

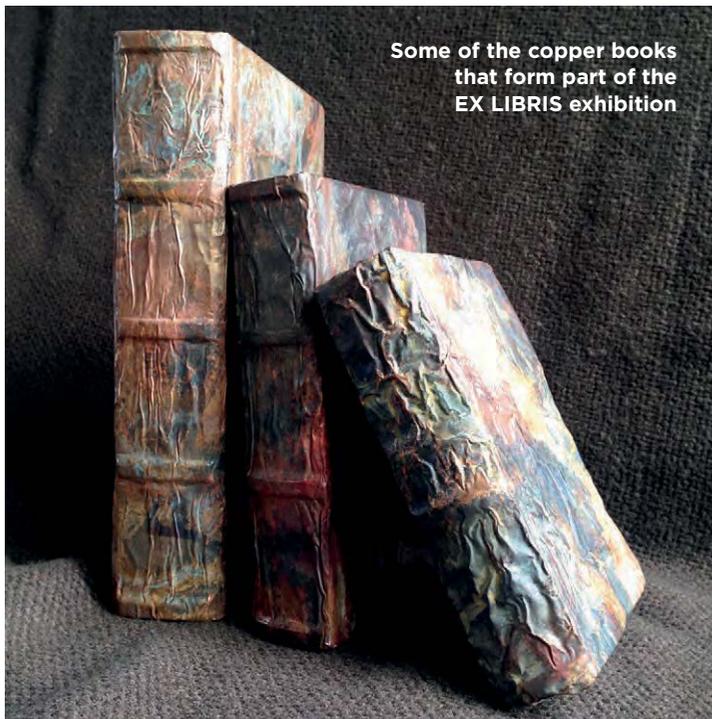
# METAL ON METAL

WHOEVER THOUGHT THAT GREAT SHEETS OF METAL COULD BE TURNED INTO GORGEOUS WORKS OF ART? AND YET, THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT ARTIST **MARIE-LOUISE KOLD** DOES. CHECK OUT WHAT SHE HAS TO TELL **RAMONA DEPARES** AHEAD OF HER *EX LIBRIS* EXHIBITION.

## **The form of your art is pretty unique – can you describe it in laymen's terms?**

Whenever I tell someone I create metal art, I think they mostly imagine welded sculptures – and what I do is pretty much the opposite. I use sheets of copper, brass and bronze and etch them with chemicals to create structures, patterns and often text.

Time, touch and weather will naturally create a patina on metal, but I take it a couple of steps further by subjecting it to lots of different combinations of chemicals and sometimes also heat.



Some of the copper books that form part of the EX LIBRIS exhibition

In this way, I achieve a huge number of different colours through the metal reacting with these substances. I don't add pigments or paint or enamel. After all this, the copper, bronze and brass are combined to form works that are more or less three-dimensional, though most often hang on walls. You could say metal is my canvas. I have also made a number of free-standing pieces, especially for the book-themed *Ex Libris* exhibition.

## **What made you wake up one day and say: I want to create art out of metal (in this particular way)?**

Well, no sane person would, would they? (*she says with a laugh*). It certainly wasn't a logical result of what I had done before it, and it wasn't a well-considered decision. But, when it happened, it was utterly unavoidable.

I started attending art school in Lund in southern Sweden in 1996. We were supposed to become familiar with as many techniques and media as possible, not find a favourite and abandon all others.

I really liked copper printing. Allow me to get technical very briefly here, because this is how it all started. To make a copper print you first take a sheet of copper and then you need to create grooves in it. You either engrave it using tools, or you cover it with a resist (which will protect it from etching chemicals), you scratch through the resist revealing the copper and then let an etchant do the engraving for you.

After it's all done and the copper has been cleaned you rub oil paint into it. It'll embed itself in the etched or engraved areas and by then pressing the copper against a sheet of moistened paper, the oil paint is transferred and you get the result: a copper print. Repeating the process you can get a couple of 100 of them. The copper plate is not really part of the artwork, it's a tool. Well, after doing lots and ►

**The artist with her  
largest copper book.**  
PHOTO BY ELIN JONSSON



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The artist working at her Malmö studio



Working on one of the small copper books for *Ex Libris*.



Book made from etched and patinated copper

lots of copper printing, I moved on to other stuff and then one day, months later - it was a gloomy, wet autumn day in 1997 - I went into the metal workshop at the school to look for a hammer.

And I happened to come across one of my first copper printing plates. And it had changed... it had developed a gentle but magical patina, it suddenly had depth and a glow and I could see a few of my fingerprints on it. With a pounding heart I prepared for the whole printing process, imagining that I'd get the best print ever. But I didn't. The print I got looked just like the first ones I'd made months before. I realized that all those changes weren't on the surface and couldn't be transferred. They were in the metal itself. The disappointment lasted only seconds, because I was dizzy with a deep thrill that overtook me completely. I knew that what I had to do was work with the metal itself.

Now, copper was very expensive at the time. (And it has more than doubled since...) And it's heavy. Yes - I'm technically a heavy metal artist! It's hard to work with, and it's a dirty process that often involves injuries. Add to this that, while I may not be typically Scandinavian, I do really like to plan things. And that's utterly impossible with this material and these techniques! I never get where I think I will! And despite all of these difficulties and drawbacks, there wasn't a smidgen of doubt in my mind in that moment. Despite it defying all logic, I was compelled to work with this material that I had basically fallen head over heels in love with.

**The technical part looks pretty badass. Have you ever suffered any 'on the job' injuries?**

You know how art is said to be created from blood, sweat and tears? That's most definitely the case with me. For a number of years I

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had the National Swedish Poisons Information Centre on speed dial. Not any longer, because I now know their advice by heart, generally: go stand in the shower for 45 minutes so you don't get a third degree burn from the nitric acid splash.

I have gotten better at protecting myself over the years. I have taken good care of my lungs and my eyes from day one, without cutting corners. When it comes to things that are literally deadly or could blind me in seconds, there's no compromise on safety.

But, you know, a nitric acid splash on the skin doesn't kill you... It does, however, mess up the creative flow rather badly if you have to stop and take a 45 minute shower break.

Cuts, though... Boy, do I get a lot of cuts! I have a band-aid budget that is rather ridiculous. And have needed stitches once or twice. I wear gloves when I handle chemicals, but I do need to touch the metals. It's the only way I can really feel them, shape them and work with them. And that means cuts, unavoidably. *(To illustrate this point, she waves fingers with two band-aids, and lots of fresh, thin scars.)*

**So what are the biggest challenges you face?**

There are always challenges, but I have to say they were harder in the beginning. When I started as a full time artist 17 years ago I had

a ridiculous struggle for several years, working 80 hours a week and making a loss.

Back then, the main challenge was to just persist and keep going and hope things would get better before my meagre savings ran out. No longer struggling constantly to make ends meet - and what a relief that is! - the challenges are of a different nature now. A 100 ideas and only time to realize seven of them.

And, of course, the exciting challenge of constantly being right on the edge of my ability, balancing and pushing it and exploring. The moment *Ex Libris* finishes, I will dive into an important project which will demand everything I've got, I can't talk about it yet, but it's a challenge I'm proud to take on and eager to do my absolute best with.

**Can you tell us a few words about *Ex Libris*?**

*Ex Libris* is truly a labour of love. It started years ago, with the central inspiration being the Bibliotheca and its centuries old books, which deal with metal, metallurgy, chemistry and alchemy.

I'm fascinated both by the scientific content and the aesthetic qualities of these incredible books. They have inspired artworks created from copper, bronze and brass in the form of metal books and scrolls, as well as other artefacts containing text.

In many cases, I have etched text so deeply into metal sheets that it is uncertain whether it will last forever or, on the other hand, disintegrate, much like the actual books themselves at the Bibliotheca.

You could say that I am using the very materials described in these books to explore the inspiration the books themselves in turn invoke. To me, the exhibition bridges the past with the present. I have sourced and studied books from the library's collections dealing with metals, chemistry and alchemy and a selection of these books will form part of the exhibition.

**What are typical reactions to your work from people who have never encountered it before?**

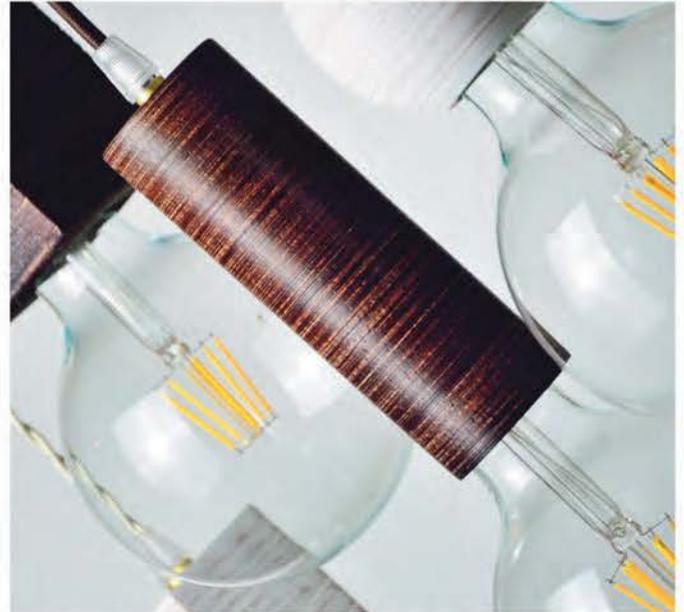
I am immensely grateful to say that it seems a lot of people share my fascination with my metals! I think it's impossible (and not desirable either) to make something everybody likes and, of course, there are people who have other preferences in art and that's as it should be.

But I'm thrilled that so many people are touched by what I do... I get all kinds of reactions, everything from exclamations, to quiet tears from overflowing emotions, to people liking it so much they want to own it and see it every day.

It is a powerful feeling that I am not alone in caring about these metals and the art that results. I could've easily been "that weird one who does something or other with metal", with people shaking their heads in my direction with half a smile. It means the world to me that that is not the case, and that others, too, really care about what I pour my heart and soul into.

*Ex Libris runs at the National Library, Valletta between May 7 and June 2. 📍*

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