METAL MAGNOLIAS

Gail Wall, blacksmith

INTERVIEW & PORTRAIT BY DIANA GREENE

A row of large metal flowers is planted in the narrow garden that straddles sculptor Gail Wall's Winston-Salem ranch house. They are happy looking flowers, simple with a touch of childhood whimsy.

Turn right at the end of that garden, though, and the world where those flowers were created appears anything but simple. Wall is a blacksmith. Her workshop, a converted two-car garage, contains serious equipment — and lots of it. There's a gas-fueled forge, saws, drills, and metal vices as large as they are numerous.

"It's a difficult media," Wall says, smiling as she heats a metal hook over burning coals. "But I like difficult."

The former occupational therapist also likes improvisation. It makes sense that jazz music plays in her workshop. She hadn't planned on becoming a blacksmith or a sculptor in 2000, when she took a sabbatical from the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County school system. She signed up for a painting class at Penland School of Crafts, but that class was full, so she ended up in a metalworks class taught by Paige Davis.

"I loved it," says Wall of working with metal. "I knew right away I could not not do this."

Returning home, Wall began a two-year apprenticeship with local blacksmith Bernd Mergener. Within that first month, a German relative of Mergener's German died, which prompted him to make a bouquet of metal roses to send home for the graveyard. Wall sawed the metal pieces and became inspired. "After I made the roses, I made magnolias." Wall keeps one of her first magnolia blossoms inside a display cabinet in her living room.

"In my art," Wall says, "there is craftsmanship, and then there is design. I love to design."

This past winter Wall designed a two-foot steel crane, a creation inspired by a scrap piece of metal shaped like a beak she had forged weeks earlier. "I like to keep scraps. I like components, and I like to work intuitively," Wall says.

Though Wall is inspired by animals and nature, much of her work is driven by interior forces such as dreams, personal experience, and a sense of the sacred. "I am in a dream group," Wall explains, "and several pieces come from images in my dreams." The piece *Positive Feminine*, a spiral of metal that emerges rhythmically and wing-like from a solid base, originated with a dream. A minimalist wall hanging, *Waiting*, depicts the despair her husband, Royce, felt during his fatal battle with brain cancer. In *Waiting*, a ribbon of forged metal outlines the doomed patient sitting, back hunched, face buried in his hand; the spare figure creates a surprisingly strong and affecting narrative.

When Wall's husband became sick in 2003, he encouraged her to retire from occupational therapy and become a full-time artist. The difficult reasons behind her transition haven't overshadowed the apparent joy that comes from living a creative life. She is fully engaged, brimming with ideas, enlivened by what she calls "the fun of making something."