

TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

Elizabeth Brim

The following text is Tom Spleth's summary and impressions from an oral conversation with the artist in June, 2007.

In general, why do you do what you do? What underlies the commitment you bring to your work?

In her interview Elizabeth said she wants to make her world be like she wants it to be. She loves the Victorian era and the works of Charles Dickens. She has read everything Dickens has written many times. Making her work allows her to be in that world. The profession does not allow one to dress with femininity but one must be “dirty and nasty all the time.” Her work “allows her to be feminine and to still be a blacksmith.”

She likes the physicality and the dirtiness. Likes being on her feet and moving around. The work

is very athletic and that appeals to her. Also, particularly in the beginning, the masculinity of the field was very attractive. She enjoys being around men.

Her commitment is tied to her ability to make a living with her work. She is very practical in many ways. She is also committed to ABANA (the Artist Blacksmith's Association of North America) and spreading the word about blacksmithing and craft. This promotional activity seems separate from her work and would continue even if she were no longer active in the studio.

While taking a ceramics course at Penland School of Crafts, her first, she had to cut through the metalsmithing studio to get to the bathroom back then and she saw



*Elizabeth Brim- Catch
Photo by Luis Quiles, 2007*

Marvin Jensen (a Penland artist) working and was powerfully drawn to metals. There was an underlying non-verbal attraction of material.

What influences your work? Is the history of craft, or the media you use, important to your work and if so how? Does your work draw references from or have any link to the past and if so how?

The blacksmithing techniques that Elizabeth uses are out of the past. She uses ancient blacksmithing techniques in contrast to her non-traditional imagery. Tied to this is her desire that her work is well crafted, that it will be respected by traditional ironsmiths. Being a woman, she wanted to hang in there with the craft so that no one could find fault with the work because of how it was made. The “so no one can find fault with me” is also a part of her upbringing in the South as a Southern Woman. She also learned at Penland that she is not beneath anyone else. Her assumption at the beginning was that all these great artists and craftsmen were in a world far above her own and far above anything she would personally attain. Penland’s atmosphere of casual accessibility and its easy social interaction taught her that she was just like everyone else and that she could accomplish any of it.

How is, or is, utility and function a part of your work?

She mentions that *Current Piece*, a chair for an exterior public art installation, may not be comfortable. It bothers her, but not enough to alter the image. Also it will be black and it will get hot in the sun. Again, while she is aware of functional issues, she is not going to alter the image for the sake of function. Her work has always ended up in houses and this piece is the first time it will be in an exterior setting in the public arena.

Can you describe your studio practice? Do you work in isolation, independently, in collaboration, in community?

Elizabeth works alone, but is quick to get help when it is needed. “When you need a brute, hire a brute.” She is planning to build lifts and cranes into her studio because the commissions get too heavy to lift. She was very strong when younger, but now must face the fact that her aging body is no longer able to pick up as much as before. She is very integrated into the Penland iron community and finding people who will help out is not a problem.

What does “mastery” mean to you?

She thought about this a lot. Mark Peiser (a glassworks artist at Penland) joked to her that “there is a job opening at the post office. Wouldn’t it be nice to have a job that gets easier as you do it, instead of one like ours that gets harder?” She still feels like she is stumbling around, but knows that her desire to do it better

continually raises the bar. Her standards get higher and she is meticulous about craft.

Are you a native of your current home community or did you move there? How long have you lived in the South? If born in the South, how do you think you've been influenced by it?

Elizabeth Brim has lived in the South her entire life. She is positive that being Southern has affected her, such as living with the idea that people must not find fault with her. Probably some of this comes from Southern Baptist upbringing. That and also she has dealt with the training received as a Southern Woman and the expectation that you will marry someone who will provide money and a house, take care of putting oil in the car, etc. To live alone and work as an artist is in contrast to expectations—hers included. For her, when growing up, art was an important interest, but it was only a hobby and a way to meet the most interesting people in town. Penland, the circumstances of her marriage, and employment at Penland showed her that she could make a living on her own. She was a real Southern character working in the kitchen, doing iron work, and thrilled to keep it going, saving money from her kitchen job and repairing her house. She had people renting, paid insurance and taxes, etc.... Before, she never considered making money for herself. It is important to her to take care of what she has.

Talk in general about the relationship of your work to place. Do you have a particular relationship to the land or a landscape? If you do, can you talk about it?

She likes flowers a lot and walks in the area to see the flowers which gets into the work. In her art, she is non-specific in her use of flowers and makes expressive forged flowers in contrast to unappealing sheet metal flowers that are an unhappy norm for the metals world. She is not interested in botanical verisimilitude and even the recent rhododendron chandelier was an impression of the rhododendron, not a copy. People seem to respond more readily to “the inexact stuff.”

In your opinion, are there features, factors, conditions that distinguish contemporary craft being made in the South from work made in other parts of the country?

She says no, that there is a national sense of things with her and all the people she knows. There is easy access to so much information.

Do you see yourself as an innovator?

She does! In particular, she makes pillows, clothing, and furniture, details like hatbands, ribbons, and fringe with metal. She is the one who introduced such imagery to the iron world.

How is your work evolving?

Mark Leach said when she was at the McColl Center in Charlotte that she should make textile works that were not so involved with the image but more sculptural in an abstract way, to make works about textile or about texture. She tried it and it didn't work. She likes to make a thing that is a thing. So things are getting more literal as time goes on.

Describe your relationship to community? Are there communities of people with which you affiliate or have a common interest?

ABANA (the Artist Blacksmith's Association of North America) is very important to her and she is very involved with it. She is the self appointed social director of the Penland Iron Studio and gets to know everyone that comes through Penland, students and instructors. Making iron not under the eave of Penland School is unthinkable to her. Being isolated in a small town away from iron workers would make life impossible.

She is also involved with the Fire on the Mountain Festival in Spruce Pine and is bringing up the standards so that, as a destination, it becomes a place where the craft is treated with dignity.

She is slated to do a presentation at SNAG (the Society of North American Goldsmiths) to talk about women in iron. She is collecting images from all the women she knows in iron and is the de facto spokesperson for the women in iron phenomenon and is asked all the time to speak. She is also a member of SNAG.

Do you see yourself as a keeper of the culture? What does this idea mean to you? What would you like your legacy to be?

Yes. She is a promoter of blacksmithing and really gets the word out all the time. This is a big part of her life. She would probably promote the culture even if she were no longer working in the studio as a blacksmith. It is important that the country knows about this work.

How did you learn your craft?

Elizabeth, in addition to working there as a teacher, was trained at Penland.

Do you share your knowledge with others—the next generation of artists?

She interacts with all classes and is asked to do demos for nearly every class for which she is rarely paid. Socially it is a peer situation where all are equal.

What role do you think colleges and universities have played in the development of contemporary craft in the south? And, alternative places like Penland School of Crafts, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, John C. Campbell Folk School?

Penland has kept craft alive in America. Universities do not acknowledge craft and actively denounce craft.