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*Lisa Geertsen:*

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*Uncommon  
Smith*

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*by Lisa Geertsen,  
Seattle, WA*

*Photos by  
Lisa Geertsen  
unless otherwise indicated.*



*Above:  
Lisa Geertsen  
Left:  
Milagro Cantina.  
Commission for a restaurant  
Steel 24' x 6-1/2' x 2-1/2'*

**A**s an artist-blacksmith based in Seattle, Washington, I feel fortunate to have lived in the Pacific Northwest for over 20 years. I was welcomed almost immediately into the local blacksmithing community. Washington is a part of the country that has a high percentage of woman smiths, which is a big reason I made the decision to follow blacksmithing as my path in life.

I graduated with a BFA in sculpture from West Virginia University and moved to Washington State in 1997. I had no plans to stay, but I fell head over heels with the beauty of the trees, the mountains, and the water in this area.

I found a job at an architectural ironwork business that had a blacksmith shop, equipped with two pneumatic power hammers, two gas forges, plenty of anvils and other tools. They hired me because I could weld and I had a good attitude. I was drawn to the forge and my coworkers work, however, I had never worked in a fabrication shop and had no experience with forging. Taking any opportunity to practice forging, I stayed late after work and came in on the weekends. I learned quite a bit from working and wanted to learn more.

The lead blacksmith was Laura Goemat. In 1999, she gave me some basic lessons and invited me to come with her to a blacksmith's conference. The conference was at Alan Flashing's shop in Oregon and Paul and Heiner Zimmermann were the demonstrators; I was completely amazed. I met most of the Seattle area smiths that day, many of whom are now dear friends.

The company I was working for was struggling. I needed steady work, so I got a job working for an art fabrication company where I learned much about fabrication and that side of the public art world. I was the first woman they hired (for the shop floor) and most everyone treated me like family. I loved that job, but I missed forging; I was still being pulled towards the fire. So, I kept in touch with the blacksmiths by going to conferences when affordable. After a short time in Florida, I came back to Seattle. I shared space with some other local smiths in a building where there were at least seven other blacksmith shops. The women there told me that if I truly wanted to pursue this, I should consider working for Darryl Nelson (Meridian Forge in Eatonville, Washington). They all had worked for him and said that it was a turning point in their careers. So, I took the challenge.

Never having met him, I drove out to his shop at the base of Mt. Rainier. He had me follow along as he made an Italian leaf. That same day, Gary Eagle was visiting him to discuss a project they were working on. I had never seen such beautiful work before. I complimented Gary on his work and said I didn't think I could ever be able to make anything as beautiful. His reply will always stick with me: "Oh sure you can; it's not that hard. You just have to keep after it. But remember to always have fun with it." I took that to heart.



*Above left and above: Simperman Home Railing. Detail and long view of custom railing at a private residence. Blending the organic feel of the garden in with the fabricated railing in which it is incorporated. Powder coated steel.*

*Left: Simperman Railing. Mounted to a pony wall at a private residence. Steel Rhododendron leaves mirror the plant behind the rail.*



I am forever grateful for the three years I spent working for Darryl. I had never worked that hard in my life or learned so much. I further learned that I have limits: While I enjoy working hard and doing a job well, I recognize when I have passed the point of doing good work and need to stop. These lessons can be hard to swallow, but they are invaluable.

After working for Darryl, my husband (at that time) and I started our business, Firelight Forge. We moved our shop to a building with many other artists and it was a good fit. We made architectural and artistic metalwork for five years, until we split up.

I continue to run the business on my own, working with clients directly. Most of them choose a combination of forged and fabricated work. Much of my inspiration comes from nature and organic forms, so I enjoy incorporating them into my designs. I also really enjoy working with nonferrous metals; so, it's exciting when a client is willing to have copper or bronze in a commission, even though the material cost is much higher than steel.

My work is infused with a narrative that at times is easily communicated by the piece. Or, it may be underlying just enough that the viewer is drawn to their own story. When doing commissions, I often ask the client about what they like or if they want a specific theme; the goal is to weave a story into the work. It may be as simple as using a plant form that is special to them or fusing small details with meaning into the design. In this way I can make things for my clients that are special; things that they will live with for many years that are specific to their story.



*Above:*  
*Norm's Restaurant Railing.*  
*Steel*  
*8' x 40" x 1"*  
*Commission cafe railing for a restaurant.*

In 2007, I was hired at Pratt Fine Arts Center as a forging instructor; something that has brought me great joy. Though it was terrifying in the beginning, I love teaching. It's energizing to see the same spark in a student's face that I had when I started forging. In 2013, Pratt hired me as their Sculpture Studio Manager, and I have grown the forging department far beyond what it once was. We offer at least four sessions of adult forging classes, meeting once a week for six weeks, cycling every eight weeks. We also offer welding and forging for teens on Fridays during the school year and summer nearly every weekday. Teaching a maximum of eight students, we fill almost every class.

In addition to the forging department, I also manage stone carving, bronze casting, and welding. Because this is a part-time facility, we employ local artists. This aspect has opened my community of artists beyond what I could have imagined. I am thrilled that I can hire women to teach skills that are traditionally thought of as masculine. Pratt has a wonderful family of instructors and staff and thus I am grateful to be part of its community. For more information about Pratt Fine Arts Center please visit our website at [www.pratt.org](http://www.pratt.org)



*Top and detail above:*  
*Tiny Weapons RAD.*  
*Mild steel, various sizes.*  
*These were a series I did for the*  
*"Ring A Day" challenge in 2017.*  
*Photos by Michelle Smith Lewis*

In 2017, I decided to participate in an online challenge called: Ring A Day. Participants were asked to complete a ring each day and post a photo online. Not being a jeweler, I was a bit intimidated at the idea, but what I found was an abundance of inspiration. I took time each day to make my ring whether it was a forged piece, a twist tie, or a concept of a ring. To see what other people made, go to Instagram: #ringaday2017. That challenge made me think outside my normal realm. With the forged pieces, it challenged me to think about form in a very small scale.

I began making the tiny weapon rings as a reaction to how I was feeling at the time. Some of us have so many battles to fight and so often it feels as though the weapons we have in our armory are too small to have an effect. But, with enough of them and with persistence, no matter how small they are, no matter how small we are, they/we become significant. On a process level, I challenged myself to make them from one piece; no connections, no added parts. Overall, it was an excellent challenge that led me to make the tiny cutlery sold at my studio during the last holiday season.

There's just something about the very tiny, extremely sharp, fully hand-forged things that make me smile. They made other people smile as well.

During the end of 2017 and the beginning of 2018, I was fortunate to have a fabrication job that allowed me to hire helpers. One was a young woman new to Seattle and the other was a local female metalworker. With their help, we got the massive fabrication project finished on time. I was able to use that income to cover my studio expenses in order to prepare for my solo show in the spring. The venue was a theater with three floors of gallery space, normally occupied by large group exhibitions. I proposed this to be *A Show of Hearts* to exhibit the pieces from my *Heart Series*.

My concept for this ongoing show is to make a series of sculptures that involve anatomical hearts and a surrounding that lends itself to the title. This often involves some sort of wordplay or use of the word "heart" in our everyday language. The sculptures begin with the title, a word or phrase I hear in conversation, a song, a poem, a plant, or a story shared by a friend. I have been working with this concept since 2005 and enjoy the constant influx of ideas for new pieces.



*Above:*  
*Tiny Sharp Things.*  
*Spears are 4" at the largest and the smallest butcher knife is 1-1/2".*  
*Made for sale during the holidays. They are mild steel and sharp!*

*Right:*  
*Guarded V-2. (From the "Heart Series".)*  
*36" x 15" x 5"*  
*Steel, copper, walnut, leather*  
*Photo by Michelle Smith Lewis*



Everyone can relate to the heart, as it is something we all possess. It is a symbol of life, strength and human emotion. I mean to engage the viewer physically or conceptually with these pieces. Some are cryptic, some are meant to give you a laugh, some bear the weight of pain or loss and some are filled with joy. I completed 11 new works for this show and included every piece I still have in my possession for a total of 48 exhibited pieces. This was my largest endeavor for a solo show. To date, I have completed 59 hearts; some residing in other homes and some created after this show. My ultimate goal is to achieve 100 pieces.





**Opposite page**

*Top left: This Sky.*

*Copper, steel, glass 24" x 10" x 6"*

*Collaboration with glass artist, Tegan Hamilton*

*Photo by Michelle Smith Lewis*

*Top right: Closed.*

*reclaimed steel, mirrored stainless. 20" x 14" x 3"*

*Photo by Michelle Smith Lewis*

*Bottom left: Ohia Lehua/Metrosideros.*

*Ohia wood, steel, wrought iron, pure iron, steel, paper*

*20" x 30" x 4"*

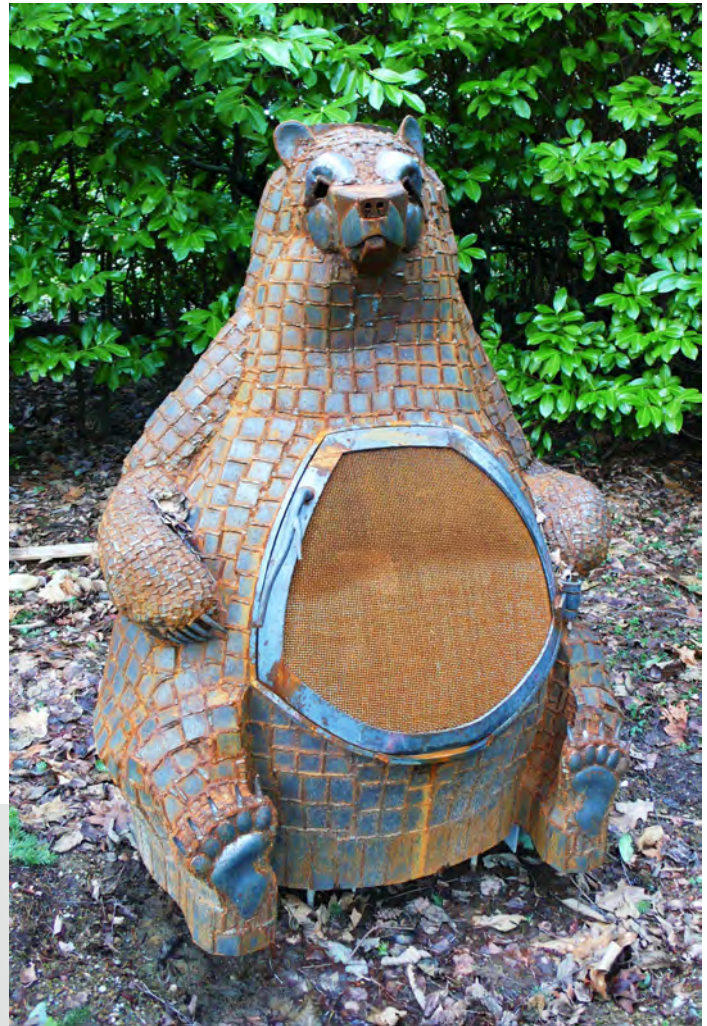
*This is the wood of the first plant to grow on a lava flow. These trees are sacred to the islands of Hawaii and are in danger of disease. The latin name of this tree is translated , "Iron Heart Wood", which is why I used both wrought Iron and pure Iron. The heart is pure iron and is placed over the location of the park.*

*Photo by Michelle Smith Lewis*

*Bottom right: Wide Open.*

*Copper, steel 30" x 12" x 8"*

*Photo by Michelle Smith Lewis*



*Right: Papa Bear*

*Steel 5.5' x 3.5' x 3.5'*

*Commissioned outdoor fireplace.*

*Below: Snoose Part Dieu back bar.*

*Copper. 24' x 3' x D- variable.*

*Custom Copper mural for a back bar in a restaurant in Seattle, WA.*





In August of 2018, I participated in an event that took nearly a year of preparation. Anne Bujold, Rachel David and I organized a gathering of female identifying blacksmiths at Mt. Hood, OR to discuss what we (the people present at this event), want to represent as the face forging in the 21st Century. We had two goals: 1.) Build a forged bench and discuss our experiences in the field. 2.) Decide what we could contribute to our community in order to fill in the gaps we see. This was the first time we (ten women from the USA and one from Australia), had ever experienced a woman-only workspace. It was empowering. The bench we completed was ambitious and beautiful. We bonded through the work, the meals, and discussions. We talked about what sort of organization to build.

We discussed how to make welcoming spaces for people of color, women and people of non-binary gender identification to learn and practice the art and craft of blacksmithing. In this way, we would be including people with an interest in the blacksmithing community who might feel marginalized or uncomfortable in a typical gathering of blacksmiths.

We decided to form the *Society of Inclusive Blacksmiths*: a group to support the craft of forging in all communities regardless of race, gender or gender identity. We are still in the growing phase, but our website is live: [InclusiveBlacksmiths.com](http://InclusiveBlacksmiths.com) From here we will be working on starting a nonprofit organization to connect smiths all over the world. A very important part of our goal is also to provide resources for folks who want to be an ally to support us and other smiths. We look forward to being able to share more about this soon.

*Right:  
SIB Bench in Progress.*

*Below:  
SIB Bench.  
Steel 4' x 5' x 2'  
This is the bench we built during our event this summer for the Society of Inclusive Blacksmiths. It resides in the sculpture garden of the Summit Art Center in Government Camp, OR.*



*Above:  
SIB Bench.  
Steel 4' x 5' x 2'*

*Right:  
Collab Forge Eye.  
This eye was part of a large piece for the collab. It was later patinated and attached to the larger sculpture.  
Photo by Ethan Fronev.*

*Bottom:  
Collab Photo.  
Photo of me and Henry Pomfret forging.  
Photo by Matthew D'Avella*







Above:  
 Collab 2018 group photo.  
 Photo by Laurel Schultz

In a year of amazing experiences, I also had the honor to be invited back to the Hawaii Artist Collaboration. This is an invitational where top-notch artists from around the world gather in one place for a week to make art together. Some folks have been a part of this since its inception eight years ago, and some are first-timers. Many of them participate in other artist collaborations all over the world. The artists cover all bases: from painting to woodworking, jewelry, ceramics, blacksmithing and more.

The majority of artists are from the islands of Hawaii, gathering in Holualoa on the Island of Hawaii at Tai Lake's workshop. The art making is spontaneous and improvisational. We are encouraged to bring materials specific to our media of choice, but there is a "parts pile" of items to spark inspiration. Artists are encouraged to step outside of their normal making mind-set to create whatever they desire. There are minimal rules, but you must collaborate.

Each year I have been happy to contribute to the blacksmithing portion of the group, working with other smiths such as Craig Campbell, Ethan Fronev, and Henry Pomfret. The days are long, working from 9AM to midnight most days, but the energy of our collaborators is inspirational. I have made some lifelong friends at this gathering and look forward to making art with them for as many years as possible. The most important thing I have taken away from this collaborative experience is that bringing someone else into your creative circle can spark wonderful possibilities.

After a few years of running my business and teaching, I was asked to be a demonstrator at the Southern Ohio Forge and Anvil conference. As intimidating as that sounded, I knew I needed to accept. You see, I was inspired to become a blacksmith because of the talented women I saw in my community. Because of them, I want to do what I can to encourage other women to try forging because we are in the minority. Since then, I have demonstrated and taught workshops for five other organizations and schools, as well in my local organization, the Northwest Blacksmith Association. It was an honor to be asked back this past year as a demonstrator for SOFA, and to have Leslie Tharp as my striker. I will accept opportunities to travel, teach and make art to further the exposure of forging. It is important for me to stand up in front of others and represent forging from my perspective; to represent the creative capability of the unexpected. ■

Lisa Geertsen, Firelight Forge, [www.firelightforge.com](http://www.firelightforge.com)

Right:  
 Eye of the  
 Craftsman.  
 Artists: Chip  
 Clawson, Lisa  
 Geertsen, Mat-  
 thew D'Avella, Ian  
 Rogers, Ron Ger-  
 ton, Rose Adare,  
 Annette Barlow.  
 Photo by  
 Matthew D'Avella

