

The curator's overview

Multiple Perspectives: forged metal claims its place in contemporary culture

In recent years, the practice of artist blacksmiths has transformed. Contemporary artist blacksmiths are creating original and cohesive bodies of work, works which engage not only with the practices and forms of traditional blacksmithing, with its focus on material, process and function; but also with many broader cultural, environmental and socio-political conversations. These works bring a fresh perspective to the discipline and demand new critical consideration, giving focus to an international community of artist blacksmithing driven by ideas and concept as much as by process and material.

The title 'Forge' embodies something of the tension and complexity we see both in the contemporary profession of artist blacksmithing and in the works. Forge points to an exhibition characterised by a process and a material; the forging of hot metal is at the heart of all this work. Forge as a noun also evokes centuries old ideas and practices of blacksmith, hearth and anvil, which have a place in literature and myth as well as social and economic narratives past and present. For individuals, the relationship with this multi-dimensional history varies. In the work of Ambrose Burne we see a maker who works in much the same way as the smiths of the past when they arrived at what is now considered a traditional vernacular, he looks directly and freshly to the natural world to define his own expressive forms, drawing upon growth and movement from the structures of plants and shells. Analysing shapes, rhythms, patterns, to find forms and lines that can be the starting point for a design, he explores how a material as hard and heavy as steel can express the velocity and vitality of the organic; resulting in works which are rich, both in historic references and contemporary design values. When it is used as a verb, forge is often used in the context of driven change and innovation: 'to forge ahead' or forge something new, the objects here all represent the work of artists concerned with originality and the context of the contemporary world in which they live.

Christian Vaughan Jones's work speaks of architecture, of tactility, and process. The structures of heavy, cracked stone and pinned, forged steel both repel and support one another. There is both balance and tension, and each piece, regardless of its actual size, has a monumental impact. The purposeful cracking of the stone and the natural self-framing of each piece through its metal structures shows how boundaries can work for and against each other. The relationships between the compressive but brittle stone and the binding strong steel are communicated as dynamic statements of opposing force.

In his extraordinarily finely crafted objects Stephen Yusko explores ideas of 'home' by using salvaged material with its own layers of meaning. He extrapolates and redefines details providing a counterpoint between what the object was and what it has become. The lids on Yusko's exquisite boxes capture the inherent plasticity of hot forged steel and convey a surprising tenderness in the gentle fit of lid to body and convey a feeling of warmth and caress.

Richard Smith's works evoke both the uncompromising geometry of architectural shapes allied to the plastic forms and colour of geological strata. Light plays off the surface textures of metal that has been moved through hours of painstaking repoussè, a time honoured

process applied to produce an innovative and personal outcome. These complex compositions offer a solemnity and presence as the viewer explores the reflective quality of the meticulously textured facets, contours and forms.

The range of pieces in the exhibition might suggest these international artist blacksmiths work mainly on smaller scale objects, but Francisco Gazitua is far from alone in bringing an individual voice to very large scale pieces of architectural metal work and public art works, as exemplified by *Rosa Nautica*, which stands over twenty metres high and is installed in Toronto, Canada, or *Huechuraba* which stands at eleven metres and is installed in Santiago, Chile; maquettes of both these works are exhibited in 'Forge' alongside photographs of the completed installed works and demonstrate the artists' ability to translate a monumental concept in all scales.

The artist blacksmiths featured are all members of the different local, national and international associations that are a feature of the discipline. Perhaps because of its strength and structural qualities the medium lends itself not only to collaborative working, but to the creation of large scale public structures. Such pieces are embodiments of this coherent and cohesive "Community of Practice" within Artist Blacksmithing. As part of this process the greater community of blacksmiths will often come together to collaborate and work together to design and construct permanent pieces with explicit meanings and intentions, such as the Peace Monument (Ypres, 2016). They are testament also to a generosity of spirit within the craft that enables skills and knowledge to be exchanged with a new generation.

Whilst there have been a growing number of international exhibitions giving blacksmithing visibility and stimulating new work, this exhibition breaks new ground in the UK. Here the very strength of traditional blacksmithing practice, and a persistent cultural tradition of rural nostalgia, may arguably have hindered artist blacksmithing from gaining wider recognition as a contemporary art form. We hope these fifteen international artists will have a significant impact on current thinking about forged metal art and demonstrate creative and conceptual working with forged metal to be a meaningful and innovative international discipline.

Some of the exhibitors combine teaching, academic research and scholarship with their forged metal practice - Daniel Randall (USA / Appalachian Center for Craft, Tennessee Tech University), Fred Truus (Estonia / Estonia Academy of Arts), Nils Hint (Estonia / Estonian Academy of Arts), Ambrose Burne (Wales / Hereford College of Arts), Takayoshi Komine (Japan / University of Tokyo). Two exhibitors are Professors within their institutions; Professor Heiner Zimmermann (Germany / University of Gothenburg, HDK Steneby) and Professor Richard Smith (USA / University of Illinois). Most produce works for exhibition, as well as private and public commissions and public artworks - Francisco Gazitua (Chile), Stephen Yusko (USA), Claudio Bottero (Italy), Egor Bavykin (Russia), Patrick Quinn (USA) Leszek Sikon (Poland) and Christian Vaughan Jones (Wales) and many are represented internationally in a number of museum collections.

The aim of this exhibition is not to undervalue the skills and traditions that underpin contemporary artist blacksmithing but to capture this new contemporary and forward-facing perspective. It is also something of a call to arms for more recognition and critical consideration of the creative work of artist blacksmithing beyond the discipline, as well as a strengthening within it of our own reflection and critical conversation.

Together the selected makers and their work present us with a series of conversations that speak to both tradition and the contemporary crafts landscape; each forged metal object is unique, reflecting the individual practice of each maker. However, all share an emphasis on material, process and concept that represents the power, quality and contemporary relevance of artists who work at the forge.

Delyth Done has become a leading international scholar in the discipline of Artist Blacksmithing. Done moved from teaching ceramics in Cardiff a decade ago to work with degree students studying Artist Blacksmithing. This marked the beginning of a fascination with forged metal; the students studying it, the objects and architectural ironwork they make and the wider community of practice. Leading the BA (Hons) course in Artist Blacksmithing at Hereford College of Arts, she has curated national and international exhibitions and is a council member of the British Artist Blacksmiths Association. As part of her research and teaching practice, she has co-designed an innovative MA course in Contemporary Crafts .