

Society of Inclusive Blacksmiths: Forging Our Future

By Anne Bujold, Photographs by Michelle Smith-Lewis

August 12th-15th, 2018, 11 smiths gathered at the Summit Arts Camp (formerly the Cascadia Center for Art and Craft) in Government Camp, Oregon. The goals were a collaborative project for the on-site Sculpture Garden and conversation around issues of inclusivity in blacksmithing. The event, organized by Rachel David (LA), Lisa Geertsen (WA), and Anne Bujold (TN), brought women from across the country, ranging in age, experience, and metalworking interests.



Clockwise from far left: Monica Coyne, Anne Bujold, Rachel David, Lisa Geertsen, Ryna Cady, Lynda Metcalfe, Alice Garret, Leslie Tharp, Ann Klicka, Heather McLarty

Blacksmithing is a demanding craft. Complex problem solving, spatial reasoning, and math skills inform decision making; exercising these skills builds competence. Blacksmithing is not about brute strength - it is about understanding the nuances of material manipulation and responding in the moment to the immediacy of hot iron. Minorities in the field provide a role model to others who do not fit the stereotypical image of a blacksmith and communicate that there is a place for them.

Beginning the organizing process in 2017, invitations were sent to female and transgender smiths from across the country to meet at the Summit Arts Camp (SAC). Our original vision was to have an open invitation to women, queer, transgender, people of color, and gender non-conforming smiths in a less formal format, but logistical limitations required us to rethink our parameters. Instead, we developed a small group project that would be donated to the Sculpture Garden at the SAC. It was critical to include smiths from a variety of locations in order to gain perspective on the geographic differences in the blacksmithing community.

Attendees included Ryna Cady (WA), Monica Coyne (CA), Alice Garrett (Australia), Ann Klicka (WI), Heather McLarty (CA), Lynda Metcalfe (NC), Caitlin Morris (MD), and Leslie Tharp (FL). All participants are skilled metal workers, each with experience ranging from 5 to over 30 years. Most participants have multiple components to their careers, including functional and sculptural work, and several have active teaching schedules or work with community education facilities.

This event, and the work leading up to it, generated a lot of discussion on the topics of inclusivity and representation in the field. This step towards addressing the lack of diversity in blacksmithing has real value. By developing awareness through listening to the experiences of others, we work towards building a community that truly supports, encourages, and educates people regardless of constructs of race, gender, sexuality, gender orientation, or physical limitations. In recognizing these issues, and learning about the nuances involved, we can begin to consider how to be agents of change. As Geertsen asserts, “this organization is to be built on an attitude of support for those who have felt like they are on the fringe of the blacksmithing community. It is our challenge and our strength to hold an open mind to those who want to see this group grow and succeed.”



© Michelle Smith-Lewis

Rachel David, Lisa Geertsen, Caitlin Morris, Monica Coyne

Each participant brought their own unique geographic, generational, and political concerns to Mt. Hood. Our commonality is a desire to see a field that makes space for, and supports, those who are marginalized in the larger culture and underrepresented in the metal arts world. We delved into deep conversation about factors that shape our craft, including historical, cultural, and political forces in the world in which we live. We discussed ways to provide space for traditionally underrepresented groups to access blacksmithing - spaces that are inclusive yet might not include everyone simultaneously - and our bigger dreams for being part of a world that operates with less cruelty and more compassion.

Inspirations for this project came from many sources, including Latifa Sayadi's *Striking Women: Mild As Steel*, published in 2012. Sayadi is a Tunisian/German artist blacksmith based in Berlin, Germany, and her book is a compendium of images by female metalsmiths from around the globe. The introduction describes a series of events held in Germany in the early 2000s where women smiths gathered to share skills and make art. Alice Garrett, who was visiting from Australia, is part of an organization in her home country called Blacksmith Doris which hosts women-only blacksmithing events. This was the first time any of the American participants have been part of a project intentionally designed, directed, and completed in a space without male colleagues.



Clockwise from top left: Caitlin Morris, Alice Garrett, Lynda Metcalfe, Rachel David, Ann Klicka.

We applied for several grants to make this event possible. We have tremendous gratitude for the support we received, including AI Bart Grants from the NWBA and funds raised at the NWBA 2018 Spring Conference auction. I worked closely with SAC director Betsy Vallian, completing grant applications to the Regional Arts and Culture Council and the Oregon Cultural Trust. We were recipients of a \$5,000 grant from the OCT in the Creativity category, and also received funding from private donors, including a matching grant from Microsoft. Pratt Fine Arts Center provided steel for the project, and Tharp worked to arrange food donations from Franz Bakery and New Seasons, a Portland-based grocery. Harnessing a variety of resources to support this complex project, from financial contributions to direct material donations, made it a feasible endeavor.



Left to right: Lisa Geertsen, Ann Klicka, Alice Garrett

We recognized that in order to promote future projects, we needed to capture high-quality, dynamic images of this event. As a component of the funding, we budgeted to hire Seattle-based documentary photographer Michelle Smith-Lewis. Smith-Lewis specializes in performance photography, and her talent in capturing the drama and energy of the room is palpable in the images that accompany this article.

As our grant proposals developed, we needed a project design to accompany our applications. David, Coyne, and Klicka worked remotely as the design team. In a series of design "sprints," they drafted the project over the phone and via email. Initially conceived as an archway, the design evolved into a bench after consideration of installation issues on the Forest Service property where is SAC is located, liability, and feasibility.

The joinery was a critical component in this design, and as McLarty notes, "blacksmithing is full of connections. Rivets and mortise and tenon joints are traditional connections used to join metal. Used by artist-blacksmiths in a contemporary sculpture, they are authentic and soulful ways to connect us to our past, in a present where technology-based solutions are often used at the expense of human connection."



Photo courtesy workshop participant

The shop at the SAC is rustic, with a dirt floor, and several propane forges, anvils, vises, and a tire hammer. Before the event, a spreadsheet shared in Google Docs allowed the group to assess what tools were needed and account for what each person could provide. Most hand tools were brought to the site, either shipped ahead or packed in carry-on luggage. The bench design was enlarged to full scale and the full-sized drawing was shipped from New Orleans to Seattle, and the steel was cut at Pratt Fine Arts Center before heading to Mt. Hood.

The project was divided into five teams, each headed by a driver who worked with strikers to complete components. The scale of the material and upsets desired required the use of many hands in each element. As the project came together, participants rotated seamlessly into and out of different teams in



Left to right: Lisa Geertsen, Ann Klicka, Heather McLarty, Anne Bujold



Rachel David striking for Linda Metcalfe.



Leslie Tharp and Lisa Geertsen



Marathon work day.

order to accomplish tasks. One group took on heading each rivet, others forged tenons, drifted holes, formed the sheet metal for the seats, and curved elements using the fly press provided by Orion Forge. Everyone dug in with enthusiasm and incredible energy, including a marathon 22-hour final work day.

The product of the build, a sculptural bench, provides seating for two or three people, sitting adjacent yet looking out to different perspectives. People can sit side-by-side, but their view is not the same. We can sit on an equal plane but bring different perspectives which, when shared, open an opportunity for a more complex understanding of the world.



Photo courtesy workshop participant



Ann Klicka, Caitlin Morris, Alice Garrett

Our conversations helped us better understand some of the regional differences in blacksmithing communities across the country. The Pacific Northwest differs in its culture from Florida or Louisiana. It is important to understand how people in other locations might have unique challenges in accessing information, tools, and support. There are a lot of women in the PNW and California blacksmithing communities, but understanding that this is more an anomaly than an average is helpful when thinking about the work to be done moving forward. Looking beyond gender divisions, blacksmithing lacks racial diversity, and finding ways to address this is critically important.



Left to right: Caitlin Morris, Alice Garrett, Ryna Cady, Heather McLarty, Rachel David, Monica Coyne, Anne Bujold, Ann Klicka.



Leslie Tharp, Anne Bujold, Caitlin Morris.



Lisa Geertsen, Ann Klicka, Leslie Tharp, Alice Garrett.



Heather McLarty and Anne Bujold.

At the conclusion of the build, alongside the sense of accomplishment, we recognized that working in a space with only women was, indeed, a unique and valuable experience. The opportunity to be in a shop where, for the first time, participant's gender was a non-issue, was something that no one except for Garrett had experienced. As one smith explained, "in every scenario, I can remember there has always been at least the hint of a gender divide to navigate, and it sometimes gets in the way of the reason I'm there - the metalwork." We were neither praised for being good at things despite our gender, nor made to feel less-than because of it.



Alice Garrett and Lynda Metcalfe.

At the conclusion of our time at the SAC, we settled on the name the Society of Inclusive Blacksmiths (SIB). The hashtag #societyofinclusiveblacksmiths is available for use by anyone who wants to participate on Instagram. We are working towards a self-published book to document the build and share our experience with the larger craft community. By showing role models that do not fit the stereotypical image of a blacksmith, we can help to shift the perception that this craft is only for those who fit a certain image.



Photo courtesy workshop participant

As the conversation that began on Mt. Hood continues, it is exciting to imagine tangible outcomes beyond this first project. In the future, inclusiveblacksmiths.com will host a gallery of Smith-Lewis’s images and include resources and ways for smiths to connect. There is active discussion about what the group might facilitate – events for specific communities, professional development information, resources for allies, a list of women/LGBTQIA friendly shops to work for, or scholarships for educational pursuits. There are many ways to think about supporting underrepresented people in their pursuit of smithing, and the format of this organization is yet to be determined – whether it becomes a formal entity with membership, or remains an ethical framework that any interested person or group can adopt.

This initial gathering is not an exclusive group setting out to take on these issues alone. This requires a much broader conversation, with smiths from across the country, of all ages, races, genders, and demographics, to engage in this work. Everyone who is passionate about blacksmithing process should have access and support, and we can build a culture that strives to make that the reality. These conversations are challenging, and there will be missteps and mistakes, but we cannot sit safely on the sidelines and hope that someone else will do the work. As smiths start to consider how race and gender have shaped the aesthetics and values of this field, we can start to examine what role each of us plays in either perpetuating or challenging the dominant paradigm.

Many folks might not immediately see the connection between forging metal and issues of inclusivity, but it is clear that by supporting a diverse community of makers, the field as a whole will thrive. Diversity of perspective is fertile ground for innovation, and it is through both an appreciation of history and an eye towards the future that blacksmithing can be a space of truly unlimited potential. As Tharp keenly observed, “each person reading this has a lot of power to make ripples in this field. I think it's hard to remember how influential we can be but in so many large and small ways our actions and words all add up and lead to meaningful change. It's kind of incredible.”



We would like to express our deepest thanks to the NWBA, the Summit Arts Center and Betsy Valin, the Oregon Cultural Trust, Pratt Fine Art Center, Franz Bakery, Michelle Smith-Lewis, Microsoft, Lois Bujold, Orion Forge/Hunter Dahlberg, Kellen Bateham, Susan Lammers, and New Seasons Market for their support in making this event possible.

Back row from left: Leslie Tharp, Ann Klicka, Rachel David, Alice Garret, Caitlin Morris
 Front row from left: Heather McLarty, Anne Bujold, Lisa Geertsen, Ryna Cady, Lynda Metcalfe

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NON PROFIT
USPostage
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TEKS SERVICES

A publication of the Northwest Blacksmith Association

4742 42nd Ave SW #185

Seattle WA 98116

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Society of Inclusive Blacksmiths Project Team

Back row: Caitlin Morris, Rachel David, Monica Coyne, Leslie Tharp, Alice Garrett, Heather McLarty, Ryna Cady

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