

## Contemporary artists explore and expand on the qualities of metal



Charlotte Charbonnel, *Train End*, 2016; Measuring tool and stainless rods, 11 7/8 x 13 3/8 in.; Courtesy of Backslash; Photo courtesy the artist; © Charlotte Charbonnel.

**WASHINGTON, DC.-** The National Museum of Women in the Arts is presenting *Heavy Metal—Women to Watch 2018*, which highlights contemporary women artists working with a variety of metals and techniques to create artworks such as wall-size installations, exquisite jewelry and reinventions of familiar objects. On view June 28–Sept. 16, 2018, the exhibition features 20 artists and more than 50 works of art made from silver, copper, bronze, pewter, aluminum and more.

Inspired by NMWA's collection of silverwork crafted by British and Irish women in the 18th and 19th centuries, *Heavy Metal* seeks to further disrupt the predominantly masculine narrative that surrounds metalworking despite women's consistent presence in the field for centuries. This narrative is rooted, in part, in the gendered discourse surrounding the traditional distinctions between fine art, design, craft and decorative art. While large-scale bronze and steel sculptures made by men are hailed as "fine" art, subtle and more delicate works in metal, towards which women have been historically encouraged, are often dismissed as craft or "decorative" art.

"The idea that metalworking is too physically demanding for women to do is pervasive in historical as well as contemporary discourse," said NMWA Director Susan Fisher Sterling. "The contemporary artists selected for the 2018 installment of *Women to Watch*—and NMWA's own collection of 18th and 19th-century silver by women—contradict this archaic notion."

*Heavy Metal* is the fifth installment in NMWA's dynamic *Women to Watch* exhibition series, which is presented every two to three years. The series features emerging or underrepresented artists from the states and countries in which the museum has outreach committees. Twenty participating committees worked with curators in their respective regions to create shortlists of artists working with metal. From these lists, NMWA curators selected the artists whose work is on view in *Heavy Metal*.

"Like modern-day alchemists, artists working in metal transform their materials into valuable and unique objects," said NMWA Associate Curator Virginia Treanor. "*Heavy Metal* demonstrates that contemporary women artists carry on a vibrant legacy in metalwork."

From the sleek Minimalist aluminum forms of Rana Begum to the rough-hewn quality of Alejandra Prieto's iron pyrite sculptures, the featured artists delight in the physical properties of their chosen medium. Some artists revel in the manipulation and fabrication of the material, while others source their medium from existing, often discarded objects. Alice Hope arranges used aluminum can tabs and ball chains to create mesmerizing, large-scale installations. Paula Castillo also uses readily available materials, particularly industrial by-products. She fashions these pieces into sculptures by first modeling the forms using computer software and then welding individual components together. Carolina Sardi and Kelsey Wishik both manipulate steel to create their vastly different forms.

The durability of metal attracts artists who seek to encapsulate memory, either collective or personal. Leila Khoury creates industrial-looking works that serve as indelible monuments to places threatened or destroyed by war in Syria. The wearable art of Kerianne Quick is likewise inspired by the effects of war, particularly the objects carried by those who are forced to flee.

From the macrocosm of the universe to the microcosm of the molecular makeup of metal, the natural world provides fertile ground for inspiration. Blanca Muñoz explores phenomena of space and light through undulating forms, while Serena Porrati experiments with the properties of different metals and ponders the endless cycle of mining, smelting, use and re-use of the material. Charlotte Charbonnel finds beauty in the visualization of magnetic fields using ferrite filings, and Beverly Penn memorializes the transience of nature with botanically inspired forms.

Jewelers represented in *Heavy Metal* push the boundaries of the category with works ranging from darkly fanciful pieces by Lola Brooks to the oceanic forms of Cheryl Eve Acosta. Petronella Eriksson also finds inspiration in nature, particularly the forests of her native Sweden. Susie Ganch uses her training as a jeweler to create large sculptures that retain the delicacy of ornamentation.

Some artists play with the masculine associations of metalwork to engage with ideas about traditional feminine roles. Holly Laws takes discarded wooden ironing boards and tops them with copper and bronze elements that transform these instruments of drudgery into something altogether more threatening and sinister. Venetia Dale works in pewter to evoke the colonial market for that material, particularly in the Boston area, and to examine the gendered market for household goods. Katherine Vetne also explores this market by using objects such as the crystal pitchers common to wedding registries, which she melts down and coats with silver nitrate. Through her wearable sculptures, Carolina Rieckhof Brommer considers the paradox of home as both haven and prison for women.