

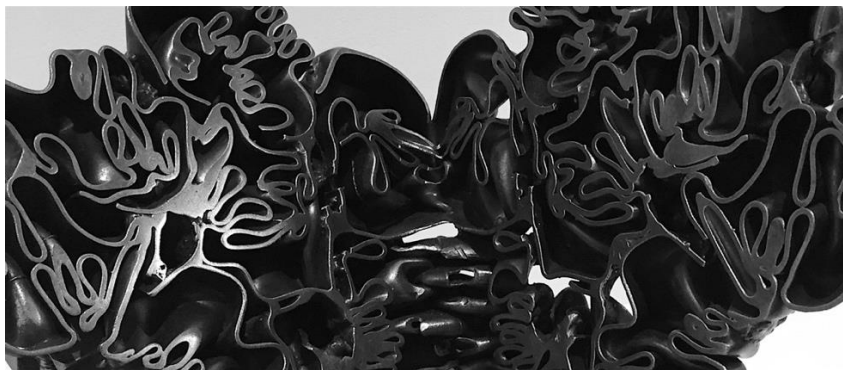
Dreaming Dangerously - Forged Realities

Forge – Ruthin Craft Centre Curator Delyth Done May 2017



René Magritte Un Séduisant Naïve D'eau Mer

The forge, a blacksmith, paintings of hearth and anvil, literature and labour, art and myth, socio- cultural and economic narratives. Past and Present. Forged metal! Always a Constructivist echo embedded in this first strike on the anvil. Reflections aplenty and concepts of course; but concepts not always conceptual enough for the language required by the academies and art councils. Yet this is language sometimes too conceptual for the quarry men, the big smith-hitters, the metal gurus....And so on, cautiously but dreaming!



Nothing in the transformation of hot metal need be explained so simply and tightly, nor need our language follow existing art discourse that it has no release. In a tension where process and material forever changes, transformations are uppermost. Recognize immediately in this tension a wonderful unease. Working a material that transforms itself from the molten state to form the folded, angled or crushed metal object. Unending, indeterminate, resistance: this practice of forged metal.



An idea is born, steel is struck, history is melted and the conversation is so hot. Or at least that's what appears in the exhibition *Forge*. The idiom *step up to the plate* has more than passing chance significance here. *Forge* is a discourse waiting to happen. It's worth a diversion. In the 1960s, a book emerged into the architectural world called *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. It was historical, contemporary, provocative and seminal, written by the scholar architect Robert Venturi. It suggested something simple in no 'unsimple' terms. The singularity of a Modern Architecture - probably up until that point considered progressive, unchallenged and the future - was about to be broken. The tradition Modernism was expected to become had not quite happened before it began to dissolve itself. But of course Modernism was no singular movement with a tacit agreement. Architecture was, instead, full of complex realities as much as it was also contradictory. It is neither an exaggeration nor misplaced to see a parallel to the inner and outer conversations going between the forged metal works in this exhibition: the works are complex, contradictory and - crucially - accessible.



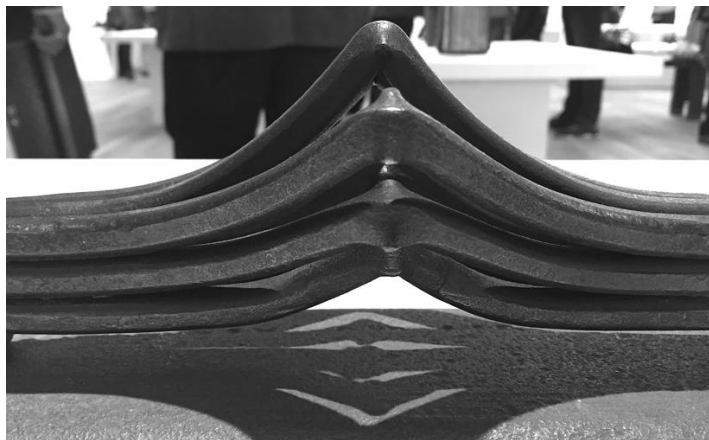
A spanner and a spoon. A Mermaid with legs. Life of course goes both ways we know that, backwards and forwards at the same time. We live both ways. Metal does that too. The paradox is transformational, in flux. Let's prepare a T-shirt slogan: *Hot metal is always Euripidean*. Or should we rather move that to read: *Heraclitus' Vision!*



Forge is a cultural slider. This exhibition breathes new life into the old vessels. Many of the contributors selected demonstrate a practice transformed through teaching and the necessity for academic and industrial research. The ambiguities in these works of metal are as clear as they need to be, open to anyone with an interest in the anvil, and anyone who thinks bending spoons is merely an illusionist's skill. Where will scholarship begin locating this practice, and what will define, even validate, its specificity? As an outsider to forged metal practices the show demonstrates ideas waiting to be occupied; ideas easily inhabited and accessible but not always instantly recognizable. Works range in scale from the bejewelled cross-dressed instruments of the scissor artist, to public art and the poised monuments de-sacralising and re-sacralising the sweat of labour past. Recast and re-fashioned farm implements and munitions recall not only the instrument of labour, the role of steel in the last century, but the bipolar lament of unexploded ordnance and the next IED waiting to fall outside Aleppo. We mourn for the tampered steel that turned objects into a narrative of our cultural history but not the grim reaper of wars, ammunition and terror. The scythe, the sickle, the rake...Krakow, Birkenau or Mosul?



Some works have the poise and balance of a fencer and the art of fencing. This is no idle aesthetics. These works rest on the eye, deceiving the operation of unfolded and splintered steel. We do not think of splintered steel but this is what is happening here. We can use the word *splinter* precisely because something unusual is in front of us. Yet we have seen it before; we recognize it in the balance of metal objects that beg a lightness out of what we imagine is so heavy. The air surrounding these works is often heavier than the objects themselves. The heaviest moment might be its lightest. The grip on the instrument might be the strongest



Take the folded troughs. Solidity empties itself here, folds curl the molten metal. Somebody stops the process – the artist, the blacksmith? - but how? This is forged metal become pastry allowed to run, folded back and collapse on itself. This is the water buffalo skin fold of steel, as if the anvil too answers back. These are witty pieces pushing meaning not only for meaning sake, but playful and delightful. Provocation asking and then answering back those ceramicists who took to precious forms like the folded plastic white coffee cup or the crumpled brown paper bag. We drink from crumpled ceramic. These works stop us at the point where steel compresses on itself. Dare we touch it when it is now so cold, so transformed from the skills and traditions of the contemporary blacksmith? Let's not go quite so far as calling this the work of the artist-blacksmith. Art councils may like such awkwardness but caution tells us this this could doom the work to redundancy. There is more presence in these works than that. There is more memory to when the metal was so molten that it could just run and run.



All the works in *Forge* nuance transformation and memory in different ways. They all measure an element of complexity and contradiction, necessary in any reflection of a strong cultural and social tradition within an open conversation. At one moment, perhaps a ridiculous thought: the artist René Magritte took the worked gates of his own art and made for those scissors with ribbed feet, tools with new extensions, new visibilities, impossibilities. *Forge* is an exhibition of works as if Magritte had let the molten steel draw itself. Mermaids run free; are these liquid dreams of a perpetual modernity?



These are not just works struck when the iron is hot. The cliché is unworthy of the way forged metal extends itself. Here we are close to a stage when the work suggests a deeper critical history. There are moments - in art, culture and industrial forms - when these forces close in on themselves, when the nostalgia for tradition cannot hold back the 'contemporary'. If industrial design relies on ambiguous clash so too this gay science of the blacksmith. *Gay* here in the Nietzschean sense (*gaiā scienza*)- *the singer, the knight and free spirit*. Here the creative and conceptual do not sink into lonely aesthetic exercise but dream and dream dangerously. Exuberance distinguishes the dance here. This is a sovereign wish. If only we knew how to get there. But there is in this a suggestion: a conference where metal gurus do not fall into any agreed language, or ideas of home and craft, but salvage and distort any new meanings achieved. Finely crafted molten steel must meet the water buffalo roughness, Zen poise and the crude explosive; a new *gaiā scienza*.



Any amount of art-critical language can be used to (critically) appreciate these works, to locate them in a (new) tradition, to situate them in a critical thinking, even to hold them back. But after all that necessary fiddling, we must fall back on the obvious: If a caress is uttered in the same breath as this forged metal then we have hope. This is an acknowledgment that forged metal can carry dangerous ideas, even the memorial hybrid of stone, sweat and steel. Uppermost in all this work then is the unending transformation implied in forged metal where layers of meaning pass onto and over to other extremes. Even plasticity must be embraced like tender, marinated skin. The scar of the explosive, the de- and re-sacralizing of the sickle minus the hammer! The free spirit!



We study across time and we call this in our models and methodology the *diachronic*. We study a section in time, we call this *synchronic*. Metal goes both ways, back to the past of the industrial night, meteor, comet and shooting star. Forward to that same comet going the other way. Metal is synchronic, it collides at the same time with other technologies and poetry. It can re-script them. If an idea is born, are we sure our sensibilities are so clear and refined that this idea cannot be formed by splintering, folding, extending and collapsing the hottest of hot metal into a Heraclitean flux? *In recent years*, the catalogue has it, *the practice of artist blacksmiths has transformed*. You don't say. *Forge* is worth a visit for anyone willing to scorch hand, finger tips, eyes and the extremities of skin.



Think of everything you imagined about a blacksmith and the anvil. Think horseshoes. Think cultural significance or even D H Lawrence. Think critically and then don't be too afraid when art occasionally closes in on the sturdiest of practices and the blacksmiths strike back with an unimaginable lightness. I often visit exhibitions with a book under my arm. It's probably a security measure. If the work offers me nothing I can retire to word. The book I had for *Forge* was *Comradely Greetings* by Nadya Tolokonnikova and Slavoj Zizek (Verso 2014). In it I found this line written by Zizek on Pussy Riot: "Their message is IDEAS MATTER. They are conceptual artists in the noblest sense of the word: artist who embody an idea." Insight with courage. Can hot metal carry dangerous ideas? The answer must be the affirmative.



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