

A detail of one of the large, multilayered works in Karin Broker's show "Love Me, Love Me Not."

ARTS

BY MOLLY GLENTZER



**The piece:** "Second Wives"

**The artist:** Karin Broker

**Where:** McClain Gallery,

through June 23

**Why:** A domestic goddess with an iron will sometimes has to steel herself in a world dominated by men.

Some of the antique objects in Broker's fifth show at McClain Gallery are more than metaphors: They're puns. "Second Wives," in particular, made me smile. It's a huge piece: a steel table topped with 11 antique irons, each a solid, heavy

black base from which a single, colorful but also slightly distressed flower sprouts.

These heavyweight pressing tools, which were hot to handle, are known in the antiques industry as "sad irons," utilizing an Old English word for "solid." But, of course, they have a kind of sad history, too, a physical embodiment of centuries of unheralded labor that traditionally fell to women.

Tiny crystal beads adorn the tangles of braided gold wire woven up through the flowers.

Similar wires appear in many of the other sculptures within the show, a gesture that creates an unabashedly pretty sparkle. But look closely: The wires have jagged, sharp bits, like thorns.

And all of Broker's sculptural assemblages incorporate hard, unyielding materials — steel furniture, a cast-iron urn, a revolver and the glass domes under which she often displays tabletop pieces.

Large works on paper, in soft brown and cream tones, provide balance and fill the walls with

Broker's signature layered bouquet imagery. Included are 11 large collages that appropriate a trove of World War II-era love letters Broker acquired, written by a man named Johnny to his darling Kay back home. Cutting them up, Broker kept thinking about notions of the happily-ever-after, and how Johnny was concealing all he must have been seeing on the battlefields.

She also mined other histories about brutal acts against women and remarkable, overlooked

female figures. Some of that found its way into the beautifully layered works on paper, which show Broker's deft hand with printing techniques. (A longtime professor, she oversees the printing studio at Rice University.)

Another table is set with copies of the limited-edition artist book Broker compiled during the four years it took to build the show. Her labor of love may look nostalgic on the surface, but she's no pushover.

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