

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