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Amour d'Armor
Fear, Fantasy, and Fashion in the New Age
April 1–May 13, 2007
Ida Sinkević and Robert S. Mattison, curators

Ida

Amour d' Armor:

Fear, Fantasy, and Fashion in the New Age

Bob

Throughout history, arms and armor played multiple roles in society. From Mycenaean bronze daggers inlaid with precious metals to mail, plate, and shiny metallic costumes that adorned medieval and early-modern knights, arms and armor revealed not only technical skill and military power, but also aesthetic considerations and ideals of beauty held by its makers. While invented, technologically advanced, and produced primarily for war and battlefield, arms and armor nonetheless acquired multiple functions in non-military spheres of society.

Exquisite examples of richly decorated luxurious weapons were used as diplomatic gifts, symbols of authority, accoutrements in ceremonial processions, fashion statements, and powerful social, class, and gender metaphors. In medieval and early-modern Europe, numerous public ceremonies and spectacles, such as triumphal processions, royal weddings, baptisms, and even aristocratic funerals, included knights in shining armor. Their elaborate, masterfully crafted and opulently ornamented swords, shields, helmets, and full suits of armor communicated notions of nobility, authority, chivalry, power, and beauty. As such, they acquired an iconic status.

A production of elaborate, heavily embellished, and fashionable pieces and suits of armor in postmedieval Europe became a special, highly desired, and lucrative industry that involved not only armorists but also artists. Some of the most famous artists, such as Leonardo da Vinci, Hans Holbein, and Albrecht Dürer, designed armor. From portraits of gentlemen in armor, to abundant inclusion of armed figures in religious, mythological, and battle scenes, armor became prominently displayed in works of art, too.

Arms and armor also continuously resonated with fashion. The correspondences between metal and cloth costume have been part and parcel of the history of armor. Moreover, during the Renaissance and the baroque period, pieces of armor became incorporated into daily dress. For example, a sword was a popular accessory of a sixteenth-century Italian gentlemen. Sometimes accompanied by a corresponding dagger, swords were decorated to match the outfits and, in addition to battle, they were worn in daily promenades. As medieval knight transformed into Renaissance gentleman, the sword echoed the chivalric ethos, while at the same time revealing the noble aspirations and fashionable concerns of its wearer.

Fascination with the Middle Ages was revived again during the nineteenth century. Reflecting and absorbing European trends, industrial-minded America embraced traditional arms and armor, which became sought-after collectors' items. In response to the growing market, historical examples of arms and armor were embellished with new decorative patterns, and numerous newly crafted suits of armor circulated in the marketplace either as forgeries or as honest reproductions.

From the early times, artistic representations of armor ranged from realistic to fantastical, sometimes leaning towards bizarre. Images like the seventeenth-century Wendel Dietterlin the Younger's grotesque parade of makeshift armor made of pots, pans, and other assorted kitchenware, with lids serving as shields and helmets, appear to have paved the way to the modernist take on armor (c 1614, Allentown Art Museum). Ambiguous and polyvalent

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What do we make of armor in the modern era, an age in which chivalry seems to be a low agenda item? In fact, the first uses of the term armor during the twentieth century were devastating. Armor identified the new forms of steel plating used to shield vehicles—cars, trains, and tanks—from the lethal weapons invented for World War I, a war the horror of which exceeded all human expectations. One response to the war was epitomized by Dada poet Hugo Ball. In 1916 in the neutral city of Zurich, he donned a deliberately ill-made paper costume. Its cylindrical torso, arms and legs, and pointed cap resembled armor. In this misshaped, faux-metal garb, he became the first modern anti-heroic knight. Protected and emboldened by his mock chivalric costume, Ball screamed at the audience in nonsensical words and made primal sounds, all of which ridiculed the impassioned speeches of politicians and generals that he believed led to the war. Ball's now famous performance introduced the themes of deep irony, vulnerability, and, yes, radical creativity that characterize the modern age. Rather than a sign of male splendor and empowerment, modern armor connotes ambivalence, hesitation, bizarre fantasy, and an often-frustrated desire for security that dominates the age. It is this sensibility that informs our own strange *amour d'armor.*

In the 1970s German performer Joseph Beuys, who was deeply influenced by Ball and Dada in general, created his *Felt Suit* (1978). Beuys had been recruited as a child-soldier by the Nazis and as a result of this experience became a lifelong pacifist. Significantly, his first *Felt Suit* was created during the Vietnam War. The suit makes the wearer as awkward as did Ball's costume. Unlike traditional armor which deflects blows, *Felt Suit* absorbs everything surrounding it from water to sound. The suit thus reflects the tendency by the modern individual and Beuys in particular to soak up, not shun, the ills of society. The vulnerability found in Ball and Beuys is palatable in the post-9/11 world. One increasing phenomenon is civilian protests against governmental policies. Ralph Borland's *Suited for Subversion* (2002) is padded to protect its wearer during street protests. While based on protective garb actually worn by Italian protestors, its effect is clearly comic. For instance, it is the opposite of the very serious looking, and hopefully functional *Neptunic "C" Sharksuit* by Jeremiah Sullivan. The pliable form and red color of Borland's protest suit make the wearer look like a giant piece of candy. Even so, this appearance may have the advantage of defusing a violent response with carnival-like humor. *Suited for Subversion* also a speaker that amplifies the wearer's heartbeat. While the quickened heartbeat may arouse the crowd to action, it also exposes the fragility of the human body used as a protest tool. More than just a shield, *Suited for Subversion* draws attention to the risks that the protestor faces in order to express his/her convictions.

A question posed by *Suited for Subversion* is whether the piece should be regarded as a functional object or as artistic speculation. One of the essential features of modern art, a heritage of Dada, is to blur these boundaries. With Bill Burns' *Safety Gear for Small Animals* (2003-ongoing), we seem to be on safer footing—or pawing. Burns' carefully crafted miniatures include radiation and triage tents for squirrels, a dust mask for an ibex, and safety vest for a rodent. These items play on our natural love for small furry creatures and our interest in miniatures. While our first response is whimsical disbelief, *Safety Gear for Small Animals* leads us to more serious questions about deforestation and environmental pollution as well as other ecological and social concerns. David Gothard's *Ruby-Throated*

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in its meaning and appeal, simultaneously violent and vulnerable, potentially as destructive as it was defensive, armor has figured prominently in modern art and retained its appeal up to the present day.

Works of art and artifacts in this exhibition testify to this never-ending fascination with armor. The paranoia for protection from numerous agents, ranging from air pollution to different types of human aggression, results in outerwear designs that revert to various aspects of historical armor. Joseph Beuys' *Felt Suit* (1978) and Jeremiah Sullivan's *Neptunic "C" Sharksuit* (2005) invoke numerous meanings of a suit of armor. Providing an additional, protective skin to its wearers, they simultaneously signify the presence and absence. Just like the metallic costume of a knight, they conceal individual traits, while at the same time projecting a new identity, powerful in its appearance and overlaid with symbolism. With beautiful practicality and foreboding presence, *Felt Suit* and *Sharksuit* emulate the appeal of the traditional harness, oscillating between object and idea, art and item, fashion and fantasy.

The boundaries between armor art and fashion are also blurred in Cat Chow's dress, *Heavy Metal* (1999). Recalling the medieval technique of mail armor, painstakingly constructed of interlocking metal rings, Chow's dress projects a poetic image—sleek, beautiful, and wearable. The objective heaviness of metal is overcome by the sensual design, and the gender stereotype historically associated with mail armor is violated. Rather than protective, Chow's dress is inviting, creating layers of skin that wait to be peeled, discovered, and savored. The dichotomy of garment and undergarment is also explored in a series of photographs by Tanya Marcuse, *Undergarments and Armor* (2005). Multifaceted in their intent, the photographs use traditional armor to examine complex relationships between past and present, presence and absence spectacular defense and spectacular destruction.

The notions of fear and fantasy coalesce in a bizarre contraption designed by Ralph Borland, *Suited for Subversion* (2002). Echoing the playful nature of faux armor occasionally worn in Renaissance carnivals and village fairs, the nylon-reinforced PVC suit is intended to protect the wearer during street protests. Equipped with various gadgets, such as a pulse-reader and speaker that projects the amplified heartbeat, *Suited for Subversion* epitomizes paranoia, fascination with technology, and subversive cynicism of the new age. Disarmingly funny, the suit is, to paraphrase the artist's own words, as much provocation as protection.

Ida Sinkević

Professor Sinkević is a scholar of medieval art at Lafayette College. Her most recent interests include the study of the vestiges of medieval culture in later periods. She was curator for the Allentown Art Museum exhibition, *Knights in Shining Armor: Myth and Reality,1450–1650.*

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Warrior (1997) presents another armored small creature. Rather than a statement about ecology, Gothard's bird concerns creative fantasy often associated with the idea of knights in shining armor. Against all rational odds, this bird, attired in studded metal armor, soars aloft, as can our imaginations.

Another abiding concern of our age is disease. Despite the advances of modern science, such situations as the growing AIDS crisis highlight the impossibility of armoring ourselves against physical decay. In *Plague Robe* (2007) Kathy Bruce has re-created in modern materials a Plague Doctor's costume that was used all over Europe during the seventeenth century. The elaborate and sinister-looking costume featured an oil-cloth robe soaked in liquors to preserve the health of the doctor's body. The beaked mask was designed to hold medicinal herbs as protection against the plague, which was thought to be caused by bad air. As a final result, the costume makes its wearer appear as a harbinger of death rather than a beneficent healer. While not concerned specifically disease, Martha Posner's *Unfamiliar Skin Series* (2006) addresses human skin, our primary armor, as an encasing that inspires ambivalent emotions. It is a substance that is soft and supple as well as craggy and hairy. Posner's richly colored and hair-covered mixed-media sculptures capture this dichotomy and lead us to question the standard notions of beauty and ugliness. To borrow an expression, her works make us "uncomfortable in our own skins." Posner's undulating shapes, skin without bodies, make them simultaneously cling to the earth and dance above it. Installed outdoors in raw natural settings as Posner prefers them to be seen, they appear to be a new race of creatures that are seeking home and companionship.

In terms of distant archetypes, the model for today's hero is not armored Achilles in Homer's *Iliad* but instead Odysseus of the *Odyssey*. The latter had as armor only his intelligence and wit. Instead of craving glory in war as did Achilles, Odysseus sought only to return to the security of his home.

Robert S. Mattison

Mattison is Marshall R. Metzgar Professor of Art History, Lafayette College. He has published extensively on modern art. He recently served as site curator for an exhibition of prints and paintings by Andy Warhol at the Allentown Art Museum in 2006.

Above: David Gothard, *Ruby-Throated Warrior,* 1997
Cover:
T: Tobias Wong, *Ballistic Rose Brooch,* 2004.
C: Ralph Borland, *Suited for Subversion*, 2002, photo by Pieter Hugo.
B: Martha Posner, *Child's Dress, Unfamiliar Skin Series*, 2006, photo by Larry Fink © 2006.
Far Left: Wendel Dietterlin the Younger, plate 5, from the series of eight plates of *Monstrous Dream Creatures,* about 1614, etching with engraving on laid paper, 4 1/8 x 12 ¼ inches. Courtesy Allentown Art Museum, SOTA Print Fund, 2003 (2003.18). (Not in exhibition.)

TL: Cat Chow, *Heavy Metal*, 1999
TR: Jeremiah Sullivan, *Neptunic "C" Sharksuit,* 2005
BL: Tanya Marcuse, *Medieval Helmet, Undergarments and Armor* Series, 2005
BR: Bill Burns, *Leather Work Gloves, Safety Gear for Small Animals* Series, 2003-ongoing

TL: Joseph Beuys, *Felt Suit*, 1978
TR: Kathy Bruce, *Plague Robe*, 2007, detail
CR: Angie Waller, *Armored Cars: Protecting Yourself from Ballistic Attacks*, 2007, video still
BR: HJC Helmets, *Motocross Helmet*
BL: *ChemBio Inflatable Shelter*, prototype

Ida/Bob

Amour d'Armor: Fear, Fantasy, and Fashion in the New Age **resulted from a conversation several years ago between Lafayette art historians Ida Sinkević, a medieval art scholar, and Robert S. Mattison, an expert on modern art. Sinkević was in the early stages of curatorial research for an exhibition currently at the Allentown Art Museum, *Knights in Shining Armor: Myth and Reality, 1450-1650. Knights* explores the popularity of arms and armor in the art and daily life of the Renaissance and baroque periods. As they started to identify examples of modern "armor," Sinkević and Mattison discussed the possibility of cocurating an exhibition at Lafayette, scheduled to correspond with the Allentown exhibition. *Amour d' Armor* presents the work—from the fantastic to the practical—of contemporary inventors and artists in a selection of objects that reveal the obsessions of our age. As the exhibition took shape, they wondered if objects each selected would be influenced by their differences—medieval vs. modern art as a focus of study; European vs. American; younger vs. older, and especially, female vs. male. As a result, instead of writing a joint essay for this brochure, each wrote a separate essay to see if those differences would inform their viewpoints.**

Checklist

Joseph Beuys, *Felt Suit,* 1978, felt with wooden hanger, from edition of 60, 66 x 30 inches. Courtesy of GRIFFIN Contemporary, Santa Monica, California.

Ralph Borland, *Suited for Subversion,* 2002, nylon enforced pvc, padding, speaker, pulse-reader, circuitry, 47½ x 31½ x 23 5/8 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Kathy Bruce, *Plague Robe,* 2007, installation, bamboo, dyed Japanese rice paper, wire mesh, glass, bee's wax, lavender, lavender oil, bergamot oil, gloves, boots, size variable.

Bill Burns, *Fire Helmet*, *Safety Blanket*, *Flotation Device No. 2*, *Leather Work Gloves, Welding/UV Goggles—rectangular version*, *Hard Hat,* from *Safety Gear for Small Animals,* 2003 to present; Handkerchiefs with embroidery; seven watercolors of safety gear, watercolor and pencil on paper, 10 x 7 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

ChemBio Shelter, *Inflatable Shelter,* prototype, 8 x 10 x 11 feet overall. Courtesy of ChemBio Shelter, Inc., Allentown, Pennsylvania.

Cat Chow, *Heavy Metal*, 1999, 72 x 26 x 16 inches, stainless steel and brass rings. Courtesy of the artist.

David Gothard, *Ruby-Throated Warrior*, 1997, mixed media, 9 x 9 x 15 inches; Reluctant *Man-O-War,* from *Ink and a Brush with Death* series, 2007, ink and watercolor, 28 x 36 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

HJC Helmets, *CL-X5 Arena, Motocross Helmet,* molded polycarbonate composite shell, with interior padding. Courtesy of Michael Andretti Powersports, Phillipsburg, N.J.

Tanya Marcuse, photographs from *Undergarments and Armor* series, 2005, platinum prints, 4¾ x 3¾ inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Martha Posner, *C's Corset. Unfamiliar Skin Series,* 2006, wire mesh, beeswax, synthetic hair, pigment, 18 x 15 x 12 inches; *Child's Dress, Unfamiliar Skin Series,* 2006, wire mesh, beeswax, synthetic hair, pigment, 32 x 18 x 21 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Jeremiah Sullivan, *Neptunic "C" Sharksuit, 2005.* Courtesy of Jeremiah Sullivan, Neptunic Sharksuits, San Diego, California.

Angie Waller, *Armored Cars: Protecting Yourself from Ballistic Attacks,* 2007, video, 7 minutes 8 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.

Tobias Wong, *Ballistic Rose Brooch*, 2004, ballistic nylon, velvet leaves, and silver pin, 5" diam., Courtesy of Tobias Wong and CITIZEN:Citizen.

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