

ELLEN HARVEY

Metal Painting

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Visiting the Barnes Foundation for the first time in 2011, artist Ellen Harvey (b. 1967) was captivated by the wrought iron keyhole escutcheons, hasps, hinges, and latches that rhythmically stud the walls of the Collection Gallery, standing on equal footing with showstopper paintings by the great modern masters: Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, among many others.

In response to Albert C. Barnes's unusual installation practice, Harvey has created a new kind of ensemble composed of life-size "portraits" of the wrought iron pieces in the Barnes collection. Painting the silhouettes of these objects and arranging them, she draws attention to the artistry of their individual forms and the process of assembling a whole.

In the interview that follows, Harvey explains the evolution of this commission by the Barnes Foundation, including her response to the traditional opposition of art and craft and to Barnes's approach to display.

COVER:

LEFT SIDE: *Door Knocker Plate (detail)*,
18th century, France. Iron,
11 ¼ × 10 × ½ in. 01.01.45b.

RIGHT SIDE: Ellen Harvey (American, born
England, 1967). *Metal Painting (detail)*,
2015. Commissioned by the Barnes
Foundation. Photo: Etienne Froissard

INTERVIEW

Judith F. Dolkart, The Mary Stripp & R. Crosby Kemper Director, Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA, and former Deputy Director of Art and Archival Collections and Gund Family Chief Curator at the Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, interviewed Ellen Harvey by e-mail in July and August 2015.

Judith F. Dolkart: What fascinated you about the wrought iron at the Barnes when you visited in 2011?

Ellen Harvey: Although I knew that the installation at the Barnes was famously idiosyncratic, I was still surprised when I first saw it. Somehow I had expected something more conventionally domestic. I found the way in which the metal pieces were interspersed with the paintings to create a formal conversation (the curve of a hinge echoing that of yet another peach-like Renoir behind, for example) to be strangely compelling—they were just so seductively odd. I immediately felt that the installation of the metalwork with the paintings was where Dr. Barnes was really revealed as an installation artist, far beyond the inevitable impress of a collector's personality on his or her collection. It seemed to me that the whole collection could truly be seen as a kind of meta-installation, as a massively ambitious piece of appropriation art.

I also just liked the look of the metal works. I could understand why Barnes loved them. I really thought they were beautiful, and I loved the fact that these humble functional objects, produced by now unknown artisans, more than held their own (for me) with some of the most famous paintings in the world. I intensely dislike the barriers that the art world sets up between artist and non-artist, so I particularly appreciated Barnes's willingness to consider these objects as aesthetic equals (or at least worthy companions) to more traditional works of art. It's just one of the many ways his relationship to art is surprising and, I think, still thought-provoking. It goes hand in hand with his obsession with making his collection available to non-traditional art audiences.

JFD: Which of these wrought iron objects appealed to you as you looked at them?

EH: I was particularly taken with the objects that I found most mystifying—where I couldn't figure out what they actually were. I suppose the best example is the hinges, which were originally deeply puzzling to me. I really wasn't sure what they were. Once you change the context of an object, it's often quite hard to figure out what it is. A hinge without a door is more like a metal drawing in space, an elegant collection of abstract curves, than the thing that it actually is. Its meaning changes utterly. I am fascinated by the idea that an object can have a completely new and compelling aesthetic meaning as a result of losing its original function,

could become an artwork despite not having originally been intended as such. There's something deeply perverse also in the fact that to become a work of art an object has to effectively become useless.

JFD: Talk a little bit about how this project has evolved since you first conceptualized it.

EH: When I started thinking about this project, I wanted somehow to "elevate" the metal works into traditional art objects—to level the playing field. Barnes had already divorced them from their original functions, but I wanted to make them even more obviously "art." They already function pretty much as sculpture, so I thought the most interesting thing would be to convert them into the medium that has overshadowed them for all these years. So from the first, I knew that I wanted to make them into paintings. I wanted them to go mano a mano with the famous painting collection. Since they are so often seen primarily as providing a background for the paintings, I originally thought to hang portraits of the metalwork over prints of the images of the painting collection. But then I thought that they really deserved to be considered on their own.

JFD: It's interesting that you think of them as sculpture, which I tend to think of as a medium in the round. Barnes seemed to opt for the flattest works possible for easy inclusion in his wall compositions.

EH: It's true that, as installed, they function more as relief than as sculpture. As someone who is primarily a painter,



RIGHT:
Ensemble view (detail), Room 1,
north wall, Philadelphia, 2012



ELLEN HARVEY



Ellen Harvey was born in England and lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. She studied at Harvard College and Yale Law School and took part in the Whitney Independent Study Program and the PSI National Studio Program. She has exhibited extensively in the United States and internationally and was included in the 2008 Whitney Biennial. Recent solo exhibitions include *The Unloved* at the Groeninge Museum, Bruges; *What is Missing?* at Meessen de Clercq, Brussels; *The Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington DC* at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington DC; *Arcade/Arcadia* at Locks Gallery, Philadelphia; *The Nudist Museum* at the Bass Museum, Miami Beach; *Ruins are More Beautiful* at the Center for Contemporary Art, Warsaw; *Mirror* at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, and *A Whitney for the Whitney at Philip Morris* at the Whitney Museum at Altria, New York. She has completed permanent installations for New York Percent For Art, New York Arts in Transit, the Chicago Transit Authority, the Flemish National Architect, and for the Federal Art in Architecture program, among others. Her book, *The New York Beautification Project*, was published by Gregory R. Miller & Co. in 2005; *Ellen Harvey: Mirror* was published by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 2006; and *Ellen Harvey: The Unloved* was published by Cannibal/Hannibal in 2014. A new comprehensive monograph, *Ellen Harvey: Museum of Failure* has just been published by Gregory Miller & Co.

FOLDOUT:

Ellen Harvey (American, born England, 1967). *Metal Painting*, 2015. Oil on wood panels, magnets, and steel sheeting, 25 x 25 ft. Commissioned by the Barnes Foundation. Photo: Etienne Froissard



although I work in a lot of other media, I suppose that anything that's not just a layer of paint seems sculptural to me. They're also definitely all objects, not images or representations. With the exception of a very few decorative pieces, they are what they are. Ironically, given their final destination, Barnes seems to have been drawn to objects that were primarily functional, where the elegance of the object arises more or less directly from its function.

JFD: How did you approach the painting?

EH: The way I painted the panels is very much in reaction to the objects themselves. It quickly became obvious that fully representational paintings of the metal works were just somehow not right. So much of the objects' beauty resides in their contours, and so few of them have any decoration, that it worked much better to just paint them as life-size silhouettes. I used a really heavy impasto metallic oil paint as a substitute for the physicality of the objects themselves. If you look carefully, you can see that the color of the white backgrounds and the metal paint is not uniform; each painting is slightly different. I wanted the paintings to reflect the handmade imperfection of the original pieces. The silhouettes are also a nice shout-out to Matisse, who came up with the idea of the cutouts as part of his Barnes commission.

JFD: Yes, your paintings do take on a decorative function when you view the entire wall of them. I also think of them as "portraits"—the portraits Barnes collected are primarily of people at the margins of society, commedia dell'arte characters or Blue Period figures by Picasso, Soutine's sitters, even Saint Francis of Assisi. By making portraits of the modest wrought iron pieces, you both capture Barnes's interest in subverting the hierarchy of the arts and valorize his interest in people who were often overlooked as subjects for paintings.

EH: I also think of the paintings as portraits. Perhaps that's why I painted all the metal pieces. Originally, I wasn't going to, but then I found that I didn't want to leave anyone (or thing) out. I also really wanted to represent the compulsiveness of Barnes's collecting—and part of that is its sheer volume. No matter how many hinges he had, it was obvious that there was always room in his heart for just one more. Amazingly, once I had finished all the paintings, they fit more or less exactly onto the wall the Barnes Foundation provided for the piece. I had been worried that they wouldn't fit so I came up with the idea of inserting magnets into the backs of the plywood panels so that I could stack them if need be without damaging the paintings.



Sign for a Locksmith,
18th century. France. Iron,
10 7/8 × 24 1/2 × 1 3/8 in. 01.16.07

The magnets also mean that the paintings can be rearranged *ad infinitum*—the thing that everyone not so secretly fantasizes about doing at the Barnes. What few people know is that the famous immovability of the collection is very much at odds with the way Barnes used his collection when he was still alive; apparently he moved stuff around constantly. The installation that we know and love today and that has been so fetishistically recreated in the new building just represents the collection as it was on the day of his death. It could very easily have been completely different. *Metal Painting* allows you to imagine that alternative reality—it can be endlessly reinstalled with no “dead hand” to say you nay.

JFD: How does this project relate to your practice?

EH: I've been obsessed with museums since I was a small child and they've informed much of my recent work. There's a reason my recent monograph is titled *Museum of Failure*. There's a glamor to the museum's density that I've never been able to resist. I really love the way museums function as a repository of many voices, a cacophony made all the more poignant by the fact that so many of those voices have been forgotten, and I've always wanted to be a part of that conversation of makers.

On a darker note, I'm also fascinated by the narrative violence that coexists with the idealism of any museum. History is written by the victor and the primary narrative of any collection is written by the collector. I think that's something I find fascinating about Barnes's collection.



Keyhole Escutcheon,
18th century. France. Iron,
11 7/8 × 2 1/2 × 3/8 in. 01.09.58

It doesn't pretend to universality; it's very obviously one man's perspective. The fact that Barnes tried to build a whole theory of art appreciation based on his own aesthetic preferences is the story of the museum writ large both for good and for ill. Like all of us, he struggled to make sense of this arbitrary category of objects and practices that we label art. It's also a fascinating example of the moment where the desire to own tips over into the desire to share. Barnes's collection is a tribute not only to one man's obsessive need to own and dominate but also to his generosity.

Metal Painting is the most recent in a long line of works that have embodied different functions of the museum: as an educational resource where artists have traditionally learned by copying the masters; as the focus for the artist's desire for legitimacy and immortality; as the plaything of the wealthy; as a socially acceptable place to look at naked people, to name just a few. *Metal Painting* is most

closely related to the other paintings I have made of collections, such as *A Whitney for the Whitney at Philip Morris* (2003) where I made an enormous walk-in painting of all 394 images in the Whitney Museum's catalog of its permanent collection, or *The Nudist Museum* (2010–2011), for which I copied every “nude” in the Bass Museum's collection and hung the results on a wall papered with images of nudes from fashion, pornographic, and fitness magazines; in its final incarnation it even had a gift shop and a postcard display. *Metal Painting* is also one of several of my works that create fictional museums or collections, such as *The Museum of Failure* (2007–2008), which attempted to create a museum where all content is obliterated by context, the trove of postcards of classical buildings collected by aliens in *The Pillar-Builder Archive* (2013) or the recreation of J. M. W. Turner's gallery to contain a panoramic view of Margate hand engraved onto rear-illuminated mirrors in *Arcade/Arcadia*, (2011–2012). In its desire to prompt a reevaluation of a museum's less famous holdings, *Metal Painting* also recalls *The Unloved* (2014) for which I installed paintings of Bruges from the Groeninge



Museum's storage behind pierced mirrors opposite an 80-foot painting of an aerial satellite view of the same locations.

Stylistically, however, *Metal Painting* is a departure for me. It's the first time that I've used magnets to create a modifiable piece. More interestingly, it doesn't look much like my other work. I generally end up embracing older more realistic art traditions. This has quite a modernist aesthetic, which is funny when you think that is entirely derived from 18th- and 19th-century folk artifacts. I suppose you could call *Metal Painting* my first “abstract” painting. Or at least it's as abstract as I'm likely to get for now.

The experience of *Metal Painting* has also made me think a great deal about some of the political implications of ornament in everyday life and of the loss of the artisanal tradition that supplied that ornament. We have stripped much of our world of ornament, but instead of replacing it with a focus on simple, beautifully designed spaces, as the modernist architects hoped, we've papered over our public spaces with garish advertising and filled our homes with cheap consumer goods that just contribute to an endless cycle of waste and consumption. We can learn a lot from the craftsmen who made the metalwork. They obviously took pride in their skills. They made things that were not only useful and durable, but a pleasure to look at. They were committed to the idea that even the most humble object could be a thing of beauty.

Decorative Foliate Plaque,
16th century. Europe. Iron,
¾ × 2 ¼ in. 01.08.76

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PHILADELPHIA, PA 19130