

In Her Element

Local metal artist has found her calling

TEXT: GERALDINE BERGONZI

“I’m inspired by beauty, and I simply want to share that. It’s that simple,” says local metal artisan Marieke Heatwole. When she talks about her passion for working with steel—as she calls it, “her molten obsession”—she exudes boundless joy. Heatwole found her calling eight years ago when she took a class in silversmithing, and she hasn’t looked back.

Her organic creations begin with a walk through the stockyard or with a random telephone call from someone who’s got some leftover steel ductwork or the like. “It’s not like a painting that begins with a blank canvas,” she explains. “When I come across some [reclaimed] material, I see the form in it. I see the art piece, and I’m in awe of the fact it’s so cool!” An armillary sphere inspired by an antique wagon wheel, a scrolled garden trellis born of scrap steel, a blue patina gong that was once the base of a steel drum, or an art panel formed from reclaimed window frames and copper are among her blissful creations that can be viewed and purchased at local galleries Virtu and Half Moon Creek.



A self-described “tool freak,” Heatwole delights in a plasma cutter, a seventh-anniversary gift from her husband, Michael.

“The actual labor is loud and dirty; welding is really heavy industrial work,” says the artist. “My favorite part of the process is the idea, the brainstorm. My least favorite part is when the piece is finished because it’s over.”

Until recently, Heatwole forged her molten metals in a warehouse shop. Responding to the needs of her growing children, ages 4 and 6, a change is in the works. To deal with the inevitable life conflict between being a mom and an artist, Heatwole and her family are looking forward to building a new home that will include a workshop. As one could guess, she has imaginative plans for making the stairway railings, shelves, bathroom fixtures, and more.

▲▲ *Forget Me Not* was fashioned from rusted and forged steel and was mounted to a reclaimed window frame.

▲ For this piece, titled *Cog*, Heatwole mounted part of a D9 Caterpillar machine to a wooden base. The metal was treated with an oil-rubbed bronze finish.

▮ *Azteca* was inspired by one of the artist’s favorite books, *The History of Ornamentation*. The center design is copper.

▮▮ Heatwole hand cut the aluminum letters and cast the spoon and fork door handles for the Snow City Café.

Pictured here with her safety goggles, metal artist Marieke Heatwole has a “molten obsession!”



Life didn't always flow with such positive and reaffirming energy for Heatwole. As a child growing up in Seattle, she was prodigiously creative and absorbed the resourceful influences of family members. Her great-great-aunt Cecilia Beaux was recognized posthumously as a leading lady of portraiture. And her grandfather was a master of the ancient art of bonsai. Today, one of his bonsai is on display in the Smithsonian garden.

Heatwole's love for art accompanied her to college, where she made lots of jewelry and earned a degree in environmental studies with a minor in French literature and visual arts. Life as an artist was never really on her "legitimate" radar. After college, while working as a legislative aid in Juneau, she met Michael. It was in 2000 that she was diagnosed with suicidal depression. She says, "It was the best thing that ever happened to me." Fortunate to have a supportive husband, Heatwole emerged from this event with a new lease on life.

"I hadn't been living," she explains. Having experienced the tragedy of two suicides in her family and dealing with her own depression, Heatwole has become a committed mental health advocate. Her words express the profound transformation: "I feel so alive and have so much fun making things. I've never been more free."

About her forged creations, she explains that "it's communicating a vision."

"I'm not trying to make a statement because I already have a life statement that's about finding a peace and growing it," she says. She finds her joy in sharing the beauty she sees.

As for all artists with integrity, there is always that conflict between creating art and making ends meet. How much an artist should be preoccupied with making something saleable is sometimes the challenge, especially when dealing with commissioned work. "I have to be brutally honest with myself and with clients," says Heatwole. "I have to weigh the emotional expense to fabricate something that is not so creative with making things that people like and want to buy."

Heatwole seems to have found the right mix. She has most recently been experimenting with creating colorful patinas on the metal by way of chemical reactions.

As she proclaims on her website, "I am in my element." And that brings us joy. ■

Visit www.marickesmetal.com for more information.