

Review: *Forge*
curated by Delyth Done
Ruthin Craft Centre
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by Alexander Kamelhair

To practice the art of blacksmithing in a contemporary context is to converse with the history of technology – the evolution of civilization and knowledge. Either directly or indirectly, the conscientious maker cannot help but acknowledge this discourse through process, and with material. It is impossible to disengage because iron is so deeply imbued with thousands of years of social history and meaning; so intertwined with our understanding of our own civilized development, that neither artist nor audience can ignore its enduring whispers. The ability to shape iron is the fundamental technological development that produced the necessary tools for efficient carpentry, masonry, agriculture, and war. Both the greatest achievements and the most harrowing challenges presented in modernity are eventually, and essentially, inconceivable without this preceding and primeval craft. It is for this reason that we must critically reconsider the artist blacksmith's potential to speak with a simultaneously personal, perennial, and relevant voice to current issues in art and architecture, society and politics.

Forge presents a collection of contemporary art and design objects crafted in iron, and specifically curated by Delyth Done (Hereford College of the Arts, GBR) to inspire such consideration. It functions as a cohesive exposition on the state-of-the-art in the first

quarter of the 21st century. Although the exhibition title proclaims the act of forging as its binding theme, it is the artists' awareness of iron's implicit material content, expressed through design and process, which proves to be the more intriguing motif. Many of the works shown pointedly reference implement, architecture, industry, and ornament, and re-examine the relationship between the most foundational of applied sciences and modern life. Those artists who seemingly neglect these themes in a formal sense still utilize many of the crucial techniques particular to the blacksmith's craft. In this way, they make more oblique, but equally insightful observations regarding the unshakable lineage of this material culture. It is a quiet deference to material, a mastery of practice, and a full commitment to the exploration of technical possibilities that binds all of these artists together. By re-examining and developing upon the fundamental techniques of metal forming, they place themselves purposefully at the intersection between a craft field that honors tradition, and an art field that prizes innovation.

What makes this exhibition truly exemplary is its rich complexity and layered content, expressed from many unique perspectives, coming from several generations and several continents. Complexity, especially when combined with diversity (as in a group exhibition), can easily become complicated-ness, often at the expense of the audience's ability to intuitively and holistically apprehend. Such is not the case here. The ample gallery space never feels cluttered or overwhelming. There is just enough information presented to keep an audience engaged, but not so much that proper attention

might not be paid to each deserving work. And proper attention *is* necessary because there seems to be a general aesthetic taste for understated sophistication amongst these artists. There is a sense of modesty in the room. This is not to say that any of these works are not worthy of the spotlight, or that they sheepishly recede from it, but neither does any artist scream for more attention than his peers. Instead, each work quietly and confidently testifies to its genesis in the forge, and indicates the taciturn assuredness of a master humbly attending to the work. This is intimacy exquisitely manifest in craftsmanship, and the most profound concepts reveal themselves only once genuine trust has been established.

While many of the artists express overtly socio-political concerns regarding economic and developmental stagnation, violence, and occupation, other works speak to a more phenomenal understanding of the world. Such ideas are less literal, more ostensibly tactile, and generally manifest in either abstraction or function, eschewing literal symbolism altogether. By exposing the internal drama inherent to material and form through mastery of process, these artists likewise expose the internal drama inherent to each of us, as defining of our psychological experience of the world. Still, seemingly none can escape the burdened techno-historical implications of the practice – if there is even any desire to do so. And why should there be? This tertiary frame of reference only compounds the opportunity to find richer meaning in the work.

The main thrust of *Forge* is its successful endeavor to present the art of blacksmithing as a wholly vital and diverse practice, and as a suitable avenue for progressive art-making in a contemporary context. This work cannot be seen as antiquated because these artists show that there is so much yet to be explored and challenged within the perceived confines of a traditional practice. This is not an outmoded craft, brutally shackled to history, and unable to evolve, but one which can – and must – consciously refer to the past in order to understand its condition in the present, so that it might propose any number of visions for the future. In a 21st century art world that has so thoroughly embraced cutting-edge technological innovation and heretofore-unknowable materials, the sculptural experience can often feel exhilarating, but disconnected – spectacular while conceding to inevitable alienation. It can be wholly disorienting. With this exhibition, it is refreshing to congregate with sympathetic minds, via their work, on *terra firma* while one quietly contemplates the complex experience of the present at a singular point, centered within an expansive social chronology. The psychological stillness affords one the space to more carefully consider her/his role in this continuum, while each artist introduces a unique and thoughtful perspective, momentarily isolated from the incoherent noise of a world that otherwise seems to be quickly losing its sense of itself.

Artists: Egor Bavykin (RUS), Claudio Bottero (ITA), Ambrose Burne (GBR), Francisco Gazitua (CHL), Nils Hint (EST), Christian Vaughan Jones (GBR), Takayoshi Komine (JPN), Daniel Neville (USA), Patrick J. Quinn (USA), Daniel Randall (USA), Leszek Sikoń (POL), Richard Smith (USA), Fred Truus (EST), Stephen Yusko (USA), Heiner Zimmerman (DEU)

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