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Brooklyn Metal Sculptor Vallessa Monk Plays With Fire

Armed with four welding machines, a plasma cutter, anvil and tools for bending, texturing and hammering, Vallessa Monk sculpts home décor from bronze and steel.



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Ms. Monk was responsible for the metal canopy and the metal planter boxes placed on the facade of AKA Sutton Place.
AKA



Vallessa Monk was 10 when her stepfather, a blacksmith, taught her how to use an arc welder and helped her fashion her first metal sculpture. The piece, a cowboy made of horseshoes, nails, baling wire and a washer, won her the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo art competition, though she had a hard time proving to the judges that it was her own work.

Ms. Monk, now 48 and a Brooklyn-based metal sculptor, has been defying gender and age expectations ever since. “I felt empowered, she says, “like I’d instantly become mature beyond my age. It set me on this path.”

The artist shares a 2,500-square-foot East Williamsburg studio with her husband, woodworker and furniture designer Lars Haga. Armed with tools of the trade—four welding machines, a plasma cutter, anvil and tools for bending, texturing and hammering—she sculpts bronze and steel furniture pieces; banisters; window grilles, tables and planters. She does commissions for individuals, restaurants and luxury hospitality brands.



Vallessa Monk's headboard and night stand in the bedroom above the studio. PHOTO: JASON FRANK ROTHENBERG FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

One of her most popular homeowner requests is her Moroccan window grilles, an artistic alternative to “burglar bars.” She makes sinuous vine and leaf patterns in steel or bronze. Recent works have a more three-dimensional quality, bursting with plasma-cut leaves, dahlia blossoms and butterflies.

“They’re very whimsical and freeing,” she says. “I can be spontaneous. It’s like doing painting in metal.”

Other private pieces include a \$14,000 bronze I-beam table with solid walnut top made for the Louis Kahn house of Larry Korman, president of AKA, a collection of luxury extended-stay residences and condominiums. For AKA’s Central Park and Sutton Place properties, Ms. Monk used her signature technique of giving steel surfaces a dramatic patina by applying chemicals either cold by hand-held cloth, or hot via a torch to make “the color blossom.” She forged for AKA’s Sutton Place location a custom luggage cart to match the lobby’s handrails and a bronze exterior canopy.

She also made steps inspired by lily pads for a Manhattan film-production studio and a cast-bronze coffee table with a hand-forged top for Athena Calderone, a lifestyle blogger.

Her prices range from \$250 to \$600 for stackable, modular steel storage boxes, to outdoor planters that are \$3,000 in bronze and \$500 in steel.



The hand-forged top of a coffee table. PHOTO: ATHENA CALDERONE

Ms. Monk and Mr. Haga's studio, located in a former pipe-fitter's shop, contains relatively few finished works. One is an entryway table of cold-rolled steel that she chemically oxidized to turn to a rich, chocolate brown (\$3,500), and a piece from her series of hybrid hand tools made from found objects (\$500 to \$1,500).

Growing up in Tomball, Texas, Ms. Monk studied drawing and painting, but knew she wanted to make metal art. In 1990 she packed up her belongings—bed, dresser, arc welder, portable torch kit—and left home to enroll at the Johnson Atelier Technical Institute and School of Sculpture in Hamilton, N.J.

During a sabbatical, she backpacked through Europe, with a stop in Dublin to do bronze casting at sculptor Leo Higgins's foundry, and then worked with master carvers at Pietrasanta in Tuscany.

Ms. Monk went on to graduate with a master's degree in fine arts in sculpture from the Pratt Institute in New York City in 1996, and then found a live-work space in Williamsburg. Her most fun job, she says, was the two years spent doing monument restoration work for the Central Park Conservancy. She replaced a spur on the equestrian statue of King Wladyslaw II Jagiello of Poland, repaired a mouse's tail in the Alice in Wonderland sculpture and welded the reins back on Simón Bolívar's horse. "I sat in the saddle and had a cherry picker lift my gas-powered TIG (tungsten inert gas) welder up to me," she says.

Although her medium has been a traditionally male art, she sees a connection to the type of work women have always done. Welding, says Ms. Monk, "is like sewing with fire."



Ms. Monk at workPHOTO: JASON FRANK ROTHENBERG FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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