

METAL

SMITH

ART
DESIGN
JEWELRY
METAL

Dual Harmony:
Myung Urso



Material Girls:
Heavy Metal at
the National
Museum for Women
in the Arts

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Craft to the
Second Power



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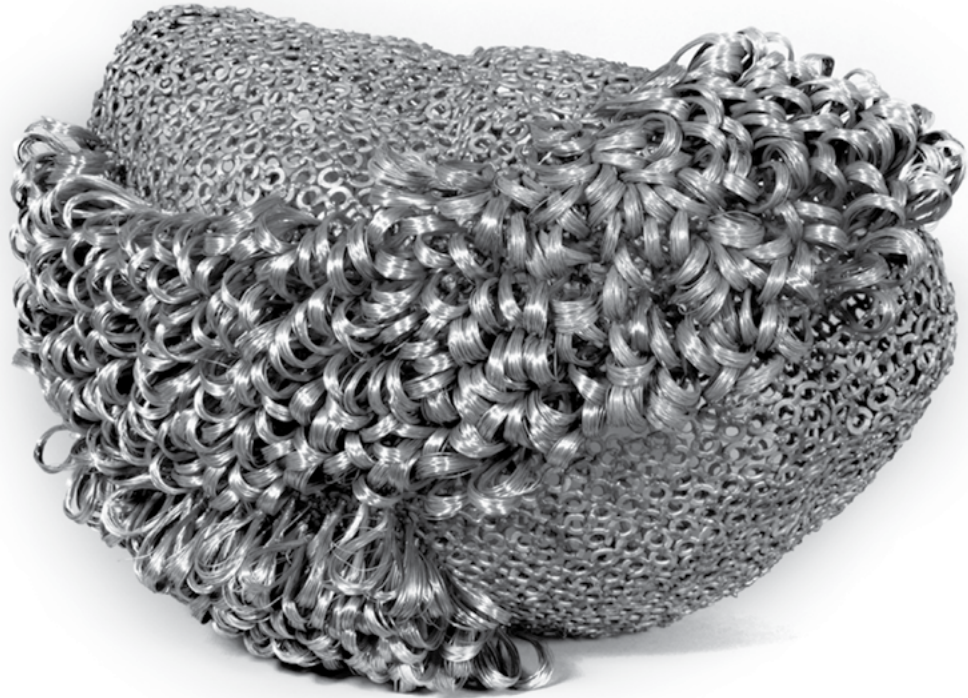
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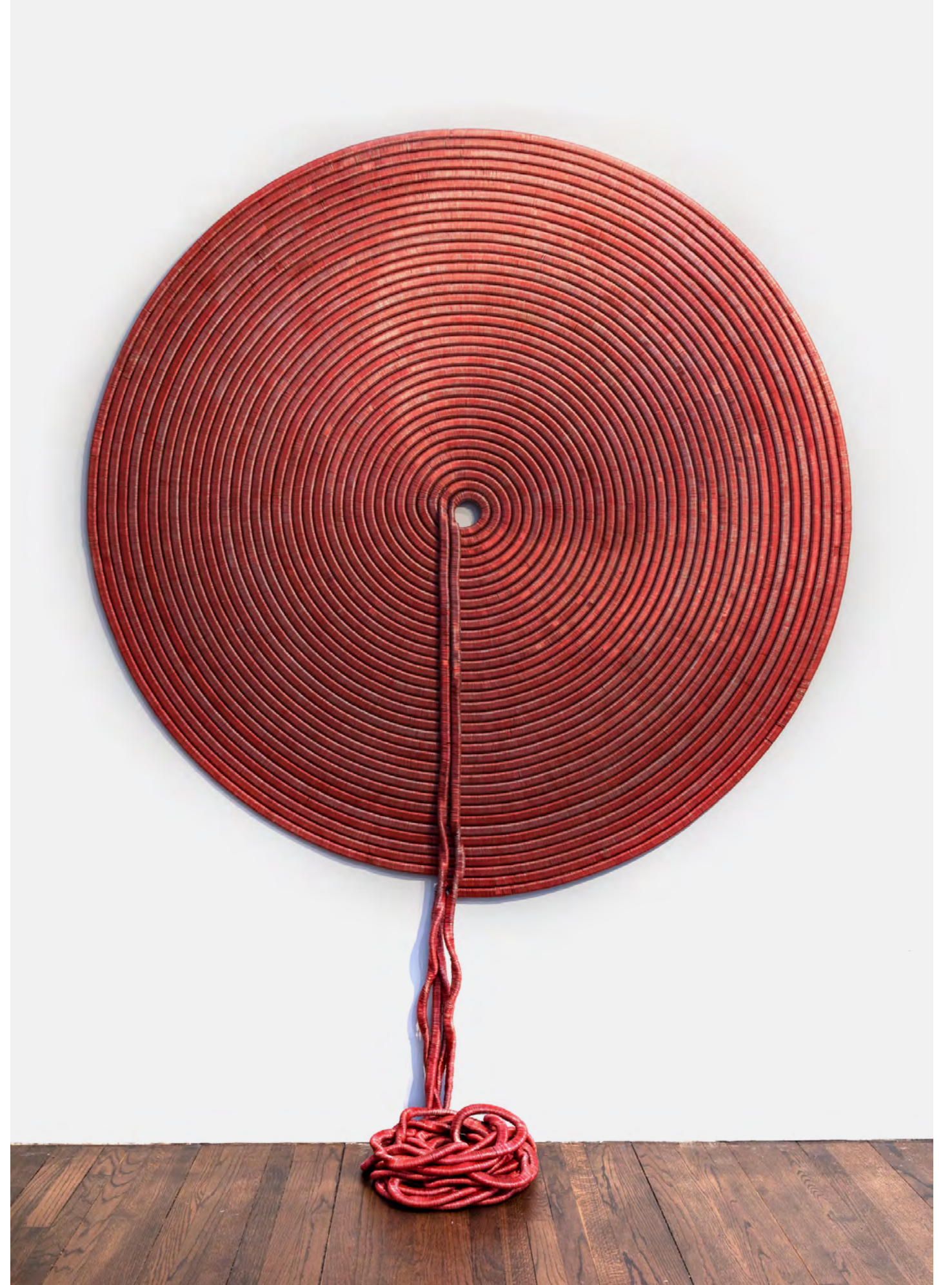
Paula Castillo
Tethered, 2014
 lock washers and hand-cut and
 twisted wire, 15 × 18 × 11"
 Photo: Courtesy of the artist



MATERIAL GIRLS: HEAVY METAL AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM FOR WOMEN IN THE ARTS

by Vanessa Mallory Kotz

Alice Hope
Untitled, 2016
 used Budweiser tabs
 6' diameter
 Photo: Jenny Gorman



A big question—What's gender got to do with it?—is at the core of a new exhibition, *Heavy Metal: Women to Watch 2018*, at the National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA) in Washington, D.C. From monumental sculpture to conceptual pieces, to jewelry in silver, copper, bronze, pewter, iron, gold, and aluminum, the show brings together more than fifty works of art made in the last decade by a group of twenty international female artists. They hail not only from within the metals and jewelry world, but across the broader landscape of contemporary art practice. According to NMWA Associate Curator Virginia Treanor, these disparate artists are linked not just through their gender, but also through their desire to show “the paradox of humankind’s mastery over the material and our total dependence on it, the reflection of our present, and a glint of our future.” Furthermore, “The durability of metal attracts artists who seek to encapsulate memory, either collective or personal.” NMWA, which was founded in 1981, is the only major museum in the world solely dedicated to championing women through the arts. Through its exhibitions and collections,

it looks to shed light on the historically marginalized perspectives and experiences of female makers.

Heavy Metal is the fifth iteration in “Women to Watch,” the museum’s series of exhibitions dedicated to emerging and underrepresented female artists, begun in 2008. The exhibitions have focused both on specific media like painting and fiber, and larger themes. Each is comprised of works submitted by seventeen national and three international committees, composed of advisors with a broad range of experience in the arts. Treanor then takes on the challenge of collecting the recommendations from each committee (each of which works with a local curator who provides guidance in identifying artists), sorting through hundreds of images, and developing a cohesive show. “This is not a competition,” Treanor said in an interview. “It’s not about picking the ‘best artists’ from each committee, but really trying to make a balanced exhibition out of the submissions that we get.”

“When we put the call out this time for metal, I purposefully did not get into specifics about what I was looking for,” Treanor says. She provided a list of images and names to the curators that included

a broad range of twentieth- and twenty-first century artists working in metals, including those with a specialization in the media like Vivian Beer, Chunghi Choo, and Betty Cooke. Also included were those who are primarily identified with other areas of the art world, like the sculptors Isa Genzken and Eva Hesse, the fiber artists Ruth Asawa and Mary Giles, and the architect Maya Lin, to encourage a variety of submissions.

This year’s theme was inspired in part by the NMWA’s collection of historic metalwork, which includes more than 190 works made by women working primarily in England and Ireland between 1695 and 1852. Featured artists include Hester Bateman (1708–1794), an English silversmith who, like many widows of metalworkers, successfully ran and expanded the family silver business following the death of her husband, an “outworker” who made chains for master silversmiths in London. Elizabeth Godfrey (active circa 1720–1758), a London-born smith, worked in the Huguenot tradition, supplying her noble clientele with high-quality pieces in an ornate Rococo style influenced by designs popular in the French court. The works in *Heavy Metal*

“demonstrate that contemporary women artists not only continue a rich legacy in metalwork, but also transcend its traditions, blending hand- and machine-work with affecting references to science, nature, history, and human relationships,” Treanor explains. “One of the main takeaways that we hope to convey is the fact that women have been present in metalworking fabrication and process for a very long time. And yet, I think it’s still very much seen as a male-dominated field within contemporary art.”

Danielle Grall and Alexandra Lambert, co-chairs of the Paris committee, wrote: “More women are working in metal and attempting large-scale abstract and conceptual pieces that have no relation to traditional sculptures ... More recent trends in metal sculptures show a continued interest by artists in creating original conceptual works which tell a story ... [they] also explore the possibilities of their materials and the various scientific characteristics and transformations.”

Treanor says “One of the most fulfilling and exciting things for me in doing these exhibitions is seeing what themes emerge from these groupings that you’re putting together.” As she looked through the committees’ submissions, she discovered these artists were not only working the material by welding and smelting, but also using prefabricated and found objects to create new forms.

Katherine Vetne (Northern California, b. 1987), for example, transforms household goods into unrecognizable objects, offering sharp cultural criticisms along the way. In *Selling the Dream* (2017) Vetne melted down three lead crystal pitchers sold by Avon during the financial boom of the 1980s. “Metal is embedded with notions of cultural value, desire, and social hierarchy,” Vetne says. “I use silver nitrate as a coating on melted lead crystal, essentially turning the surface of the work into a mirror. The crystal, loaded with associations of gender norms and suburbia, becomes a surreal, slightly

sinister object, distorting images of the viewer and the surrounding world on the polished surface.” Vetne’s choice of Avon is intentional. “Avon is a multi-level marketing company, also known as a pyramid scheme,” Vetne says. “The pyramid scheme is not only a major backbone of capitalism; it is a perfect metaphor for so many other societal structures in which success is widely advertised as attainable to all, but only available to a select few at the expense of everyone else.”

Alice Hope (greater New York region, b. 1966) also works with mass-produced materials meant for household use. Instead of “lowering” the value of a luxury good by melting it down, she elevates the mundane. Hope’s untitled work of 2016, made from red Budweiser can tabs, transforms discarded junk into a closely wound six-foot-diameter coil mounted to the wall and spilling onto the floor. Stacked and threaded tightly together into a single, gleaming chain, the humble aluminum

Hester Bateman
George III Cake Basket, 1788
silver
16 1/4" long
1987.82; National Museum of Women in the Arts; Silver collection assembled by Nancy Valentine, purchased with funds donated by Mr. and Mrs. Oliver R. Grace and family
Photo: Lee Stalsworth



Elizabeth Godfrey
George II Tea Caddy, 1755
silver
5 1/2 x 4 1/4 x 2 7/8"
1987.67.1a-b; National Museum of Women in the Arts; Silver collection assembled by Nancy Valentine, purchased with funds donated by Mr. and Mrs. Oliver R. Grace and family
Photo: Lee Stalsworth



Opposite:
Katherine Vetne
Selling the Dream,
2017
three lead crystal
Avon pitchers,
melted and
mirrored with
silver nitrate
45 x 11 x 10 3/4"
Photo: John Janca



tabs together become a rich, reflective surface, both mechanical and almost biological in appearance, as the end of the tidy chain descends from the center of the spiral into an intestinal, messy heap on the gallery floor.

"And then there is someone like Paula Castillo," Treanor says. "She's using found, discarded, industrial byproducts, and then very intentionally using 3-D software on the computer to create her forms, and then doing the physical welding after that process is done. So, it's a great symbiosis of using found objects, but manipulating them too." *Tethered* (2014) is an abstract sculpture made from lock washers and hand-cut and twisted wire, precisely arranged into the form that flowed from the artist's mind's eye to the computer blueprint. Castillo (New Mexico, b. 1961) notes that she is "...attracted to metal because metal's malleability makes it a motor of history—both geological and human. Metal transforms and translates the meaning of a range of tangible and

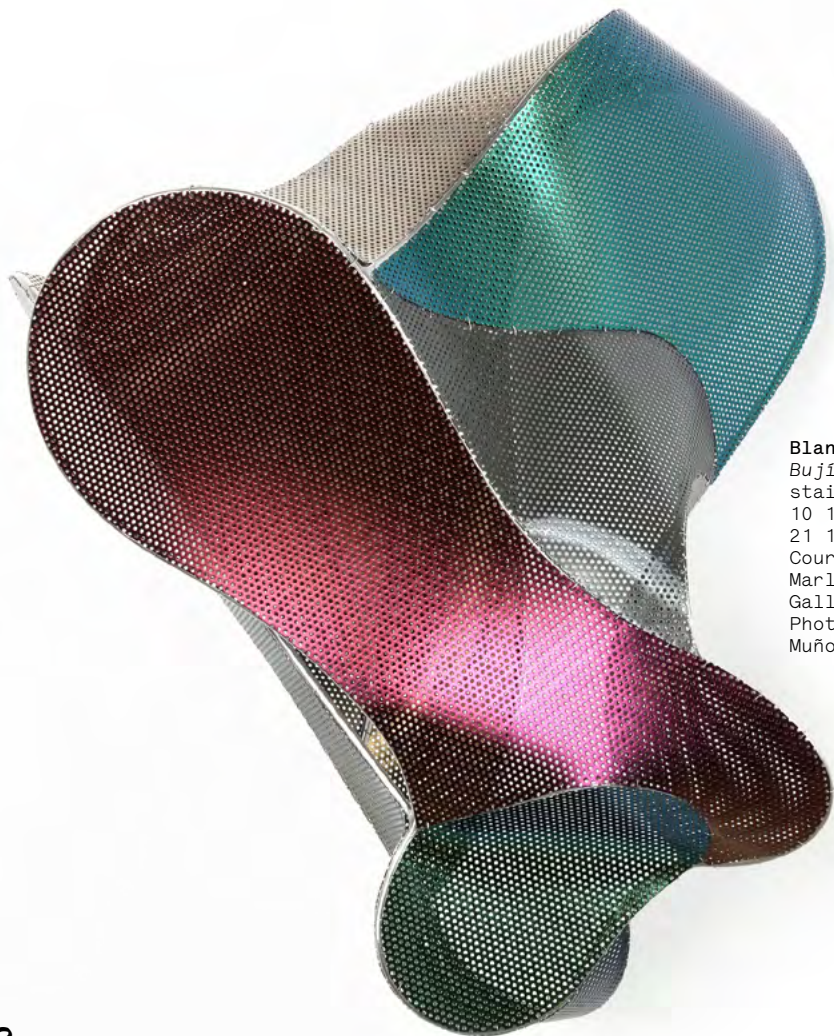
abstract elements, rendering all visible to the reader."

Blanca Muñoz (Madrid, b. 1963) creates abstract sculptures from stainless steel. "Muñoz is one of the most recognized Spanish artists," notes Spain committee curator Lucia Ybarra. "The three metal pieces selected for the *Women to Watch* 2018 exhibition are sculptural constructions that play with light and space." The artist is inspired by constellations, and the mathematical-physical principles of space and the botanical universe. "My fascination for the mystery of the universe took me to sketch in a space searching for the darkness," she says. Muñoz solders graceful curves of perforated stainless steel to a fixed steel rod, layering the natural grey with pieces clad in vibrant colors. Many of her works are large-scale outdoor sculptures. For *Bujía* (*Spark Plug*, 2013), however, Muñoz worked in a smaller scale. She's transformed a rigid, solid material into an ethereal UFO mounted to the

wall, a floating organism or deep space phenomenon in grey, magenta, and teal. The die-cut holes in each layer create shadow, movement, and mystery.

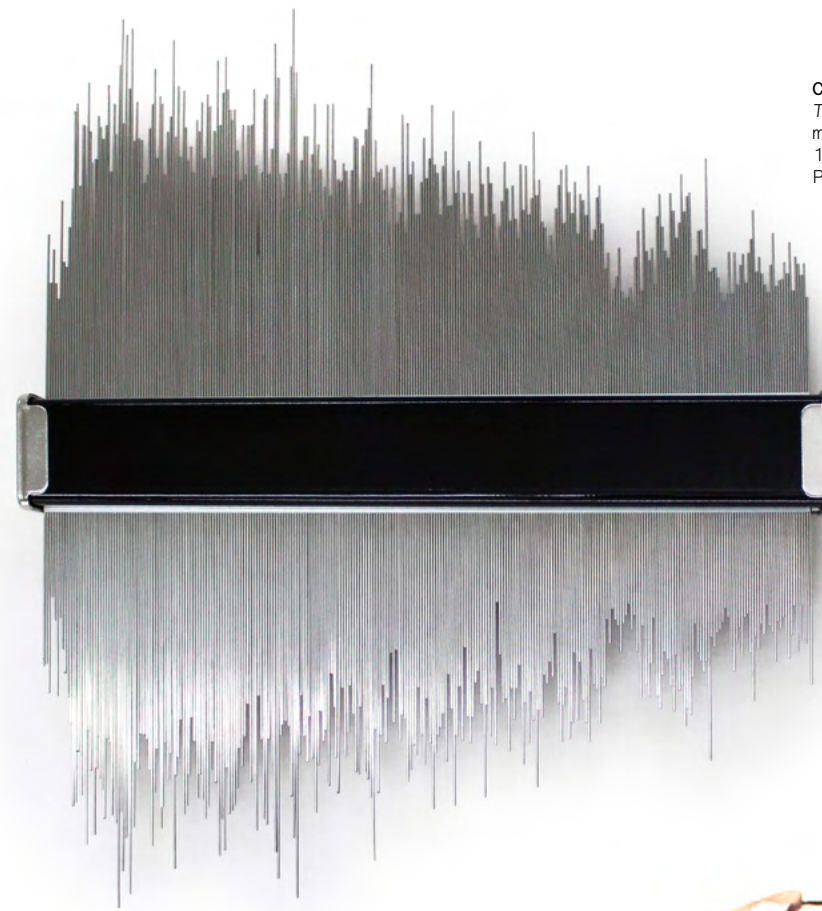
Like Muñoz, Charlotte Charbonnel (France, b. 1980) uses the hardness of metal, in this case iron filings, to capture the unexplained and ephemeral in *Train End* (2016). "Metal reminds me of energy and conductivity. I try to reveal the poetical potential of metal transformations," Charbonnel says. "I really got interested by the metal in its iron filings state because it is volatile, and once in contact with magnets, it becomes solid. It is this transformation that interests me because the obtained shape questions the status, the reign."

While researching white noise and recent scientific discoveries online, Charbonnel came across an article about a recording of a mysterious and untraceable sound discovered in 1997 by a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA) hydrophone in the Pacific Ocean. In the recording, a low humming/mechanical/animal sound increases to an almost steady frequency that scientists have yet to identify. "It's like the sound of a train that gets closer,"

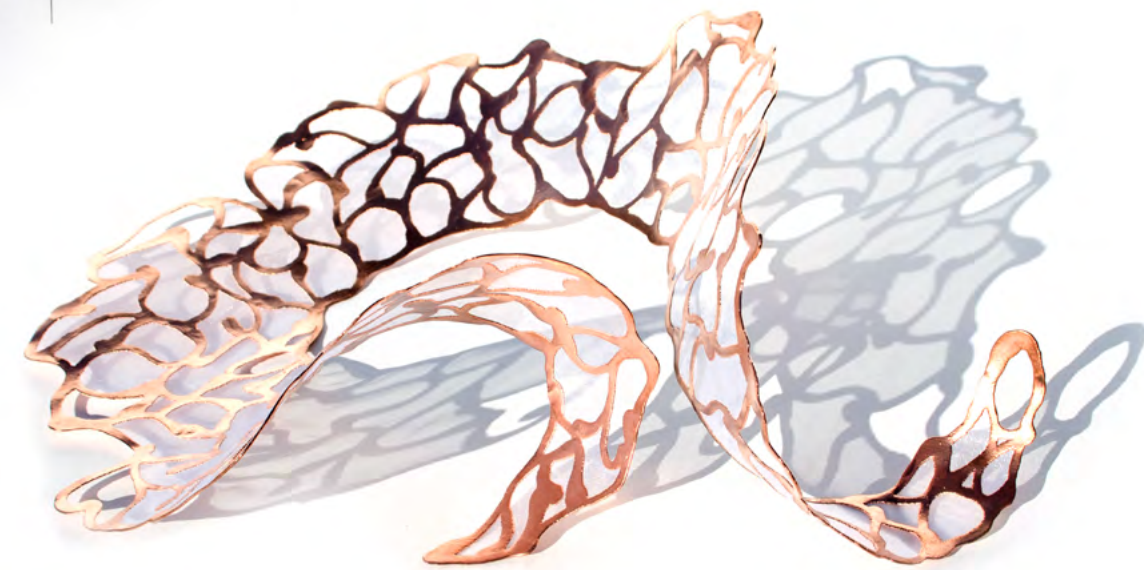


Blanca Muñoz
Bujía, 2013
stainless steel
10 1/2 x 23 1/2 x
21 1/2"
Courtesy of
Marlborough
Gallery Madrid
Photo: Arturo
Muñoz

**METAL REMINDS
ME OF ENERGY AND
CONDUCTIBILITY.
I TRY TO REVEAL
THE POETICAL
POTENTIAL OF METAL
TRANSFORMATIONS.**



Charlotte Charbonnel
Train End, 2016
measuring tool and stainless steel rods
11 7/8 x 13 3/8"
Photo: Charlotte Charbonnel



Cheryl Eve Acosta
Fossilium, 2015
collar with copper and
organza
4 x 11 x 13"
Photo: Gene Starr



Lola Brooks
four&twenty, 2015
stainless steel, 14-karat gold solder,
and champagne rose-cut diamonds
4 1/2 x 5 x 2 1/4"
Collection of Allen and
Irene Natow
Photo: Sienna Patti

Charbonnel says. “My work, *Train End*, is related to the five last seconds of this sound and represents it graphically. What interested me is the capacity of these sounds to generate stories and fictions, because as their origins remain unknown, they could be extraterrestrial, extraordinary, or paranormal. I wished to strengthen this mystery.” The resulting sculpture, made from a measuring tool and stainless-steel rods, transcribes the sound visually, like an EKG measuring the beat of a human heart.

Cheryl Eve Acosta (Kansas City, b. 1980) is a sculptor and jeweler who also takes her cues from nature, recreating the delicate temporary evidence of life in copper, memorializing the outstretched finger of coral, the spine of a small animal, or the shadow of a leaf. “A small percentage of all life forms are rarely preserved as fossils, and even fewer are discovered,” Acosta says. *Fossilium* (2015), a piece made to be worn as a collar, “captures a snapshot of our existence with its exoskeleton like silhouette.” The elegant copper structure, accented with soft organza, rises from the shoulders of its wearer like an Elizabethan ruff for an underwater queen. “The duality between

a fragile, manmade material fused with nature’s raw copper elevates my curiosity,” Acosta says. “My training as a metalsmith makes me appreciate seeing two unlike materials co-exist into a new form.”

Petronella Eriksson (Sweden, b. 1969) is also interested in evoking the mysterious, but at a more whimsical level. *Sake jug with cups* (2017) is crafted from gleaming silver. Vines and branches spring from the familiar forms of household goods, connecting and lifting them for a tea party only the Mad Hatter could host. “Plants and the way they grow have always been a big inspiration to me,” Eriksson says. “The containers of this sake [set] are inspired by the fleshy, juicy fruit of yellow water lilies. I have added my airy, three-dimensional lines. Each line relates to the next, like branches in a tree.” She notes, “In my work I investigate the place of silver in everyday life. For me, the use of the objects is intimately associated with the artistic experience of them. My objects are an opportunity for presence, and for pleasure. They are adventures waiting to happen.” The artist first “fell in love” with metal as a child when a copper cable blew into her parents’ garden. Eriksson muses, “I really can’t say why, but it keeps me interested.

The plasticity and the precision. Its soft hardness. It is my best friend.”

The boundary-pushing artists featured in the diverse, cross-generational spectrum of NMWA’s exhibition also include the jewelers Lola Brooks, Susie Ganch, and Kerianne Quick; the Bangladeshi-born sculptor Rana Begum; and South American makers Alejandra Prieto (Chile) and Carolina Rieckhof Brommer (Peru). Like the alchemists of centuries ago, the female artists in *Heavy Metal: Women to Watch 2018* have conducted significant explorations across their chosen medium. They embrace a spirit of experimentation and possibility, reveling in the sheer variety of potential and interpretation associated with this material and its forms, regardless of an artist’s gender.

Heavy Metal: Women to Watch 2018 is on view at NMWA in Washington, D.C. from June 28 to September 16.

Vanessa Mallory Kotz is a writer whose work has appeared in American Photo, AmericanStyle, and Popular Photography. She has also edited catalogues for The Phillips Collection, The Galleries at Moore College of Art & Design, and Phoenix Art Museum.



Petronella Eriksson
Sake jug with cups, 2017
silver
6 x 6 1/4 x 11 3/8"
Photo:
Petronella Eriksson



Susie Ganch
Untitled (detail), 2010
steel, enameled copper, and panel
36 x 24 x 12"
Photo:
Taylor Dabney
Courtesy of the artist and Sienna Patti Contemporary



Rana Begum
No.546 Chevrons (detail), 2014
paint on powder coated aluminum
77 1/2 x 208 1/4 x 2" overall
Photo: Philip White
Courtesy of the artist and
Kate MacGarry, London