

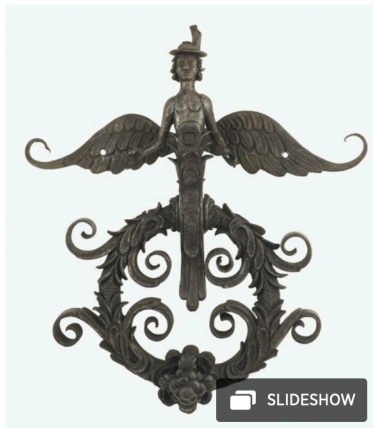
Art: Barnes goes elemental with iron

Updated: OCTOBER 18, 2015 — 11:10 AM EDT

by **Thomas Hine**, Inquirer Contributing Art Critic

The Inquirer
DAILY NEWS philly.com

Hard as it may be to believe, the Barnes Foundation has even more wrought iron on its walls than it does Renoirs. The permanent galleries hold some 887 hinges, keyhole escutcheons, farm implements, pieces of Conestoga wagons, and other mostly functional objects. They are a large part of what gives the place its character, its weirdness.



Art: Barnes goes elemental with iron

Since its galleries were transplanted to the Parkway in 2012, the Barnes has done a series of special exhibitions intended to cast a light on what Albert Barnes collected and the way he showed the collection. The latest, "Strength and Splendor: Wrought Iron from the Musée Le Secq des Tournelles, Rouen," features objects more refined and complex than most of the iron he collected.

And while Barnes cast metalwork in a supporting role in the galleries, here the iron takes center stage, and justifiably so. These locks, tools, shop signs, door knockers - there's even a corset and a very menacing iron hand -

fuse the skill of the blacksmith with the sensibility of the jeweler.

• • •

Barnes began to collect ironwork after he had already amassed nearly all the paintings for which his collection is known, and clearly he sought pieces that would look good hanging on the wall with his art. This brought a bias toward the two dimensional, and disregard for the item's function. Often, the iron pieces hang in such a way that it is impossible to figure out what they are. Their graphic profile is all that matters. For this exhibition, the Barnes commissioned a work, *Metal Painting* by Ellen Harvey, which is a great educational tool. She has painted the outlines of all 887 pieces of metalwork in the galleries - at actual size - onto blocks of wood to which magnets have been attached. Unlike the works on the Barnes walls, they can be moved around on the metal panel to which they adhere, but they are shown like a huge, somewhat enigmatic jigsaw puzzle. The number and variety of the pieces is impressive, though the painting itself does not celebrate or emulate the craftsmanship of the objects themselves.

BUM CURVES AND HINGES

Ironing Out the Barnes Foundation

"THERE ARE A lot of Freudian jokes," Ellen Harvey says, discussing the more than 800 objects that make up the late Albert Barnes's collection of ironwork that hangs 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 wonders, 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 says when I ask 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 painting each piece for a commission that debuts at the foundation September 19. Titled *Metal Painting*, the wall-covering work is composed of panels magnetically affixed to a metal support. Harvey's commission—one in a series that the institution has undertaken with contemporary artists—will open in conjunction with "Strength and Splendor," a survey of ironwork on loan from the Musée Le Secq des Tournelles in Rouen, France. Curator Judith Dolkart, speaking at a preview of the commission, says that Barnes "regarded the metalwork to have equal footing with the paintings in his collection." That's an opinion Harvey expanded upon with her commission. "What if you take the metalwork and turn it into a painting? Why is something more artistic because it's useless?" she queries. "Let the hinge have its moment!"

The effect of Harvey's *Metal Painting* is of a massive wall of



Ellen Harvey in her Brooklyn studio, working on *Metal Painting*, 2015.

icons, as if all of Barnes's wrought-iron bounty were arrayed on a computer screen. "I like this idea that you can see the entire mania of Barnes's collection in one glance," she explains. "I wanted to say: Check out the craziness." Each piece's outlines are hand-painted, with the occasional wobbly line ("I like things to be a little pathetic," Harvey explains). 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. "I really wanted to collect knives as a kid," she recalls. "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 pauses to consider the Barnesian possibilities. "I could have a sword *collection*..." —SCOTT INDRISEK

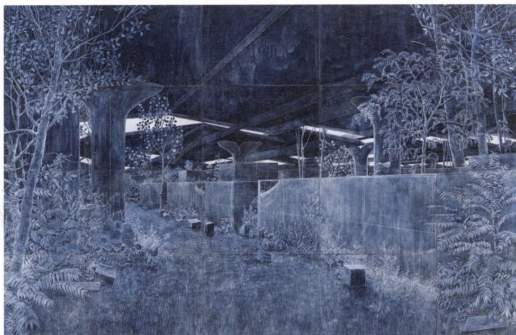
USA

ELLEN HARVEY**The Barnes Foundation and Locks Gallery, Philadelphia**

In a 2015 interview with Adam Budak, Ellen Harvey observed: 'For me, the museum exists as an aspirational space, continually collapsing under the weight of its hopes and dreams, much like my own projects.' Since the late 1990s, Harvey has consistently submitted her artistic identity to the same careful scrutiny she applies to cultural institutions. Her two concurrent exhibitions in Philadelphia – the installation *Metal Painting* (2015) at the Barnes Foundation and 'The Museum of Ornamental Leaves and Other Monochromatic Collections' at Locks Gallery – continue these dual lines of inquiry. In both exhibitions, Harvey constructs generative feedback loops between familiar museological or archival questions and the endlessly fruitful failure of painting as a contemporary medium.

The newly commissioned *Metal Painting* is a companion to the Barnes's major historical exhibition 'Strength and Splendour: Wrought Iron from the Musée Le Secq des Tournelles, Rouen'; in turn, both exhibits respond to the museum's permanent display of metalwork, which hangs alongside a primarily impressionist and post-impressionist collection – a curatorial choice that deliberately flattens the historical hierarchy between fine and decorative art. 'Strength and Splendour' presents on plinths intricately worked artefacts – locks and keys, street signs, trowels – to highlight their sculptural qualities and socio-historical functions. By contrast, Harvey's installation comprises more than 800 one-to-one scale oil-on-board silhouettes of every piece of metalwork in the Barnes's collection. Deliberately crude with roughly textured, almost impasto paint, these black and white paintings are magnetically mounted to a wall, as a reference to iron. They interlock salon-style, a nod to the Barnes's hallmark display mode, and are spatially categorized according to a puzzling system devised by Harvey. Despite its monumental scale, the display is easy to miss, partially hidden behind tall, white walls that corral it from the open-plan gallery space. In this context of shifting classifications, Harvey seems to be questioning the position of her own painting, as both a series of objects and a practice.

Harvey's sensitivity to classifications in word and image runs throughout both exhibitions. At Locks Gallery, the homonym 'leaves' of the show's title appears as a visual pun: in *The Forest of Obsolete Ornaments* (2015), flourishes from Corinthian capitals cast in glue are sorted into idiosyncratic categories and mounted on clay board over an oil sketch of woodland foliage. Flora creeps around a blandly modern derelict building in the large-scale painting *New Forest/The Internal Revenue Office Reforested* (2013), invoking the melancholy sense of 'leave' – from abandoned buildings to the forgotten treasures of museum archives. Paintings, too, succumb to entropy: *Craquelure Paintings 1, 2 and 3* (2015) mimics the finely blistered surface of aged pigment or varnish, magnified on three interlocking panels. By presenting



1

a constructed 'crackle', the work conjures forgery as much as authentic antiquity. In the past, Harvey frequently copied and reappropriated old master paintings – Lucas Cranach the Elder, Thomas Gainsborough, J.M.W. Turner – to explore painting's continuing high-art status despite its diminishing social use-value. In *Craquelure*, more concise means make a similar point. On display at Locks Gallery, flanked by arboreal imagery, these paintings' textured surfaces recall exfoliating bark. As with *Metal Painting*, context is (almost) everything.

'Narrative structure [...] is highly dependent on when it was constructed,' Harvey told Budak. 'Hindsight lends experience a spurious coherence.' Taken together, the tales of obsolescence in Harvey's elegiac Locks Gallery exhibition create a new setting for the story of its theatrical centrepiece, *Alien Souvenir Stand* (2013). First exhibited at the now-defunct Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., as part of Harvey's playful 2013 project *The Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington, DC*, the absurdist installation – literally a tourist truck hand-painted with the imaginary ruins of Washington's neoclassical state architecture – is recontextualized here as mournfully prophetic given the shock of the Corcoran collection's deaccession in 2014. The Barnes's controversial 2012 move from its historical location in Merion, Pennsylvania, to Philadelphia makes it a similarly appropriate candidate for Harvey's form of institutional critique. There, her salon-style hang and dry-humoured conflation of metal and painting draw attention to the Barnes's flawed attempt to preserve its founder's collecting philosophy despite a forced shift in display context. Both exhibitions address the ways in which museums, far from being mere keepers of history, can animate, distort and, at times, even erase the narratives they aspire to preserve.

BECKY HUFF HUNTER

1

Ellen Harvey
*New Forest/The Internal Revenue
 Office Reforested*, 2013, acrylic, oil
 and varnish on 20 wood panels,
 2.3 x 4.1 m