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VISUAL ARTS REVIEW | *The Softness of Iron*

Iron Woman: Orna Ben-Ami's sculpture is severe yet hopeful

By **KEVIN MURPHY**

The Softness of Iron

Through Jan. 26

City Gallery at Waterfront Park

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For the Israeli-born sculptor Orna Ben-Ami, iron is elemental.

It's ideal for expressing the hard complexities of the human condition.

Her current exhibition at the City Gallery at Waterfront Park, called *The Softness of Iron*, demonstrates an intimate understanding of the strength and dexterity of iron, which proves an apt material for showcasing her severe worldview, one that yearns to capture the personal and profound predicaments that define our lives.

Positioned among the white walls and glass of City Gallery, these dark, ominous sculptures are rich with symbolism and irony. The sculptures are beautiful yet haunting. They make you feel at home. And yet they pull the rug from beneath your feet.

Take "Six Years Old: Self Portrait." A slightly elevated cardboard box is turned upside down. The flaps are sprawled out. A little girl's pair of shoes pokes out from underneath. Initially, the image evokes a familiar feeling of childhood isolation. But suspicion soon invades. Questions arise.

What, and from whom, is this little girl hiding?

Other pieces are more aggressively plaintive.

"Memories" displays a stack of exquisitely crafted journals and photo albums resting on a spindle. The spindle is like a spike, stabbing through, rising high above and into the air.

"I Can't Paint" unleashes frustration, thrusting an easel through a bare canvas. "Open House" masterfully depicts a person sleeping on a park bench, forming a huddled body hidden beneath a rolling blanket.



Made of iron, "4:15 PM" is Orna Ben-Ami's quiet, looming homage to the everyday life

"Neither Here Nor There" is a mass of iron, brutally and compactly wrenched into a mattress that's folded in half on top of a cot's frame. The piece powerfully suggests a moment of transition, slowing it down for further examination, underscoring the recurring theme of displacement in Ben-Ami's work.

With grace and verve, her sculptures display an admiration for contradictions. The work is heavy and lighthearted, grounded and ready for flight. Symbolic to the bone, they succeed as disparate achievements.

While the the cot in "Neither Here Nor There" implies a sense of moving on, one hopes the future is safer, more stable. That kind of optimism is a counterpoint to the piece's nervous, detached limbo, and further underscores *The Softness of Iron's* second, more hopeful theme: triumphant perseverance.

"4:15 PM" is a quiet, looming piece, an homage to everyday life. Hanging from one of 11 coat rack hooks, a solitary book bag awaits its owner. While the book bag feels lonely, the sculpture quickly evokes a spirit of pride as you imagine yourself the hardworking student.

Orna Ben-Ami's sculptures are message-driven, bold and hardened, but they're also delicate, with a soft chocolate texture that's delicious to behold. The work is mature, thoughtful, and stoic. Her welded iron sculptures have captivated audiences from Jerusalem to Washington D.C. She has enjoyed the accolades of critics and art devotees across the globe.

And now she's in Charleston, where she can hear our applause.

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