

## Rodger LaBrash: Artist Statement

Rodger “Grizz” LaBrash is an artist/blacksmith whose artwork and profession have their roots in the ancient trade of metal work. The essence of blacksmithing—forging metal with heat, hammer, and anvil—has not changed since the beginning, only the tools have changed (although an anvil is basically the same as ever). Rodger learned recently, to his delight, that he is a sixth generation blacksmith, having had ancestors in the trade as far back as the early 19th century. This may explain why he has been drawn to metal in all its decorative, artistic possibilities since he was a child. “It’s in my blood,” he says.

For his subject matter, Rodger draws primarily from nature, forging leaves, flowers, plants, and other types of vegetation from slabs of metal. This interesting paradox, the transformation of hard, inorganic material into representations of nature’s most delicate creations, accounts for the subtlety and emotional resonance in his work. While the pieces look realistic and even evoke the calming effect of nature, there are definite hints of the literal collision between the organic realm and industry. Every piece he does, through the technique known as repoussé, bears hammer marks, showing that it came from his hand and wasn’t simply rolled through a machine.

Most blacksmiths in the U.S. are hobbyists, but Rodger is a full-fledged professional, one of probably no more than several thousand in the country. His company, Grizzly Iron, Inc., has been in operation for more than 20 years. Initially he trained as a welder/fabricator, but commissions requiring more intricate work steadily came his way and eventually he taught himself how to make art from metal. Rodger’s artwork draws from the same techniques and occasionally the same figurative subject matter as his professional work. The art, however, is usually freestanding and is more of a vehicle for self-expression.

Before actual production starts on each piece, Rodger “looks inside” the raw metal to assess its possibilities. “Every piece of metal has a distinct character: the grain, the texture; that determines how I approach it. For example, I might accentuate the grain through hammering or other techniques. Metal is never generic.” Sometimes he works from a sketch, but other times he works in a more improvisational way, taking a malleable piece of metal through the paces and letting it show him the way.

With its rich traditions and vivid associations in people’s minds, the blacksmithing community has been successful in introducing the public to its artistic side by drawing them into the craft. Rodger has been a significant part of this effort, participating in demonstrations, conferences, and other activities around the country.

“A big part of what it means to me to be an artist/blacksmith involves teaching people that this ancient trade is still a living art. We show them how we use modern tools to make things that are unique and completely of their time.”

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## Artist Statement: Atticus Adams

Atticus Adams is a sculptor whose work embodies the transformative power of art to create beauty, meaning, and emotional impact from industrial materials. Using mostly aluminum mesh—generally found in screen doors/windows and filters—he creates abstract pieces and installations, which sometimes resemble flowers, clouds, and other natural phenomena.

Atticus works spontaneously, feeling his way toward the objects that take shape in mind as he shapes them almost entirely by hand. To some pieces he adds color and texture by applying paint or broken auto glass.

“Metal mesh is a beautiful, flexible material that allows you to explore shadow and transparency in endless ways,” he says. “The material lends itself to these biomorphic shapes, which aren’t necessarily intentional . . . The sculptures seem fragile but are actually quite resilient—like nature itself.”

Recycling—as a practice and a concept—is essential to Atticus’s work. He often uses old industrial, architectural materials to create his art. Also, he reuses his own work, turning old installations into new artworks. Transformation, of course, is at the heart of all recycling: turning one thing into another; and in his art specifically, making something functional into something aesthetic; turning rough material into gentle forms.

*Hope* is at the core of his art, and may be emblematic of recycling per se. “Making something beautiful out of something mundane or even ugly is really what I’m trying to do with my art,” he says. “When it’s successful, I think it shows how bleakness or blight can be replaced by (or subsumed into) its opposite. To me that’s hope, as an active, deliberate process, as well as an emotional embrace of possibility—and I think it’s reflected in the work.”

Atticus grew up in West Virginia, steeped in traditional folk art. Several members of his family were self-taught artists, deeply involved in such crafts as wood carving and quilting. “Making tangible objects is definitely part of my family heritage,” he says. “I come from a tradition of using basic, easily available materials for creative outlets.”

His formal art training includes stints at Yale, Rhode Island School of Design, and Harvard’s School of Architecture.

Atticus has fond summer memories of screened in porches back home and screen doors that practically dissolved the barrier between inside and outside, allowing the warmth and nature to permeate each day. This association continues to resonate in his art, and probably in those who get pleasure from his work.

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## Leslie Begert: At Peace with Conflict [\[Website\]](#)

Sculptor Leslie Begert has created a diverse body of work whose basic look changes markedly from one series to the next, yet retains common themes, obsessions, and stylistic signatures that mark every piece as undeniably her own. Central to all of Begert's work is her tendency to take venerable themes in the history of art or received truths of western culture—such as the soft, innocuous character of the mother/child relationship—and tease out deep, relatively unexplored contradictions within those weighty subjects. She does not attempt to resolve the conflicts she lays out; they remain in an intriguing state of tension. This is a hallmark of her work.

"I believe these conflicts are never resolved, neither in art nor in life," says Begert. "They live on, forever. The most we can hope for is to allow these dichotomies to live at ease inside of ourselves."

The Baby Heads series is a perfect example of Begert's tendency to create work with illuminating contradictions. She blurs the line between sentimentality and alienation, giving the pieces a dark, alluringly ambiguous quality that has come to define her work in general. Each individual head has a lovable and peaceful Zen-like quality to it. Yet the peace that emanates from it has an ambiguous quality—does it represent tranquility or death, or both? Are they unsettling or comforting? These contradictions and ambiguities are underscored by displaying the work in multiples, and by the artist's use of contrasting materials, such as the bronze and her signature cold cast nickel graphite in "Negro y Dorado." In her newest incarnation of the series, featuring acrylic heads resting on different colored neon pedestals, Begert attempts a more playful exploration of these heavy contradictions, showing them in an ironic light of holy kitsch.

Baby Heads explores the existential and philosophical contradictions that define existence. "Life, love, and infinite possibility meet biology, death, and human limitations in the head of a newborn," says Begert. "In life, nothing is black and white; everything has this unsettling duality that we need to accept in a significant way, beyond just resignation."

Her Madonna & Child series also examines the clash of emotions endemic to maternity, in part by treating this tender subject with brutal force, modeling the semi-abstract sculptures not with fine tools that respect the often sacred theme, but with a large wooden stick, used to pound the clay into shape.

This series explores the agonies and ecstasies of the elemental, often overpowering relationship between mother and child. With a drastic revision of the Madonna trope, Begert seeks to overturn viewers' expectations rooted in 500 years of conventional and reverential approaches to this historic subject. Her Madonna & Child sculptures bring a decidedly contemporary perspective to a classic subject, revealing a concept of motherhood that is complex and imbued with a range of conflicting feelings.

"Motherhood is a beautiful thing, a singular experience of all-consuming love," says Begert. "Yet there's a dark side to motherhood—plenty of anger, resentment, fear, and wrenching sacrifice—that parallels its obvious beauty. Very little art addresses that sinister side, yet most mothers experience it at some point. I wanted to express that very real dichotomy in my work."

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Baby Head Series Gallery



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CUATRO MATERIALES  
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18" h x 59" w x 5" d

## Artist Statement: Hironori Kawabata [\[Website\]](#)

Hironori (Hiro) Kawabata is a figurative sculptor based in Kagoshima, Japan. He has extensive formal training, including an MFA; and he is an art educator. From this relatively quiet part of the world, from within the nondescript studio building where he works, Hiro creates supremely vivid work. The vitality that radiates from his figures flows from a style that deftly subsumes some of the great masters of both western and Japanese sculpture—easily avoiding the pitfalls of ironic appropriation or homage—while maintaining a perspective that is thoroughly contemporary.

It is passion more than anything that animates Hiro's work. His obvious technical proficiency and ability to intertwine artistic styles from disparate eras and regions captures the eye of the beholder, but it is the work's passion that captures all the rest. The visceral, lasting impression produced by his art may be its most distinctive feature.

Initially, Hiro composes all of his pieces from clay, then he casts them in either bronze or resin. To the latter he applies acrylic paint. He has embraced sculpture's essential power as an art form—it's three-dimensionality and ability to capture mass and movement—as a means for exploring human emotion, or broadly speaking, the "human condition."

"When people are suffering, they express their pain and sometimes the deepest parts of themselves," says Hiro. "I am especially interested in vulnerable people—what their lives are like, what they're feeling at certain moments. At times this makes my work seem tortured, but more than anything, I try to make sculpture with strong individuality."

Hiro cites Rodin as a major influence, because of his emphasis on individual character, as revealed through physical features. Hiro's work is also influenced by Haniwa, an ancient form of Japanese sculpture (3rd to 6th century AD). Haniwa was composed primarily of terracotta warrior figures, made for ritual use and buried with the dead or arranged around gravesites, to protect the deceased in the afterlife.

One of Hiro's signature works, "Moccas," is a bronze bust of a man, with hollow eyes—a distinguishing feature of Haniwa figures. This detail of the work, along with the extremely solemn, remote expression of the face, depicts what seems to be deep sadness or exhaustion and personal emptiness. The face might also evoke a sublime state of being or a vision from a far-off world. "Human expressions convey multiple meanings," says Hiro. "I always try to include this ambiguity in my work."

"Petrosucka," another signature work by Hiro, is a colorful, extravagantly dramatic sculpture based on a character from Stravinsky's ballet of the same name. Petrosucka is a puppet who comes to life and develops human emotions. The eyes in this piece are significant and, as in "Moccas," are drawn from ancient Japanese art, specifically Unkei (1151 - 1223), a master sculptor of Buddhist imagery during the Kamakura period. Unkei used glass for his figures' eyes, which makes them shine and seem life-like. This adds a concrete dimension to the theme, drawn from the work's source material, combining for an original, visually stunning take on the proverbial idea of "bringing art to life."

Time and again we see in Hiro Kawabata's sculpture how technique and a deep understanding of art history are synthesized inventively, and transformed into vehicles for conveying emotion, humanity, turmoil—the whole gamut of life, death, and beyond.

# Hironori Kawabata

SCULPTOR

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