

## Creating softness with metal

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Orna Ben-Ami visited her show at the Hickory Museum of Art and repaired her piece "Roots," which is a suitcase with tree roots growing from it. PHOTOS BY JEFF WILLHELM – [jwillhelm@charlotteobserver.com](mailto:jwillhelm@charlotteobserver.com)

Hickory's visiting sculptor, Orna Ben-Ami, makes her art with a welder's torch, bringing a feminine touch to metalworking.

She turns hot iron into what appears to be soft fabric: a ballet slipper, a child's pinafore, a pillow still bearing the imprint of a sleeper's head.

Twenty-nine of her metal sculptures are on display in "The Softness of Iron" exhibit, at the Hickory Museum of Art through April 5.

Ben-Ami, an Israeli, spent a week in Hickory in early February, talking about her work with art teachers, students, community groups and gallery visitors.

Some found it hard to believe the slight woman is a welder, using a torch, grinders and cutters to create her art.

“In Jewish families, girls don't weld,” Ben-Ami told students from a Lenoir-Rhyne University religion class visiting the Hickory gallery.

Yet she began welding 16 years ago, after deciding she could do more than her art at that time – making metal earrings. Ben-Ami says she can't draw or paint, but she has learned to work iron into dramatic sculptures – to make what is hard appear to be soft.

She coaches herself to deal with the metal, to bend it to her vision. “I tell myself it is fabric, not iron.”

Most sculpture is about people, but Ben-Ami focuses on ordinary objects that may tell the viewer something about their absent owner, themselves or the artist.

One of her signature pieces is an old suitcase, scuffed and worn. Gnarled roots grow from one edge, sending the message that the traveler is ready to stay put.

“This is from my own heart,” she said. “When I was a child, my parents moved every year. I wanted to put down roots.”

Ben-Ami also sees the wanderings of the people of Israel in the piece.

Some of her pieces reflect her painful heritage: Her father's family died in the Holocaust. She says one of the most difficult pieces to make, emotionally, was “5185-9.” The metal sculpture may be a prisoner's striped shirt or a ribcage, with the identification number attached.

The number is personal to Ben-Ami because it is hers, part of her national identification number.

She wants to make her pieces ambiguous, allowing the viewer to decide what they mean:

“Point” – A woman's single ballet slipper, with delicate ribbons of iron flowing down, has dented an I-beam. Perhaps women are stronger than they appear.

“The Cradle” – The cradle is standard fare except for the top, which has a lid of iron bars to keep the child from climbing out. “Maybe it is a statement that we parents are overprotective,” Ben-Ami said.

Sometimes viewers see themselves in the sculpture. Ben-Ami tells how she wanted to create a light-hearted piece – a chair with a piece or two of cast-off clothing, perhaps hinting at a sexual romp.

She welded what looked like a leather belt and hung it on a metal chair, figuring viewers would enjoy her sly joke. But she recalled a man who saw the piece was chilled at the sight. He told the artist he had often been beaten with a belt as a child and saw only pain.

That's why the sculptor says she likes to keep her pieces stark, to allow viewers the opportunity to weave in their own ideas and memories.

Ben-Ami, who was born in 1953, is attempting a new sculpture that takes her back to her childhood when she played with paper dolls. “It will be metal pretending to be paper, pretending to be fabric,” she said.

That, she said, will be a true test of her welding skills.