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Ellen Harvey Irons Out the Barnes Foundation Collection

BY Scott Indrisek | June 18, 2015



Ellen Harvey at a recent preview of her latest work, a commission for the Barnes Foundation. (Photo by Scott Indrisek)

“I think there a lot of Freudian jokes,” Ellen Harvey said, discussing some 800 objects that comprise the late Albert Barnes’s collection of ironwork, which are hung alongside the famed paintings at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia. One figurative piece, for instance, depicts what Harvey termed a “priapic dog-devil” posed next to an angel. “Is that a fifth leg?” she wondered, pointing out a suspicious appendage, “or is that what I think it is?” Elsewhere, the artist finds a shared element in the ironwork’s swooping curves — “Fallopian tubes,” she said, when I asked her what visual properties unite the collection. “And look how many look like little buttocks, little bum-curves.”

Who knew ironwork could be so sexy? Harvey has had plenty of time to ponder the intricacies, Freudian and otherwise, of the Barnes collection: She’s been meticulously painting each piece for a commission that debuts at the foundation on September 19. Titled “Metal Painting,” the wall-covering work is composed of individual paintings magnetically affixed to a metal support. (This week, Harvey previewed an in-progress version of the installation at a studio in Greenpoint, Brooklyn.) Harvey’s commission — the latest in a series of collaborations that the Barnes Foundation has undertaken with contemporary artists — will open in conjunction with “Strength and Splendor,” a survey of additional ironwork on loan from the Musée Le Secq des Tournelles in Rouen, France. Curator Judith Dolkart, speaking at the installation preview, said that Barnes “regarded the metalwork to have equal footing with the paintings in his collection.” That’s a philosophy that Harvey expanded upon with her commission. “What if you take the metalwork and turn it into a painting? And why is something more artistic because it’s useless?” she wondered. “Let the hinge have its moment!”

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The effect of Harvey's "Metal Painting" is of a massive wall of computer icons, as if all of Barnes's wrought-iron bounty were arrayed on the screen of a laptop. Silhouetting the individual objects allowed them to be seen in a new light. "When you make them flat they look very contemporary, and so fashionable," she said. "I hadn't thought of them that way. And I like this idea that you can see the entire mania of Barnes's collection in one glance. There's a crazy side to collecting, and I wanted to say: Check out the craziness." Each piece's outline is hand-painted, with the occasional wobbly line ("I like things to be a little pathetic," Harvey explained).

(Left) Bolt, 17-18 century, Spain. (Right) Hinge 16-17 century, Germany. Photo © 2015 The Barnes Foundation

The artist herself is no stranger to collecting, nor to artworks whose individual components number in the hundreds — her "Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C." included more than 4,000 postcards. In general, though, her passion isn't nearly as voracious as Barnes's. (Harvey's son, who is 8, might provide more competition: He's got extensive home-museums of both found bottlecaps and minerals.) "I really wanted to collect knives as a kid," she recalled. "I got to knife number four and my parents were like, No way. So I switched to collecting fans — which were, fascinatingly, a sublimated version of the knife. But now I'm a grown-up, so I could start collecting knives again! I bought myself a sword. But one sword is not enough. I could have more swords." She paused to consider the Barnesian possibilities. "I could have a sword collection."