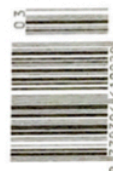


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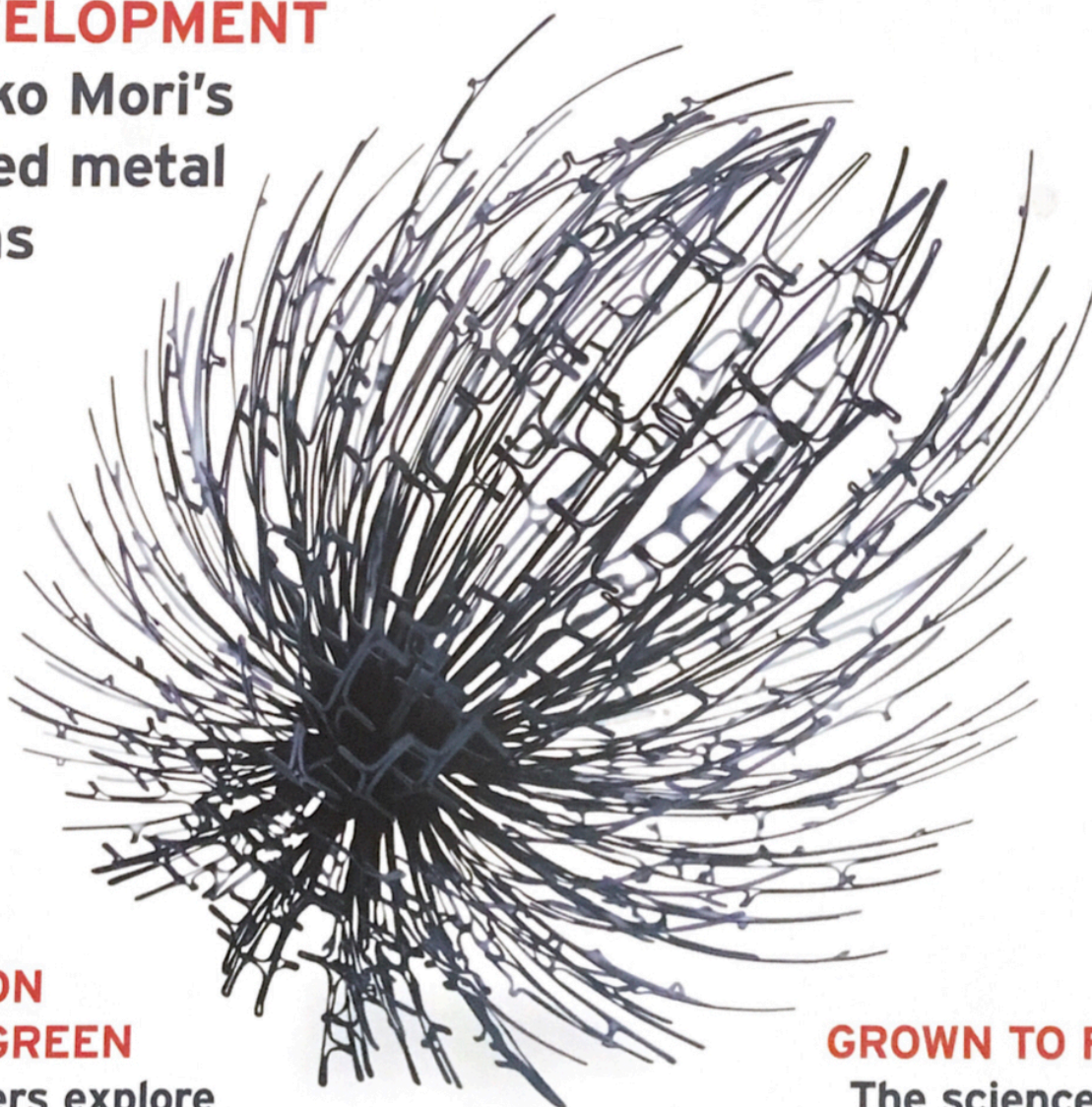
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# crafts



## NATURAL DEVELOPMENT

Junko Mori's  
forged metal  
forms

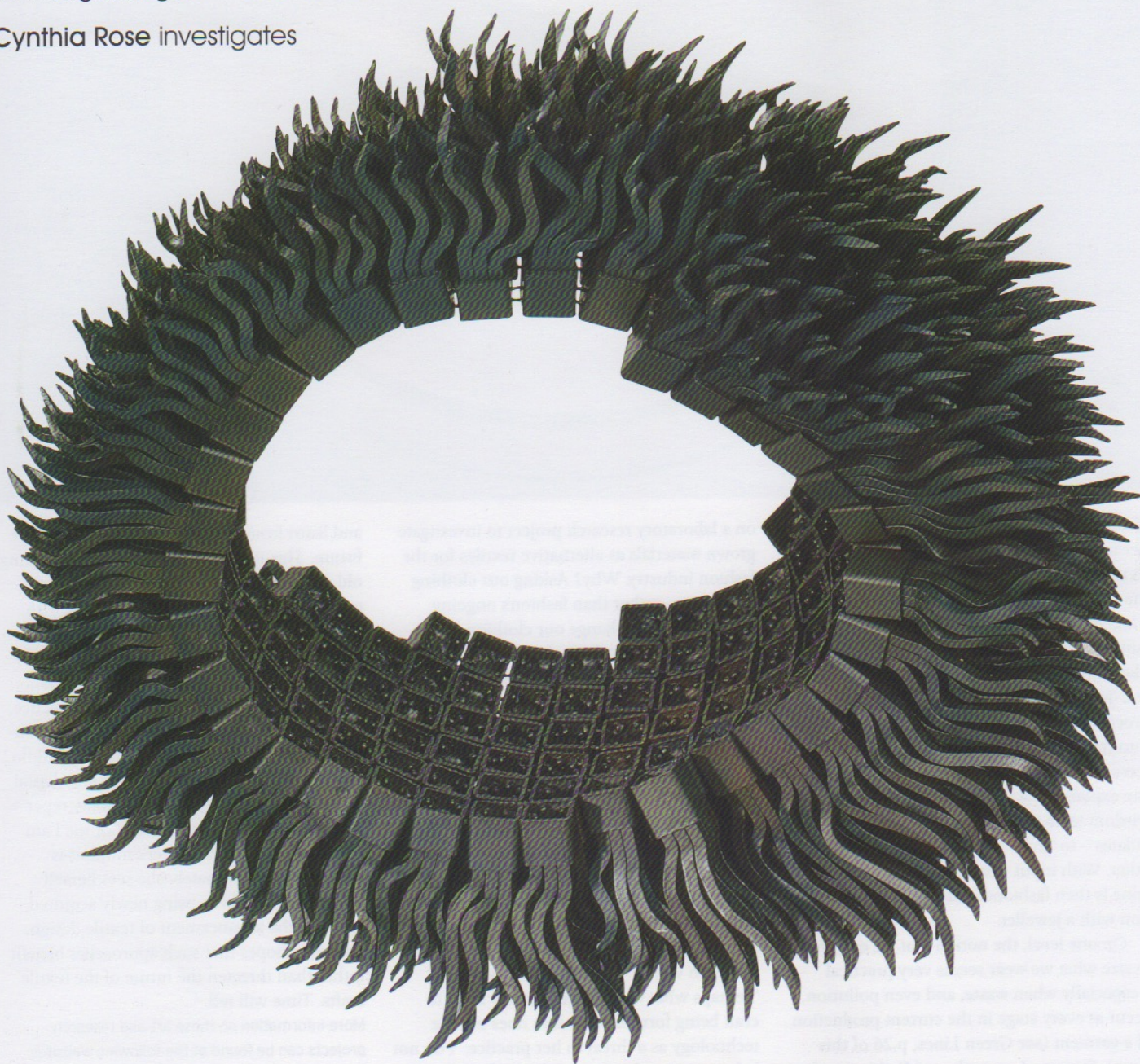


**FASHION  
GOES GREEN**  
Designers explore  
ethical style

**GROWN TO FIT**  
The science of  
new materials

# natural selection

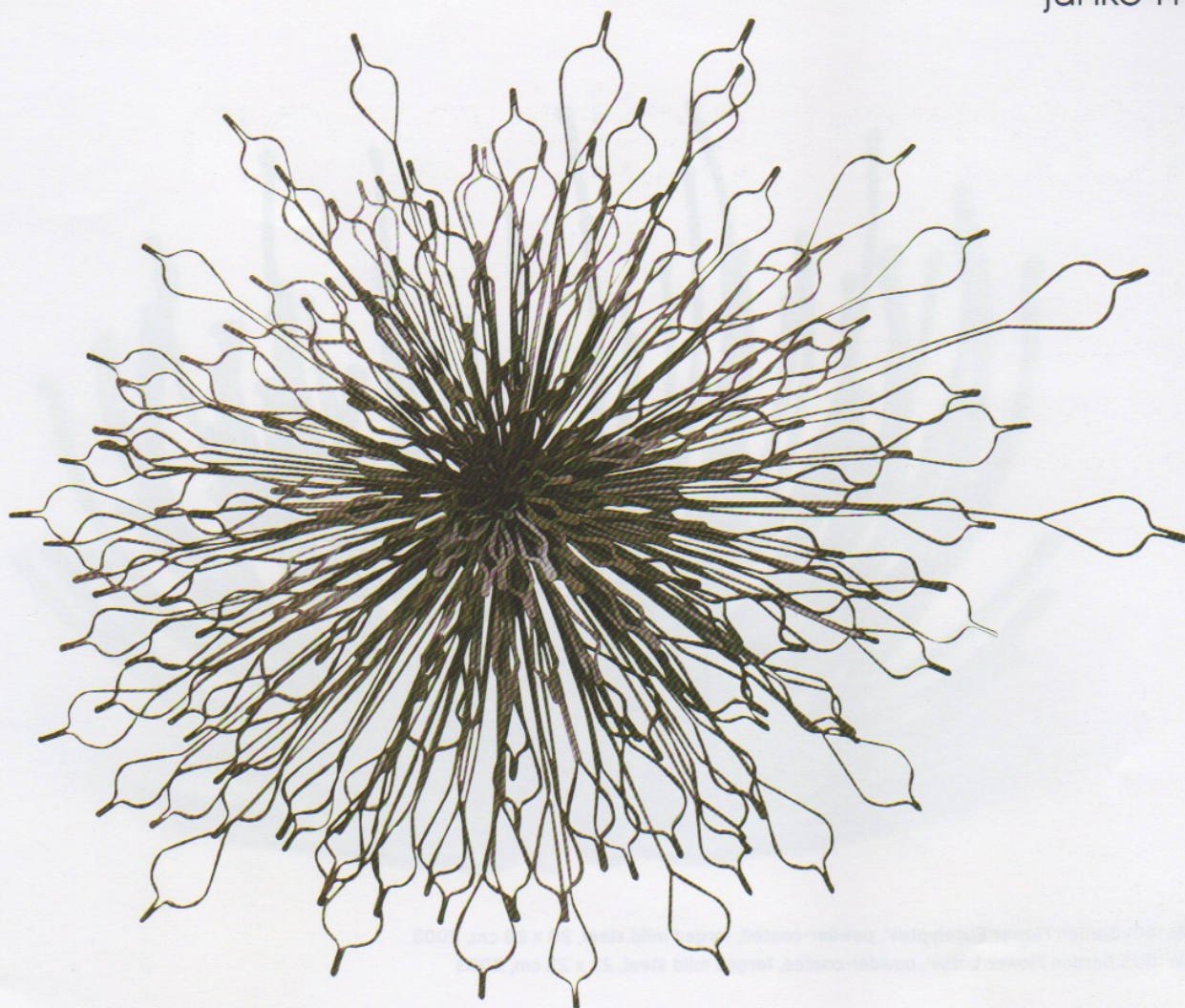
Junko Mori's metal-forged pieces  
take philosophical inspiration  
from organic growth and form.  
Cynthia Rose investigates



THIS PAGE: '#402 Propagation Project', wax-coated, forged mild steel, 44 x 40 cm, 2004

OPPOSITE PAGE: '#02 Moss', wax-coated, forged mild steel, 62 x 52 cm, 2004

OPPOSITE PAGE BELOW: '#08 Organism Protea', wax-coated, forged mild steel, dried plants, 14 x 14 cm, 2001



Does the practice of a craft mean one is making art? Must the rigour of every well-made object spring from aesthetic philosophy? Ask metalsmith Junko Mori questions such as these and you are liable to get extremely clear responses. Mori's views about her profession are emphatic ones – but she has the expertise and resumé to back them up.

One of eight finalists for last year's Jerwood Applied Arts Prize, Mori holds a BA from Tokyo's competitive Musashino Art University and a second from London's Camberwell College of Arts. During 2003 alone, her organic metal sculptures – each a synthesis of hand-forged pieces – were exhibited in Barcelona, Canberra, New York, Chicago, Manchester, London and Birmingham. The maker herself is based in Britain, commuting between a home that overlooks the Peak District and her studio in a Manchester warehouse.

Mori is an exuberant, self-possessed 31-year-old whose conversation is peppered with Northern colloquialisms. Like her work, her observations are both surprising and smart, enlivened by an almost contagious curiosity. Clearly, she has been thinking about the words

'craft' and 'art' for years. 'To me, fine art is a philosophy of aesthetic form. But craft is a making skill – and a kind of obsession with one's materials.'

Even during her childhood – she was born in Yokohama, Japan – the maker says she 'always knew art would be my way'. At Musashino, she undertook a three-dimensional course in Industrial, Interior and Crafts Design. During her second year, she decided to focus on blacksmithing. 'There's a lot of interest about it in Japan. But there was also an

amazing Masters student doing it. He was always in the studio and very energetic. That offered real inspiration – and an opportunity.'

'With someone that good and dedicated around all the time, you are free to watch them and continually try to learn.' She pauses pointedly: 'Or you can just sit in a corner, chat and eat your chocolates.'

Mori found she loved the fast response required by red-hot metal, and the fact there were only seconds in which to create. These days, she says, her hand-forging 'is almost like knitting. I know how to get myself in a rhythm, then just sweat it out. I have to treat it like a marathon.'

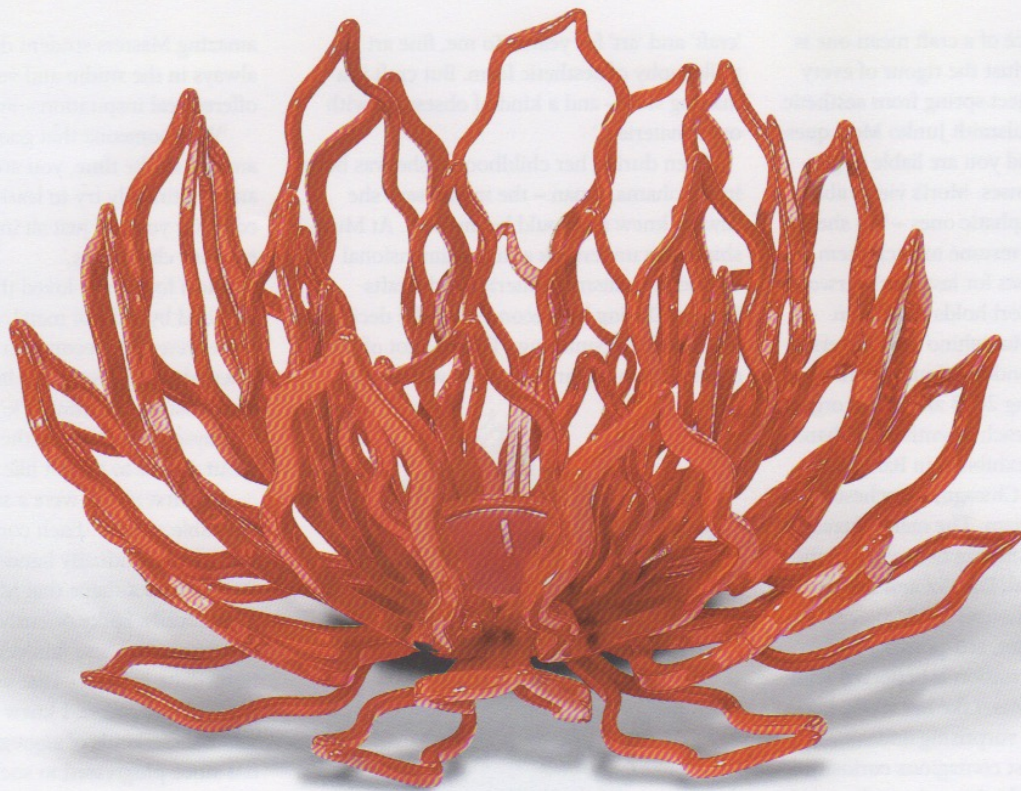
Her first pieces were a series of half-metre tall 'table objects'. Each component of every one was individually hand-hammered, then welded into a shape that Mori expanded dynamically. Spiky or curly, seemingly supine or aggressive, these fantastic creations aroused immediate interest. 'That was the start of my professional career. I knew then I wanted to make these kinds of aggregated forms.' Mori has since progressed to such series as *Organisms* – each piece of which incorporates the



junko mori



ABOVE: '#01 Garden Flower Eucalyptus', powder-coated, forged mild steel, 28 x 28 cm, 2003  
BELOW: '#05 Garden Flower Lotus', powder-coated, forged mild steel, 23 x 23 cm, 2003





ABOVE: 'Parasite Rings', sterling silver 925, 2003

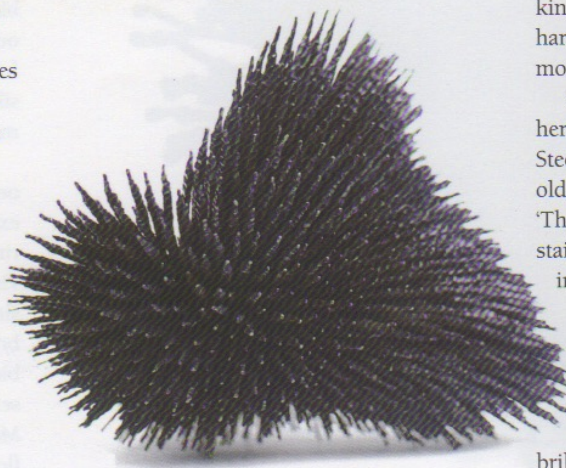
BELOW: '#504 Propagation Project', wax-coated, forged mild steel, 41 x 32 cm, 2005

forms that inspire it, from spiky Thai chillies to round paradise nuts – and *Blossom*, whose delicate strands resemble 3D drawings.

All explore what Mori now terms 'growing form', a personal translation of nature's restless particulars: from the varying veins of a leaf to the world within every drop of water. Mori draws inspiration from many sources (she cites the Internet guru Takashi Tachibana, Norwegian jeweller Tone Vigeland and the Viennese Sezession painter Gustav Klimt). But she is also driven by the culture of her birthplace.

As the critic Judith Thurman once noted, one does not casually adopt traditional crafts in Japan. It is, after all, a country that classes the most ancient of such vocations as 'Important Intangible Cultural Properties'. Japanese metalwork enjoys plenty of recognition – including pride that, for hundreds of years, it led the world in steel technology. Today, metal workers

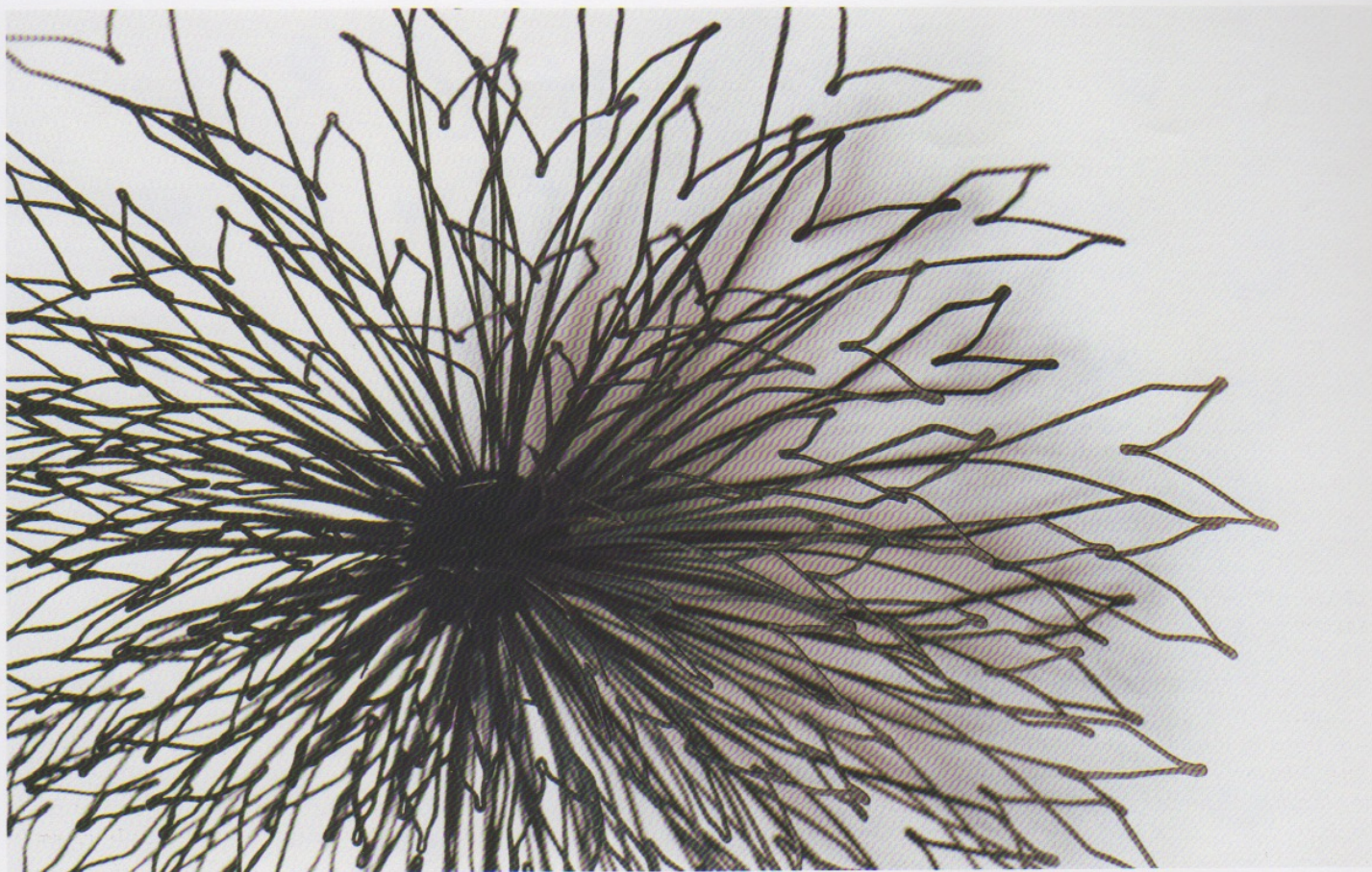
remain famous for specialties that include openwork, embossing, sand-casting, engraving and damascene. A Japanese blacksmith's personal stamp adds value to what he creates, even the humblest of domestic tools.



The force exerted by metal's past looms large over a maker's apprenticeship. So, notes Mori, do national attitudes towards labour: 'I hear the word "workaholic" a lot in Britain and here it is really almost an insulting term. There is a kind of looking down on people who work hard, an assumption that they do it just for money. In Japan, we'd simply laugh that off.'

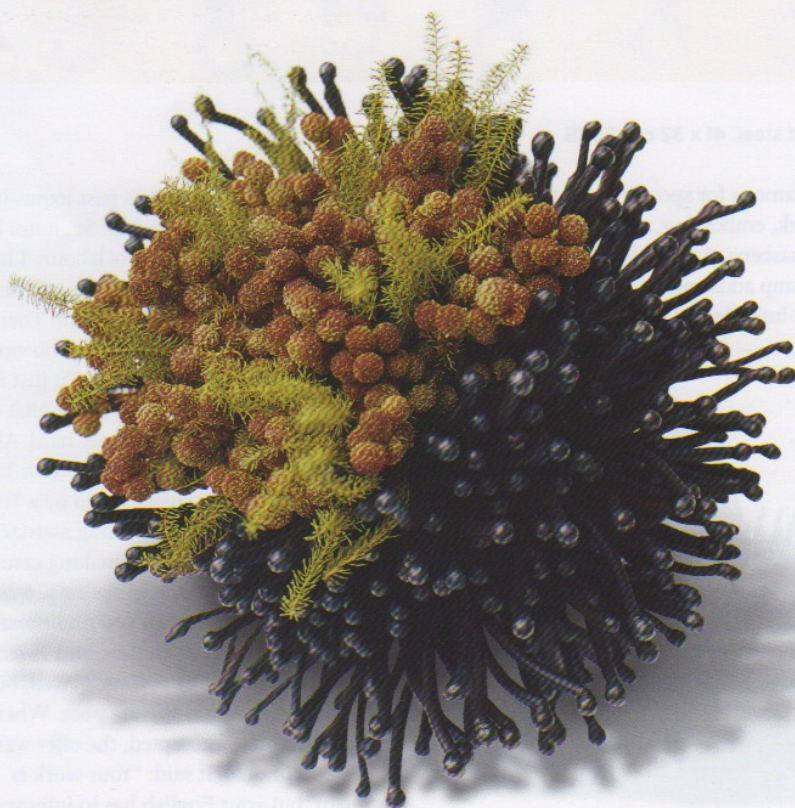
Mori herself has worked very hard. After her graduation, she honed her skills at Toma Steel, a small family business run by a 70-year-old. There she worked a welding assistant: 'There was no arty talk, just making gates and staircases.' But the training, she says, was invaluable – both tough and traditional.

Mori moved to England in 1997: 'I wanted to study at Camberwell, but my language skills were poor. When I was finally accepted, the offer was conditional. It said: "Your work is brilliant, but your English has to improve."'



ABOVE: '#05 Moss', wax-coated, forged mild steel, 60 x 58 cm, 2004

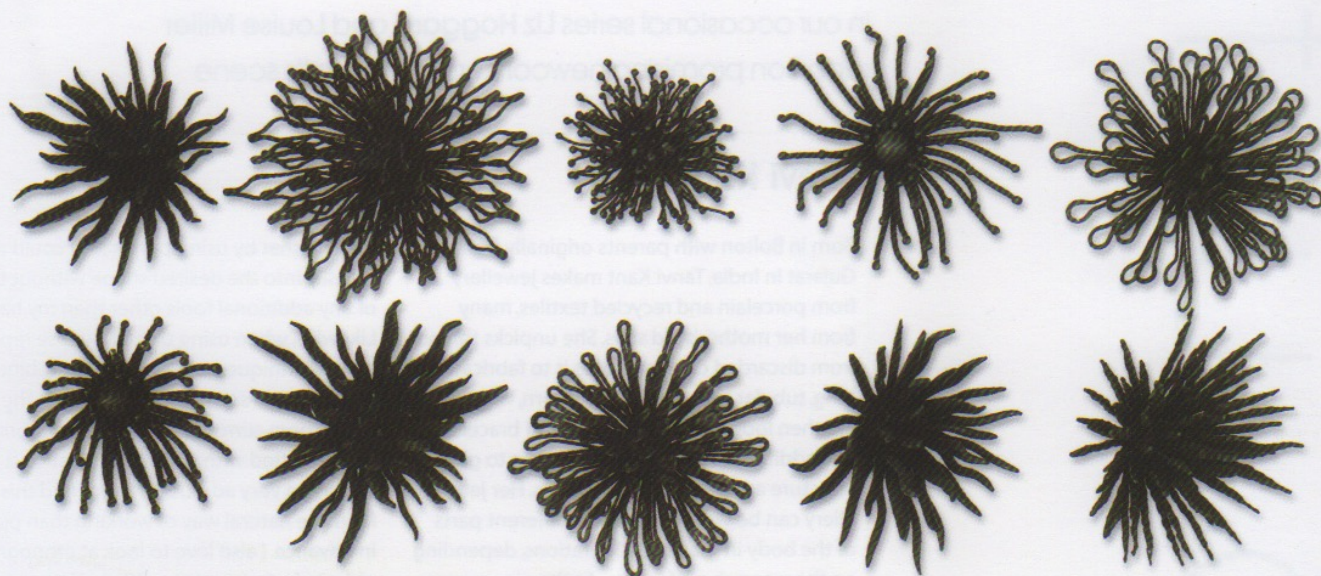
BELOW: '#60 Organism', wax-coated, forged mild steel, dried plants, 17 x 17 cm, 2003



At the time, Mori was taking eight classes per day; she was exhausted and discouraged. It took her fellow foreign students to come up with a solution. 'They found the key by making me go to the pub! I discovered that, when you drink, you finally worry less about speaking.' Admission to Camberwell, however, lowered her confidence further. The course, she says, seemed over-academic and disconnected from technique. 'I had a lot of confusion – and perhaps anger – to fight.'

What finally resolved Mori's dilemma was the realisation that her core interest still lay in blacksmithing. As she 'learned to be less serious', Mori also began to apply her skills to different metals. 'Now I've done things like weld silver, which was really taboo. But so many metals exist! I think "Why not try them all?"'

Two years ago, Mori travelled to Australia, on a HAT (Here and There) international artist exchange. With a range of funky, flamboyant rings called *Parasites* she created a personal vision of the local flora down under. Mori has since forged huge candle holders for gardens: brightly-coloured steel forms that seem like blossoms from outer space. Her later sculptural series also moved even closer to nature. In *Moss*, spidery wall sculptures clearly echo floral forms and a huge array of small, dark



ABOVE: 'Cell' collection, wax-coated, forged mild steel, 90 x 90 cm, 2005

BELOW: '#38 Silver Organism', forged fine silver 999, 13 x 14 cm, 2005

Cells could have grown on the ocean floor.

Mori thinks the hallmarks of her sensibility – the deep attraction to nature, a sense of poise about form, a practical confidence – hark back to her native island. 'I think it's very much about Japan as a nation. We instinctively notice beautiful things from anywhere; that is just our tradition, it's our culture. Also, in Japan, there is an aesthetic to everything, the most everyday things, even in poor or rural areas.'

She thinks religion plays a role, even for the non-follower: 'In the Shinto beliefs, for exam-

ple, everything has a life. If you drop a cup, then that is the end of one kind of life. But you do not worry, because death is another thing. Shintoism and Buddhism, each offers things Japanese people believe unconsciously. I know they motivate me – even if I can't explain how.'

Mori smiles. 'My work comes from a number of coincident things. Everyone's life is like that, really, but not everyone notices.' ○  
Junko Mori tours with the *Jerwood Applied Arts Prize 2005: Metal* to the Design Centre, 11 Shambles Street, Barnsley, South Yorkshire S70 2SQ, (01226)

771133, until 15 April, to the Devon Guild of Craftsmen, Riverside Mill, Bovey Tracey, Devon TQ13 9AF, (0)1626 832223, from 6 May - 18 June, and to the Harley Gallery, Welbeck, Worksop, Notts S80 3LW, (01909) 501700, from 1 July - 15 September. She also exhibits in *SOFA NY*, Seventh Regiment Armory, Park Ave. at 67th St., New York, NY (001) 800 563 7632, from 1-4 June. She has a solo show at Bluecoat Display Centre, School Lane, Liverpool L1 3BX, (0151) 709 4014, from 30 September - 28 October. For stockists, see Crafts Guide.

