



2026 ABANA Conference Spotlight:

Celeste Flores: The Shape of Community

By Torie Van Horne. Based on an interview by Addison de Lisle on March 24, 2026.
Edited for clarity, length, & flow. All photos courtesy of the artist.

Celeste Flores has been an artist for as long as she can remember. After receiving her BFA in Sculpture from the Academy of Art University in San Francisco, California, she continued her education at The Crucible in Oakland, California. Chris Niemer, head of the blacksmithing department, was her mentor for more than a decade, and she spent a dozen years teaching blacksmithing while building an ornamental metalwork business.

Recently, Flores has begun offering forging classes and team-building events, in an effort to build an artist-blacksmithing community in the Bay Area.

Underestimate Celeste Flores at your own peril. In a craft often defined by force, she has reshaped the rules around her.

This five-foot-tall blacksmith has spent her career defying stereotypes and making a name for herself creating large, architectural and sculptural pieces, and as a community builder and teacher in her Richmond, California studio.

“I’ve been an artist for as long as I can remember. The first time I was exposed to blacksmithing was while I was in college at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco, in a general metal working class. I saw that glowing metal and the hammers and I was captivated. I knew instantly that I wanted to focus on that all semester. Eighteen years later, I’m still focused on metal.

After college I ended up at The Crucible, a nonprofit organization and art school in Oakland. At first, I worked as a volunteer just to get a chance to use their studio space, but I quickly got more involved. Chris Niemer, who was the head of the smithy at The Crucible, was my mentor for almost a dozen years. He was really good at working to help me become more independent. He showed me how to work with the size of my body. I’m a very small person, and when you’re doing architectural work, you’re working with big pieces of metal. So we used pulleys, body weight, and pivot points. He

Leslie's Railing | 2020
Forged steel, architectural bronze



showed me how to manipulate the world around me, regardless of my size and to use the tools to my advantage. He had a lot of experience doing architectural work too, in this area he was very much a guide; he let me do all the work, but was always there to make sure I was able to succeed.”

This mentorship was especially important to Celeste in a world where previous instructors had not been so welcoming in traditionally male-dominated mediums. When asked about female representation in blacksmithing, Celeste feels more women are joining the field, but they still feel like the exception, not the rule.

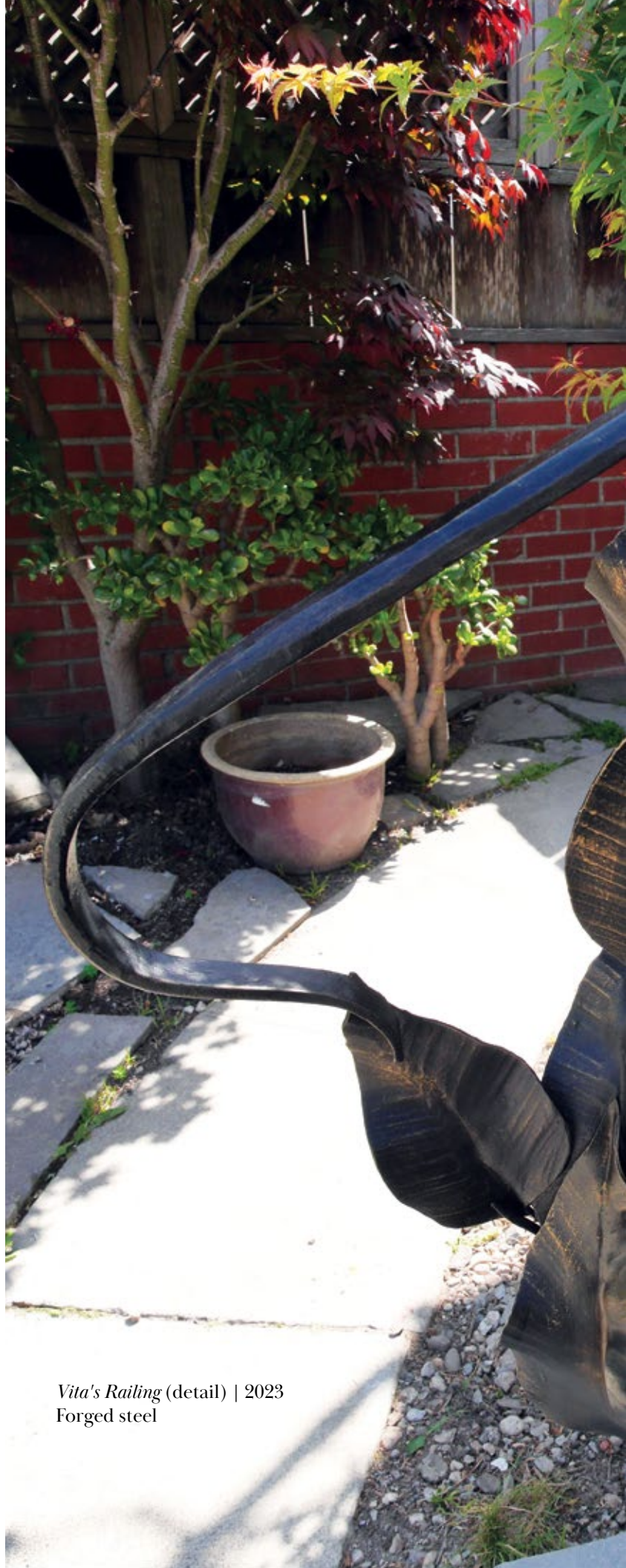
“The moment I realized that I could do this full time, that I could actually make a living off of my art, was by watching Carla Hall. Carla was working at The Crucible, also doing architectural pieces. As a petite woman, I didn’t think that anyone would take me seriously as a professional blacksmith. Seeing that Carla could make a business out of it, and succeed, really made me think that maybe I could too.

I think that blacksmithing is only going to benefit from having a broader and more diverse community. Without welcoming more people in, blacksmithing will be viewed as more and more obsolete. I’m really enthusiastic about the work that the Society of Inclusive Blacksmiths (SIBs) is doing for exactly this reason. I think it’s so important and I try to support it whenever I can.”

For Celeste, inclusion is a theme that informs every aspect of her own teaching, and how she is shaping the future of the craft.

“My shop has a very diverse clientele and a lot of different looking people, including women and people of color. I think blacksmithing can be an intimidating place for people because they might not think that they’re the right person or have the right body to be doing this, or they might feel unwelcome. I’m trying to make a fun community so that people in the Bay Area have a place where they can express themselves this way.

I’ve become less rigid in my approach to teaching



Vita's Railing (detail) | 2023
Forged steel



over time as I've realized that people have a lot of different starting places for metalwork. I start my classes with softer metals, smaller hammers, and by giving less information at first, so as not to overwhelm people new to the craft.

We will start with the smallest step. It might be 'We're just gonna bring the end of this to a point,' or 'We're just gonna flatten this out right here.' By breaking the work up into a lot of little steps it feels more manageable, and then I give individual feedback as we go along. Just getting out there, feeling like they can play and accomplish things, that's what matters. It's very important to me that blacksmithing feels approachable to a wide variety of people.

I have a lot of first projects students can pick from. The most popular are the railroad spike knife or the sword letter opener, but the ones I love to teach are the copper feather, or the bronze bracelet. The feather is really detailed, and can become a pendant or a little keychain. The bracelet is so simple, but it gives you a lot of the basic information about blacksmithing. It's all about hammer control, learning to use your tongs, and learning to watch the fire.

I also love to teach the sculptural side of blacksmithing. There are a lot of students who want to make knives and tools, and a lot of students who don't know how to express themselves through the process of blacksmithing. It's a difficult thing to go from having an image in your mind and then making it out of metal. I love introducing people to the process of doing decorative work. I would love to see more artist blacksmiths."

Sculpture and self expression are the hallmarks of Celeste's own art. As a fledgling blacksmith herself, she was drawn to figurative work.

"I thought I was going to be a sculptor, and one of my first real projects was a metal framework person. Again, seeing Carla Hall's work made me realize that I could treat architectural pieces as a canvas for whatever detail I wanted. I decided to focus on architectural work because it was something that I thought I could sell, and that



Reflection Symmetry | 2025

Forged steel

14 x 14 x 1 in.

would give me the room to be a sculptor.

I'm really inspired by nature, so I incorporate lots of organic elements into my work. I go on walks and I take pictures of the small details of things. I also really like art nouveau, but I want my work to be contemporary. A lot of the classical blacksmithing is very elaborate, very labor-intensive and detailed. I like getting into the details, but I also like having a canvas that is a little bit simpler and easier for people to comprehend. Lately I've been experimenting with textures and finishes more than anything. At the school we're also working on creating a sword class, so we're making all these little fantasy weapons. It's a lot of fun. To me, swordmaking is an opportunity for play."

Celeste is also preparing to spend a fair amount of time on the road in 2026, demonstrating and speaking at a variety of conferences, including ABANA's upcoming event in November. But this flexibility is new to her, and made possible thanks to the popularity of her weekend classes. That same philosophy of breaking the work down into something approachable for students has also shaped the way Celeste has built her business.

"I had to build my business from the ground up so I always share information about what works and what doesn't because I want to see blacksmithing continue on as a profession. I started my business doing architectural work, then in November of 2023 I started teaching. One day I just added a place on my website where people could sign up for classes. I started advertising on Instagram. I got a couple of anvils and a little bit more equipment and I discovered that the classes sell themselves. Now, teaching is a huge part of my program, and I've basically got this little school going. We run classes every single weekend. They're almost always sold out. Recently I hired an instructor, and that part of my business is pretty easy to run. Now I can actually leave my shop. I really wasn't able to travel before."

Last year Celeste was invited to be a keynote speaker at the "Forging Connections" conference

at Touchstone Center for Crafts in Pennsylvania, where she demonstrated bronze forging. While these experiences continue to expand her work, they also reinforce a philosophy that centers around diverse community as a catalyst for growth.

"I started forging bronze when I worked for Jerry Coe in Berkeley. He does bronze lighting, but also a lot of bronze architectural work. There are not a lot of people working in this medium, so when I get invited somewhere, that's usually what I do. I've become known for it.

My creativity and my ability to envision what metal can do has been largely shaped by going to California Blacksmith Association (CBA) conferences over the years. The first conference I went to, I watched John Barron make a handrail. I was able to make my first railing because I watched John. Otherwise I would have been clueless. I've also gotten to see and be inspired by big names like Roberto Giordani, Claudio Bottero, and Maegan Crowley. These people are doing really interesting work, and I feel they have inspired me as an artist-blacksmith."

For Celeste Flores, her relationship to the craft is ultimately one that encompasses mind and body. It is not power that determines success, but the willingness to learn and adapt, to return to the fire again and again until the work becomes your own.

"When I teach blacksmithing, I like to emphasize that it's not about strength; it's about knowledge and control. It's a simple, simple process. But it's the execution that's hard. I compare metalworking to learning to play a musical instrument or to dance rather than learning a process. In machining you can follow a process, and everybody's stuff will turn out exactly the same. But for blacksmithing, you have to get that process into your body. It's a challenging business, but I do what I love." 🔨

*See more of Celeste Flores' work on her website
www.clayandsteel.com*

& on Instagram at @clay_and_steel