where she learned to carve marble directly from a master craftsman – a skill that was not then part of a traditional sculptural training (it was seen as the work of the stonemason). In doing so, she aligned herself with the avant-garde, direct-carving movement, which was being championed on the continent.

In Italy she met Skeaping, whom she married and, on their return to London, they worked and showed together until, in 1931, she left him to live with Nicholson and pursue a tenaciously abstract course. Her severe geometric pieces, with their straight edges and immaculate surfaces, are now regarded as the first completely abstract sculptures made anywhere in the world. The Hepworth-Nicholson studio became the center of the avant-garde in Britain. Even the birth of triplets in 1934 did not throw Hepworth off her artistic stride. In 1939, the family left London to settle in St Ives, in Cornwall, which became Hepworth's home for the rest of her life.

There, the influence of the Cornish landscape made itself felt on her sculpture. Abandoning the austere abstract, she began to make references to landscape forms and the patterns of nature. An inherent classicism came to the fore in work that aspired to a timeless, universal concept of abstract beauty. Despite the breakdown of her marriage to Nicholson in 1951, Hepworth worked on, experimenting with her *Groups* – clusters of small anthropomorphic forms in marble so thin that their translucence creates a magical sense of inner life – and bronze, a molten material that allowed her fully to explore the fluidity of shapes. She was offered exhibitions the world over and commissioned to make large public pieces, and in 1965 was appointed Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire.

And yet, unlike Moore, who grew distracted by his public repute, Hepworth preferred the relative isolation of St Ives, pursuing her artistic ideals with the passion, commitment and profound belief that make her not just a major British or a major female artist, but a major artist by any measure. *A Greater Freedom: Hepworth 1965-1975* is at *The Hepworth Wakefield* from April 18; hepworthwakefield.org. *Barbara Hepworth: Sculpture for a Modern World* is at *Tate Britain* from June 24; tate.org.uk.
Words by Rachel Campbell-Johnston



Carve a niche

Above: Hepworth and her bronze, *Cantate Domino*, at Trewyn, Cornwall, UK, 1958

their old-fashioned sincerity. Sincerity in art being made these days comes across as a bad attempt at old-fashionedness. Making work now, I'm conscious of adding at least one extra layer of experience because more has happened; more art has been made. This might even be a rough principle of art history – a difference between modernism and postmodernism.

PORTER: Have you visited her studio in St Ives in Cornwall?

RW: I went there recently. It is pagan and otherworldly. You get to peer through a glass window into her small studio, which looks a bit

artificially set up. It is kind of crazy that you're in the place where she died after smoking in bed. The garden is crammed with sculptures and people. I think the gardener is at war with the sculptures, trying to hide them all behind his shrubs.

PORTER: What are the biggest challenges of working as a sculptor?

RW: It is tricky to find the right balance between the serious and the humorous. It has been an uphill struggle to be rated properly and taken seriously, and I've often felt this was to do with gender. This nonsense was worse in earlier generations.

PORTER: What makes a sculpture brilliant and memorable for you?

RW: Often it is an ineffable thing. Sculpture is form. It is never anything to do with forced or false meanings. And it is always different with each sculpture. The pleasure of understanding can only be gained from really looking. But the context of the life of the artist does sometimes, paradoxically, help the appreciation. The circumstances of the thing coming into being can sometimes clinch the final piece of the puzzle.

PORTER: What aspects of Hepworth's work inspire you?

RW: What Hepworth did is my Achilles heel, particularly with those holes. I like that I can't do her art – in the past, I have tried! Sometimes a small hole opens up in the clay during the making of one of my sculptures. I look and look at it, and then I almost always fill it in.

PORTER: Hepworth liked people to experience her sculpture – do you feel the same about your pieces?

RW: Hepworth wanted people to pay attention to her art, and saw touching as a part of that. I think she was really talking about experiencing frissons, which is not the same as experiencing art. I take the opposite view: touching is no substitute for looking. It won't tell you anything at all about what it is to see something, which is what art is for. Especially in this era of visiting art galleries as a thoughtless tourist sport: for me, no touching!

See *Rebecca Warren's work at ArtZuid, Amsterdam from May 22; artzuid.nl* ■

PORTER playlist... SALMA HAYEK



The Mexican actress, director, producer and philanthropist, who is set to appear in two new films later this year, reveals her eclectic taste in music, from film scores to salsa

CHOOSING MY FAVORITE MUSIC is like *Sophie's Choice*. I like rock, classical and world music – Indian, African and Arabic, too. It is impossible to specify just a few songs. My daughter, Valentina, will

listen to all my music, she is open to all the different sounds.

I DO ENJOY FILM SCORES, although I might be very sappy with my taste. I love Michel Legrand's *The Windmills of Your Mind* (from *The Thomas Crown Affair*), and Ennio Morricone, too. He is a genius. Not forgetting Gabriel Yared, my friend who did the music for my film *The Prophet*. He also did the music for *Betty Blue* – how genius was that? Then there's

Alexandre Desplat, who composed the score for *Harry Potter* – he's amazing. I LOVE LOVE LOVE Damien Rice. He is one of the greatest poets of our time. I think he is brilliant. And of course, I have to mention Prince. LAST OF ALL, I love salsa, which I like to dance to. I'm not bad, either. It is one of the few things that I can manage. I like the American classics in salsa, because I'm a romantic.

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Photography © National Portrait Gallery, London; courtesy Bowness Hepworth Estate; Mark Heathcote; Getty; Johnnie Shand Kydd; © Rebecca Warren, courtesy Maureen Paley, London; illustrator Ryan McMenamy. Barbara Warren: *Every Aspect of Birth Magic*, with an essay by Bice Burger (Furl, 646)