

Objects, useful and not
from the hands and mind of kelly backs



\$10

Zeke's Gallery,

November 28, 1998 to January 23, 1999

First, there was fire¹.

Well, first there was a sheet metal shop². Soon after, fourteen hundred workers were banging together nine railroad boxcars a day³. A little while later a structural steel shop appeared⁴. From there, somehow, jewelry came to be⁵ ~ a curiously appropriate transformation ~ and then the structural steel shop reappeared. It was, of course, a different shop from the first one.

But still: first, there was fire, as none of this is possible without fire.

Preheating temperatures for welding range from approximately seventy degrees Fahrenheit to just beyond seven hundred. Between thirteen hundred and fifty and seventeen hundred degrees Fahrenheit, steel undergoes internal atomic changes, which radically affect its material properties, transforming it from ferrite or pearlite into austenite. The maximum forging temperature for steel is twenty-four hundred degrees Fahrenheit. Steel burns between twenty-two hundred and twenty-seven hundred degrees Fahrenheit. Once burnt, steel is ruined and cannot be cured except by remelting. At twenty-eight hundred degrees Fahrenheit, steel liquefies.

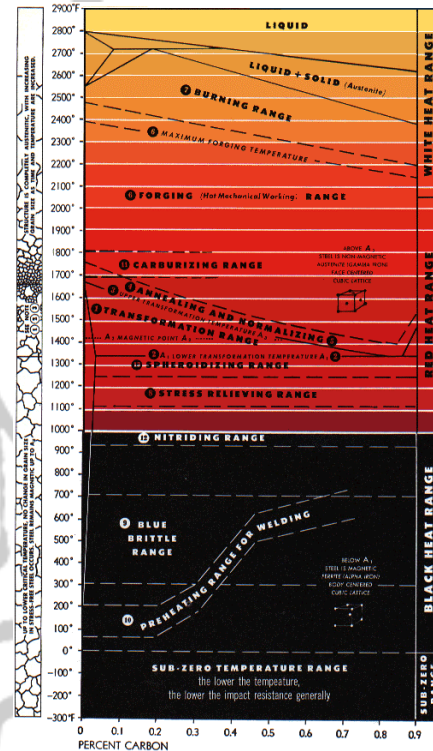
Panmettallism recognizes that although not everything is metal, metal is in everything. Waters, grasses, woods and animals are composed of salts or mineral elements.

Metal does not want to bend, curve, flower, leaf, swell, twist, or turn. At least not any temperature considered human ~ any temperature at which we don't become crispy. Metal is stubborn like that. We will turn all sorts of tricks if you put us too close to a fire. Metal likes to sit in the fire. It's cozy in the fire. But if it is left in the fire long enough, metal will do just about anything for a blacksmith like Mr. Backs. And Mr. Backs likes to make metal do tricks for him. He likes to make it flip flips, pirouette pirouettes, and squat squats. He likes to make it do things it doesn't already do. Where it is straight, he will angle it. Where it is hard, he will soften it. Flat, curve; smooth, roughen; square, round. Metal is malleable under Mr. Backs' hammer.

The continuous stretched oval spiral that rises to support a tabletop - the irregular, leafy branches that twine to the external shape of a bed support - the discreet sloping curves that arch to form a seat. All are former solid machine-cut tubular lengths of straight hard steel. Fire and hammer heat and pound them into something further than themselves, forms that exceed their own, that are both contained within and supplemented from without. The metal, in preliminary form, overflows its original structure, the spill borne of the blacksmith's operations, the metal partly (re)born of the same. Control of this flow is blacksmithing; its results are a vital forged table, bedframe, or chair.

At the end of the day, Mr. Backs quenches his metal. This sudden immersion in water helps alleviate the effects that intense heat can have on Mr. Backs while it solidifies his work. High temperatures and violent pounding require such measures to avoid dehydration. And to cool off.

Lori Waxman



¹ Well, no. First, there was a birth, ca. 1960, in the environs of the York Townships, more commonly known as Toronto. Kelly Backs, the object of the birth in question, made it into the very tail end of the Eisenhower era, just one week short of Kennedy's ascension as El President of the USA. Prior and subsequent to his birth were a half-dozen or so other births, ranging from one sister through four brothers, a half brother, and a stepbrother. It has been suggested that Mrs. Backs can out-hammer young Kelly any day of the week.

² Niagara Falls, melting pot of all things romantic and tacky (a gooey amalgamation of chocolate, long stem red roses by the dozen, not-so-cute stuffed toys, tequila sunrise-flavored condoms and Spanish fly), is the site of Kelly Backs first welding job, ca. 1977.

³ Hamilton, ON, 1979-80, where Kelly Backs is one of a sea of laborers laboring to build our nation's railroad, to make cross-country travel viable for men and women and children of all shapes and sizes, to help keep intact this great country of ours which is splitting itself right down the center (really, a little right of center). It's the American dream. But it's Canada, and these are not passenger trains, and we already have a railroad, and, well, never mind.

⁴ Scientists have been unable to explain an increase in reports of structural steel shop sitings in Boucherville, PQ, ca. 1986-87. Conspiracy theorists believe Mr. Backs may have been somehow involved.

⁵ Actually, it came to be polished. Backs polished up on someone else's jewelry in Vancouver, 1986, and later in Montreal, 1987. Later still, in 1989, he polished up his own jewelry.

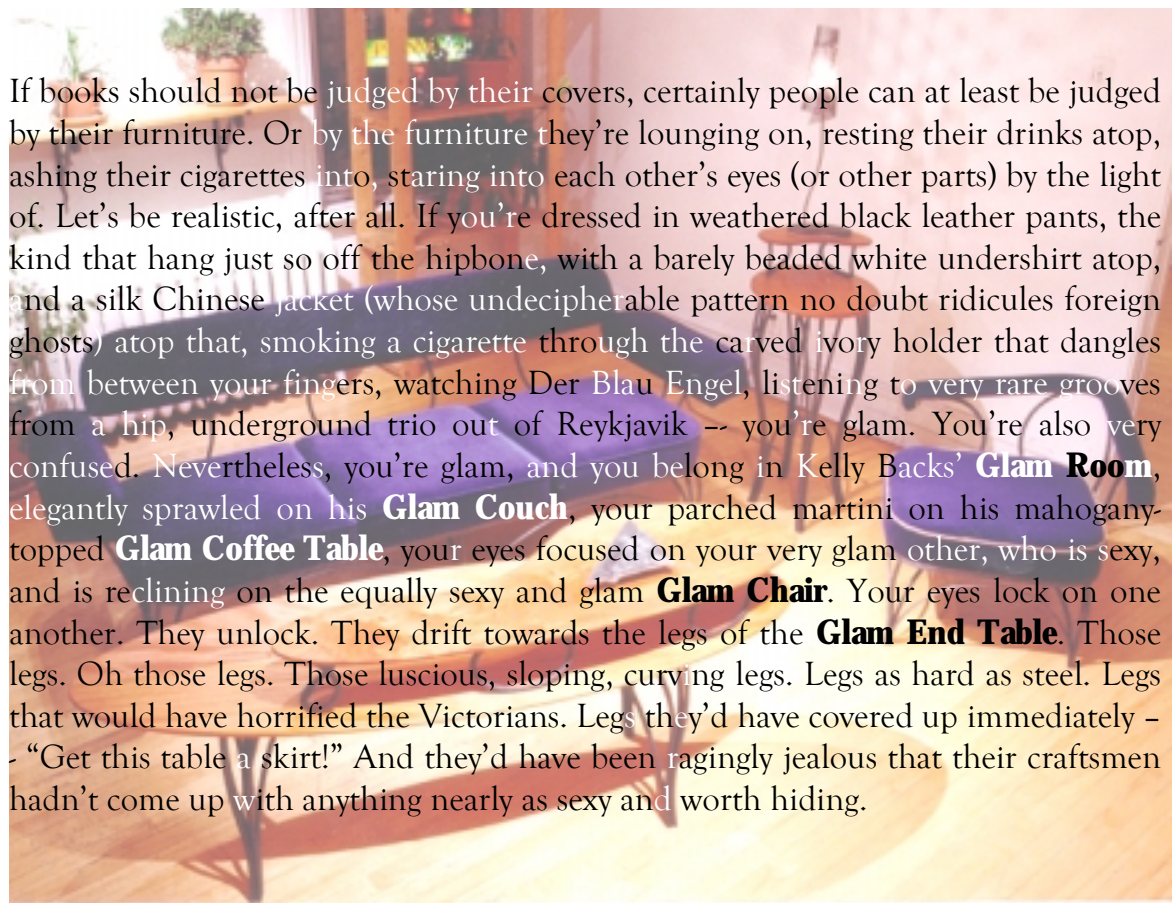
Metal is the conductor of all matter.



Blacksmiths are the conductors of all metal.



The Glam Room



If books should not be judged by their covers, certainly people can at least be judged by their furniture. Or by the furniture they're lounging on, resting their drinks atop, ashing their cigarettes into, staring into each other's eyes (or other parts) by the light of. Let's be realistic, after all. If you're dressed in weathered black leather pants, the kind that hang just so off the hipbone, with a barely beaded white undershirt atop, and a silk Chinese jacket (whose undecipherable pattern no doubt ridicules foreign ghosts) atop that, smoking a cigarette through the carved ivory holder that dangles from between your fingers, watching Der Blau Engel, listening to very rare grooves from a hip, underground trio out of Reykjavik -- you're glam. You're also very confused. Nevertheless, you're glam, and you belong in Kelly Backs' **Glam Room**, elegantly sprawled on his **Glam Couch**, your parched martini on his mahogany-topped **Glam Coffee Table**, your eyes focused on your very glam other, who is sexy, and is reclining on the equally sexy and glam **Glam Chair**. Your eyes lock on one another. They unlock. They drift towards the legs of the **Glam End Table**. Those legs. Oh those legs. Those luscious, sloping, curving legs. Legs as hard as steel. Legs that would have horrified the Victorians. Legs they'd have covered up immediately -- "Get this table a skirt!" And they'd have been ragingly jealous that their craftsmen hadn't come up with anything nearly as sexy and worth hiding.



THE GLAM COFFEE TABLE is a two-layer luxury sandwich of Brazilian Mahogany and metal. Four times four ½" steel tubes act as legs, rising and dividing to support one mahogany oval. This in turn supports a second layer of mahogany, a smaller oval with a bite taken out of it. In between, the two slices of mahogany are four squashed steel oval forms that serve as a support for the top layer.

THE GLAM END TABLE is a taller, skinnier (and richer?) version of the Glam Coffee Table.

THE GLAM TABLE LAMP sits on its kidney-shaped steel base casting a vision of shadows. It curves to its somehow upright tube stem, defying Miss Ruth's laws of good posture. Further flouting propriety, its light bulb is shaded in perforated metal, hardly the sort of clothing a lamp would usually wear.

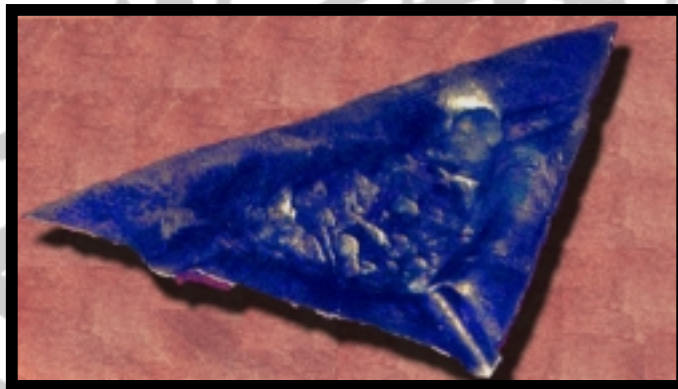


THE GLAM COUCH lounges out its blue velvet body on short clustered steel legs that match those of the other occupants of the Glam Room. Its sleek, long rectangular backrest hovers between matching armrests; all are discreetly supported by cured steel rods, which form a simplified version of the legs beneath them.

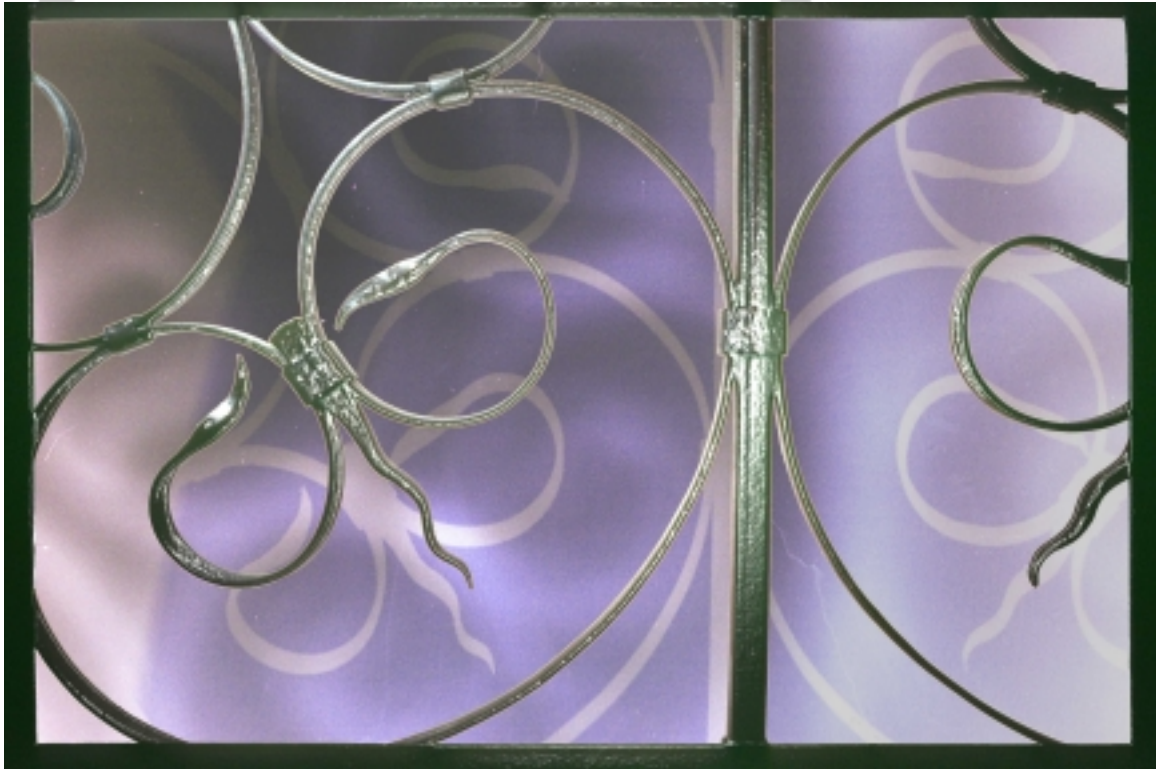
THE GLAM CHAIR seats you at a new level of luxuriousness. Square and low to the ground, it creates a suave corner of its own wherever its squat, curvy legs set it down. Wearing plush blue velvet trimmed with gold piping, its backrest angled upwards on steel curves, anyone with a dry martini in hand would fight to be seen in its lap.



THE GLAM TRAY can withstand your cigarette butts, ashes, and much more. Hand-formed from a 3/8" steel plate, it is superbly well suited to holding its own against all manner of abuse. Its isosceles triangular form merely enhances the pleasures of smoking.

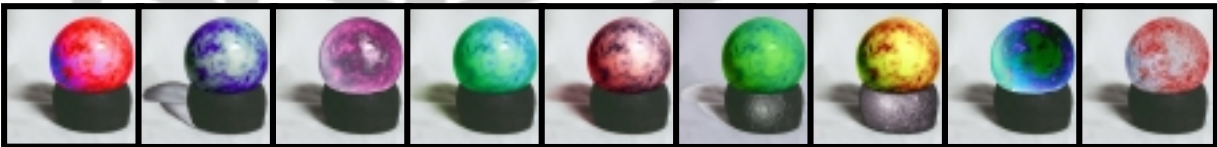


THE NAUTILUS BED lulls you to sleep in the style of the sea. A four-poster frame of 1" and 1½ " steel tube, she idolizes the 7/8" seashells that crown her masts. Her bow and stern are arches trailing seaweed hot forged from flatbar. Beneath these words⁶ and its arches, seaweed gives way to a mammoth seashell form.



THE PROMETHEUS BED is fit for a king. Two 1" posts, upset to 1½", frame a tree's worth of eucalyptus leaf C-scrolls. Though the Prometheus bed does not boast the health benefits of eucalyptus, it does boast the ability to entice one's imagination into seeing shapes of all sorts in its twists and turns.

STEPS: BABY halts its pursuit of growing up – or is it getting into trouble? – as all nine of its red, blue, and green balls comes to rest. Frozen in place by the nine forged 2" steel rings that form their bases, the temptation is ever present to surreptitiously free each marble from its anchor and set it crawling.



⁶ N.B. The Watermark.

THE WINGS are the end result of 500,000 hammer strokes – and they still won't fly. Based on standard wing design – found on sparrows, eagles, and all birds in between – and complete with steel shoulder straps and a waist band, these wings will take anyone down.



THE JEWELRY CASE looks not unlike a very skinny, elegant woman, top heavy with silver jewelry, teetering on her long, long curvy legs. These legs, however, are steel rods split and forged into down-turning leaves. Supported by the spindly legs is a hand-hammered oval case, jewels nestled in its bosom.



Brooch Of
The North



Nicole's Knot



Cloudy Moon



Knot #4



Knot #6f



Twin Edens



Knot
#73426



D'Audet's Sword



The Jen Knot

THE SHIELD OF PERSIUS is descended from the stories of the Medusa. This interpretation, done in a 1/16" sheet of steel, and set with twenty-four forged snakes, derives from an engraving found on a Greek urn from 300 BC.



I'M NOT A ROLLING STONE is a pyramid, scaled to those at Giza, cut through its center with shards of steel and a bed of moss. The lush emerald of the moss works in counterpoint to the pyramid's layers of rust, achieved naturally over a two-year period.

THE OLYMPIA CHAIR is a giant light blue velvet insect topped by the most upright, hypertrophied of antennae. It is Jimminy Cricket gone through some hybrid version of personification: Jimminy Cricket the chair. It is Jimminy Cricket's favorite chair, blown up, blown up, and blown up some more. Olympia runs, hops, jives. It saunters dapperly, with a wink to the ladies on the left and a wink to the men on the right. Olympia likes to drink mint juleps, dry martinis, and kirs.



TV TRAY 4-2 provides a loving setting for your TV dinner. Its 1/16" (almost) heart-shaped top, run round with steel piping, welcomes your meals atop its three 5/8" legs. Couch potatoes note: the legs of the TV tray have a waist.

THE TWISTED STICKS are a sensual melding of forged steel and brass designed to hold dripless candles that will light up your life, and that of the one you love.

THE ORIGAMI CHAIR is a smart, simple model for a chair. Constructed from a single sheet of metal, cut and folded, it is based on an original model shaped from an empty cigarette pack.



THE CAPTAIN'S CHAIR might have been made for Kirk himself. With its myriad of starkly, aerodynamically curving 1/2" legs holding black velvet cushions floatingly aloft, it boldly goes where no chair has gone before.

Glam Chair.	1996	Steel & Velvet	1 of 49 Ltd. Edition	\$ 650
Glam Couch.	1998	Steel & Velvet	1 of 49 Ltd. Edition	\$ 1,600
Glam End Table.	1998	Steel & Mahogany	1 of 49 Ltd. Edition	\$ 600
Glam Coffee Table.	1998	Steel & Mahogany	1 of 49 Ltd. Edition	\$ 1,000
Glam Table Lamp.	1998	Steel & Perforated Steel	1 of 49 Ltd. Edition	\$ 175
Glam Tray.	1998	Hand Forged 3/8" Steel	1 of 49 Ltd. Edition	\$ 75
Glam Picture Frame	1996	Torch Cut Steel	1 of 49 Ltd. Edition	\$ 45
Nautilus Bed.	1996	Hand Forged Iron		\$ 2,800
Prometheus Bed.	1998	Hand Wrought Steel		\$ 1,800
Prometheus Shelf Brackets	1998	Forged Steel	Prototype	\$ 65/pair
Pursuit Of Happiness.	1998	Forged Steel 1 1/8" Ø	Prototype	Sold
Wings.	1995	500,000 Hammer marks,	Collection Of Darren Namer	NFS
Jewelry Case.	1998	Forged & Plenered Steel		\$ 650
Shield Of Persius.	1998	Reposé & Forged Steel		\$ 800
I'm Not A Rolling Stone	1995	Steel, Moss & Rust		\$ 800
Origami Chair.	1998	One Piece Sheet Steel	1/4 Model	NFS
Steps: Baby.	1998	Forged Steel & Stone		\$ 240
Twisted Sticks.	1998	Forged Steel & Brass	Prototype	\$ 170
Mimi	1997	Forged Steel	Prototype	\$ 120
T.V. Tray 4 - 2.	1997	Forged Steel & Sheet Steel	Collection Of Donna Moore	NFS
Captain Chair.	1997-8	Steel & Velvet	Prototype	\$ 450
Olympia Chair.	1996	Steel & Velvet	Production Model	\$ 550
A Thousand-Rail Spike Knife.	1997	Forged Rail Spike		Sold
Cloudy Moon.	1988	Sterling Silver	125% Casting Model	\$ 120
Knot #3b.	1988	Sterling Silver	125% Casting Model	\$ 60
Knot #6f.	1988	Sterling Silver	125% Casting Model	\$ 55
Button Of Cardiff.	1988	Sterling Silver	125% Casting Model	\$ 110
Knot #3.	1988	Sterling Silver	125% Casting Model	\$ 40
Knot #4.	1988	Sterling Silver	125% Casting Model	\$ 45
Knot #5.	1988	Sterling Silver	125% Casting Model	\$ 50
D'Audet's Sword.	1988	Sterling Silver	125% Casting Model	\$ 80
Brooch Of The North.	1988	Sterling Silver	125% Casting Model	\$ 105
Twin Edens.	1988	Sterling Silver	125% Casting Model	\$ 95
Knot #73426.	1988	Sterling Silver	125% Casting Model	\$ 65
Nicole's Knot.	1988	Sterling Silver	125% Casting Model	\$ 60
Celtic Life	1988	Sterling Silver	125% Casting Model	\$ 130

Jewelry prices include your choice of pin, post, or ring. Chain \$15, extra.

Process...Patience...And Vision

Sometimes I wake in the middle of the night. Sleep becomes impossible until pen has connected to paper to the satisfaction of the vision in my head. An idea won't leave me alone until it reveals itself, in at least two dimensions. Losing the idea is not my fear. That fear belongs to the idea itself, struggling to live, fighting its way into the physical world. Some of these creations are content with their flat rendition, and are not strong enough to go beyond the page. Others will nag and prod, or turn my path to become manifest.

Metal was not my first medium, and may not be my last, but it is something that inexplicably lures me and brings my visions to life. When I was in kindergarten, they divided the class into different craft areas. The crayon table, the Lego blocks, blunt scissors and colored paper, and the plasterscene. No one had an assigned place, except me. When the teacher saw the focus of my attention with the clay, she allowed me to stay there the whole day, every day. I haven't been without a chunk of plasterscene since. Putting heat to metal, then smashing it, I substitute tools for my digits to reproduce the forms that my 6-year-old fingers did a lifetime ago.

Time has tempered my need for the nearly instant results I achieved then, and given me the skills to bring my visions to life. Now, like then, a lot of the joy is in the doing, the actions involved in fashioning something lifeless into something that speaks to me about myself. The sweat and force involved in shaping metal teaches me my limits, but at the same time, urges me to go beyond them and reach for new heights. The might and subtleties of the hammer demand my total attentiveness for us to work as one, and rewards me for my efforts. The magic of the fire draws me to it. Taming it as a tool is the challenge.

Beauty...Balance...And Love

The love of creation has been a big part of my life. Being the first person to see an object move from thought through design to realization is always a thrill to me. With something like my Jewelry case⁷, my first reaction was to stare, all thoughts blocked out, just absorbing my creation with my eyes, with no sense of time or place. My next reaction was an uncontrollable need for someone else to see it, with the idea that it's not yet real until another person has experienced it.

Negative space is often the most important consideration in my constructs. Symmetry has a place in all things, but must be used in moderation, to avoid repetition. Boring is one sin I'll make every effort not to commit. The mass of the metal allows me to make a statement of strength and power, as shown in the corner posts of the Prometheus bed. With the lightness that it brings to a design like the Captain's Chair, I can create a feeling of refinement and grace.

Viewing a work in progress, the piece will tell me if it's proper or not. Some small detail that is out of place will practically scream for change. It is my duty to make those changes before showing it to anyone.

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Exploration...Knowledge...and the Self

Most of all, what I like about my work is the range of emotions it brings. From execution to completion. Whether it is in the physical struggle of wrestling the Pursuit of Happiness⁸ into its final form or the overwhelming contentment of seeing the Glam Couch in its present setting, I feel more alive for the work.

The further I delve into the medium, the more secrets get revealed, but simultaneously, the more I realize I have to learn. This act of creation, as part of the exploration of who I am, is a life long pursuit. This voyage of self-discovery, aided by my family, my friends, my enemies, and my work, has so far been a very interesting trip.

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I'd like to thank Olivier Maranda, most of all, without his support (and tools!) most of these objects would not exist.

I also wish to thank the people who showed me how to tame the iron; Mr. Rogers at N.F.C.V.I., for exiting me to the possibilities, the jewelry teacher on Salt Spring Island (sorry, I forgot your name) for the attention to detail, Michel Pednaud at Les Foufounes Electric, for showing me how to look, Michel Bernier at Centre des Arts Contemporain, for teaching me patience, Eddy at Les Ateliers Lucifer, for the secrets of the fire, the hammer, and the eye, and Geoffe Barns in his shed in Adelaide, for showing me what a real blacksmith can do.

Thanks to Dominique Alary at Lumid and Andrew McRae at Net-Net for the advice, Colin at Question Authority for the lift, Gerry Gradauer for the push, Michel DeBlois at Lucifer for the loan, Markian at Pavliv Industries and his p'tit pascal, Thierry at la Corde Sympathique for the mahogany, the gang at the Nation for the company, Brian Zee and Mathieu Colette for the laughs, Will for the dishes (I'll do them soon, I promise), Georgette for being an outstanding supporter for the last 39 years, Julie Chrysler at Azure for being a fan, Dan Webster for my MiMis, Dana Rempel, Lori Waxman and Jessica Hand at Zekes' for the hand, and you, for your feedback.

Kelly Backs, 1998

*T.V. Tray 4-2 courtesy of Donna Moore
Wings from the collection Darren Namer
A Thousand-Rail Spike Knife courtesy of Neil Diamond
Celtic Life courtesy of Kevin Backs*

Photographs of Kelly, The Glam Coffee Table, The Glam End Table, The Glam Couch, The Wings, The Jewelry Case, and The Olympia Chair by Patricia Gonzalez © 1998

Photographs of The Glam Room, The Glam Lamp, The Glam Chair, The Glam Tray, Prometheus Bed (detail), Steps: Baby (detail), Shield Of Persius, I'm Not A Rolling Stone, Twisted Sticks & T.V. Tray 4-2, Captain Chair, Jewelry Case (detail), Pursuit of Happiness, and Nautilus Bed by Neil Diamond, © 1998

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