

Contemporary Armor: The Modern Warrior Woman

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Art

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May 2020

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Abstract

This thesis examines the idea that fashion can be viewed as a tool for female agency as well as an expression of individuality and personal empowerment rather than reinforcing gender norms or oppressive patriarchal ideals. I reinforce this perspective using imagery I have created in watercolor paintings and wearable artworks that discuss these ideas. Within this thesis, I discuss how fashion plays a role in social judgement, how 'feminine' forms of art are judged differently than 'masculine' ones. I discuss the misconceptions that surround armor and fashion's functions and trends. I reference contemporary fashion that draws upon historical armor, and discuss the metaphorical versions of armor that I explore in my body of work. I analyze my influences from the world of art and fashion.

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Acknowledgments

I want to take the time to acknowledge all those whom have supported and inspired me. I want to firstly thank all of my family who have supported me to follow my passion and reach for my dreams. Without their love, encouragement and support I would have not been able to accomplish this, thank you from the bottom of my heart. I would also like to thank all my professors. Thank you Professor Z.L Feng for your wonderful mentorship, your joy and encouragement. You truly are an amazing artist, teacher and even more so an amazing person. Thank you Professor Margaret Adams, although I have known you a short time your love and encouragement will stay with me for a lifetime, and I am so happy to have your help and influence in my life. Thank you Dr. Roann Barris, your wisdom, advice and support have been immensely helpful throughout my journey here at Radford. I also want to thank all my fellow graduate students, who truly have helped my growth as an artist, we banded together and became a support group for one another. Lastly, I want to thank every wonderful, beautiful, strong woman in my life, you have inspired me beyond words.

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Introduction

Throughout my graduate journey I have asked myself many questions, the most important of which is “why?”. “Why do you like warrior women so much?” “What is it about a woman in armor, exhibiting strength, that is so fascinating to you?” The answer that I have come to is that seeing women presented in this way, as a warrior, as a strong empowered person is imagery that I have and will always crave to see in the world. As a young girl I was constantly drawn toward warrior princesses, Queens with swords and crowns, female superheroes who had powers just as impressive as their male counterparts. This core interest to see figures of women in roles that exude strength, power, dignity and receive respect for having such qualities is fundamentally why I create the art that I do.

As human beings it is in our very nature and evolutionary development as social creatures to use our senses to make observations and more importantly judgments about our environment and those whom are in it. The evolution of social judgement is essential to help avoid enemies, form alliances we trust, find a suitable mate etc.¹ As beings of higher thought we can recognize that our social judgements can be influenced by bias, and are not entirely accurate most of the time. Yet the very act of making assumptions about a person using sight is innately in us. This action of making a ‘snap-judgement’ is part of our evolution, and a way one dresses is a key aspect to how we judge others.² Fashion and dress can give off key signals to

¹ Funder, David C. Haselton, Martie G. “The Evolution of Accuracy and Bias in Social Judgement.” *Evolution and Social Psychology*, Psychology Press. 2004.

<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/comm/haselton/papers/downloads/HaseltonFunder.pdf>

² Johnson, K., Lennon, S.J., Rudd, N. Dress, “Body and self: research in the social psychology of dress.” *Fashion and Textiles*. 2014. Article 20. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40691-014-0020-7>

making these social judgments. In a 2012 interview when asked what fashion is, a Pulitzer Prize winning fashion writer Robin Givhan stated:

“As soon as man emerged from the cave, clothes took on a social significance. I don’t think there’s ever been a period where a shirt was just a shirt! There’s always been a desire to differentiate ourselves through association with a social tribe, announce our ranking in society... or even show off our status and accomplishments. Those things have always been wrapped up in fashion whether we consider the era of the French courts or even the emergence of hip-hop.”³

I argue that fashion has been used by women like a version of armor for centuries. Armor is not only used to protect one’s self in battle, it is also used to intimidate one’s opponent. Fashion past and present, operates as a socially acceptable platform for women to express themselves. Certainly, some aspects of fashion have been forced upon women and given way to a great deal of negative effects on body image and beauty standards, but fashion can also be used in a positive way. Fashion can function as a reclaimed avenue to express how one feels, how the woman wants to be seen, how she views herself and ultimately how a woman wants to be treated.

Fashion, Femininity and the Body, Paradoxes

In postmodern feminism and into contemporary fashion and art there have been conversations regarding the distinction between art and culture, and ‘art and ‘craft’. In art culture there is a hierarchy that some forms of art are regarded as more valid than others. In

³ Shah, Vikas S. “The Role of Fashion in Human Culture.” Thought Economics. 2012.
<https://thoughteconomics.com/the-role-of-fashion-in-human-culture/> (accessed March 2020).

today's world we can see more clearly that some aesthetic forms have become stereotyped as 'feminine' and are automatically judged as 'lesser' because of their association with femininity.

⁴ Their value is less 'great' or less important compared to the more 'masculine' forms of art. We as a society are giving objects, forms of entertainment, aesthetics' a gender, and therefore in a patriarchal society placing the same stigmas and judgements of those particular genders onto these forms.

Clothing in western society is very paradoxical. Trends and dress can act as conformity, while simultaneously be used to individualize ourselves. Clothes can socialize our bodies by displaying our social or economic status, our cultural identity, and can even articulate our psyche. ⁵ Fashion projects inward and outward simultaneously; fashion can be both controlling and empowering. Utilizing a feminist perspective, the work reexamines often disempowering fashion items and turns these gendered and oppressive items into their paradoxical form, in an effort to empower women using the very tools designed to oppress them. Just as we see Victorian women's fashion as only oppressing and restricting women, most are unaware that in the rise of twentieth century fashion, dress was used as a tool to increase freedom and liberation. Women involved in the suffrage movement in the United States were taken more seriously by conforming to the trends and standards of the day, but also utilized the symbolisms and the meanings of the fashion to display their ideals. Suffragettes wore white as a symbolic motive to show their 'purity' and the high-mindedness of their goals. Fashion at this time

⁴ Ash, Juliet, Wilson, Elizabeth. *Chic Thrills: A Fashion Reader*. University of California Press, Berkeley Los Angeles. 1992. 5-13

⁵ Ash, *Chic Thrills: A Fashion Reader*.

started to step away from tight and highly covered to more loose, freeing and comfortable.⁶

This movement gave way to the internationally coveted phrase “New Woman”. A writer named Sarah Grand used this term ‘new woman’ in a very influential article she published in 1894.

This phrase refers to the idea of an independent woman who seeks radical change.⁷ This independence not only refers to the ‘new woman’s’ ideals or philosophies but to the physical activities and dress she is a part of, expanding a woman’s ability to engage and experience the world.⁸ The phrase “new woman” has been used throughout history after this point, describing each following decade’s version of ‘new woman’.

Fashion can be used to alter the body’s image for a desired effect; this is seen within both mainstream society and other cultures. We try to alter the body, to enhance or change the body through adornment.⁹ Women’s bodies have been used to discuss almost everything except it just being a body. Whether it is discussing the standards of beauty, femininity, sexuality, morality, maternity, all have been placed on women’s bodies for centuries.¹⁰ The most recent feminist interest in women’s clothing is the implied reaction against the idea that women’s clothing is only about sexual allure and the standard of beauty.¹¹ There is a more complex view in modern society in fashion, that clothes act as an extension of self and body.

⁶ O'Brien, Alden. “Part I: Great strides for the “New Woman,” suffrage, and fashion.” National Museum of American History. <https://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/2013/03/guest-post-great-strides-for-the-new-woman-suffrage-and-fashion.html> (accessed March 17, 2020).

⁷ Ledger, Sally. *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siecle*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997.

⁸ Roberts, Jacob. “Women’s work.” Distillations. Science History Institute. 2017. <https://www.sciencehistory.org/distillations/womens-work> (accessed March 2020).

⁹ Ash, *Chic Thrills: A Fashion Reader*.

¹⁰ Broude, Norma. Garrard, Mary. *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism*. University of California Press. 2005.

¹¹ Ash, *Chic Thrills: A Fashion Reader*.

Clothes represent culture and the dominant values of that culture. We still can acknowledge that dress is a powerful weapon and symbol of control and dominance, but widening our view to understand its simultaneous qualities of empowerment, self-expression, and consent are what I have chosen to explore in my artistic body of work. I choose to explore these ideas in both paintings and wearable art. Both are connected in the metaphorical, communicate my themes and ideas utilizing the different strengths of each medium and the idea of re-claiming tools for empowerment. The watercolor paintings are vivid and represent real women and reclaim the stereotype of watercolors feminine qualities. The 3-dimensional pieces come to life in a real space and reclaim sewing's domestic qualities into tools of empowerment.

Sewing Wearable Art: Watercolor, Sewing and Domesticity

Throughout the many paradoxes that I play with in my work, the challenging of certain stigma and stereotypes also pertains to my chosen mediums. Watercolor for many years in western society has been perceived as a very 'feminine' medium. In early Victorian and Edwardian America a 'well rounded' woman would be educated in such feminine hobbies such as watercolor painting, sewing and embroidery.¹² Challenging the stereotypes or value of feminine aesthetics or 'hobbies' I created sculptural, wearable and functional works of art that discuss important issues such as: consent, feminine/masculine gendered fashion and domesticity. The very act of sewing, a medium that is very much stereotyped as a 'feminine' skill and hobby, contributes to the idea of reclaiming or reexamining the mediums power, and taking that for my own to empower others.

¹² Losano, Antonia. *The Woman Painter in Victorian Literature*. Ohio State Press, Ohio University, Columbus. 2008.

The first wearable piece of art that I created, titled *Sharp: This Rose has Thorns*, explores this idea of taking a 'sexualized' form of clothing and twisting its power. *Sharp* is made from a bra and pantie set, which I added and manipulated into a studded, spiked set of leather armor. (See Figure 1) This piece is intended to create discussion about consent, that even if a woman is dressed 'sexually' or 'provocatively' she still can be the one in power, and that she still deserves respect. The title *Sharp: This Rose has Thorns*, comes from the idea of something so beautiful having a sharp defense, the piece has dark emerald fabric inlayed in the leather to resemble a thorn bush. The feminine and 'masculine' qualities are blended and balanced in this piece, bold spikes and black leather is combined with a long sheer skirt, creating a blend of soft beauty and sharp textures.



Figure 1. Reilly N. Gordon, *Sharp: This Rose has Thorns*, 2019

I explore these paradoxes within my work, twisting and turning the meaning of once restricting or seen as strictly objectified, feminine/masculine items to represent empowerment and self-giving adornment to feel strong. I also use masculine fashion as a way to change the stigma of women's 'feminine' fashion trends. Women can wear men's or masculine styled fashion to make commentary or be viewed as 'more professional', but historically it is not socially acceptable for men to wear women's fashion. I explore this idea of masculine fashion becoming a woman's form of empowerment in my sculptural piece titled *"Suit" of Armor: What every Boss-Woman Needs*, in which I have taken a man's black business suit and altered it to not only fit a woman's body, but resemble motifs of a suit of armor. (See Figure 2) Commenting on the reclaimed power and mentality of being ready for battle in the professional male-dominated corporate world.



Figure 2. Reilly N. Gordon, *"Suit" of Armor: What every Boss-Woman Needs*, 2020

My final wearable artwork, *Apron Chainmail: Battle Ready Betty* encompasses this idea of reclaiming domesticity to create empowerment. (See Figure 3) I took the most common, feminine, domestic symbol; the apron, and turned it into metallic armor with chainmail and scale-mail. The reclaimed power is also implied in the connection to Pin Up imagery. Once objectified, and now empowered.



Figure 3. Reilly N. Gordon, *Apron Chainmail: Battle Ready Betty*, 2020

Armor Past and Present: The modern Warrior Woman

An example of the influence that armor, or rather perceived privilege and status of wearing armor, on civilian dress is demonstrated by an Italian trend during the second half of the fifteenth century. During this period, it was considered fashionable to wear so-called 'arming points' on garments intended purely for civilian use. Arming points are essentially pairs of strings that are normally attached to the arming doublet (a sturdy garment worn underneath

armor) in order to secure individual elements of the armor to the body.¹³ In later fifteenth-century Italy, these points appear to have a fashionable status through their inherent quality of bestowing an aura of chivalry on the wearer. Like most man-made items, armor both developed its functionality and its particular aesthetic qualities and trends for each historical period. Such trends in fashion could change quickly. Medieval and Renaissance fashion trends are not as different from our modern concept of the 50s, the 60s and the 70s, trends and tastes of that particular decade.¹⁴ The most common misconceptions about armor and its functionality are that armor was only worn by knights, that historical women never wore armor and that it was so extremely heavy it renders the wearer immovable. All these statements are incorrect.¹⁵ The common belief that only knights wore armor may come from the romantic notion and phrase, “knight in shining armor”. Realistically, armies were only led by a few knights, only some of whom wore plate-mail armor and were mostly supported by foot soldiers, archers, pike-men, crossbowmen, and hand gunners who wore chain-mail. During a campaign, a knight depended on others such as squires, and attendants who lent armed support and looked after his horses, armor, and other equipment.¹⁶ Most armor we see in museums are artifacts that were predominately used for ceremonial purposes, parades, and showing off the wearer’s status, and were very rarely actually used in a battle. Another misconception is that women never took up arms or contributed to the physicality of war.

¹³ Breiding, Dirk H. “Fashion in European Armor, 1400–1500.” In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–.

¹⁴ Breiding, Dirk H. “Fashion in European Armor, 1400–1500.”

¹⁵ Breiding, Dirk H. “Arms and Armor—Common Misconceptions and Frequently Asked Questions.”

¹⁶ Breiding, Dirk H. “Arms and Armor—Common Misconceptions and Frequently Asked Questions.”

The assumptions and ideas that the imagery of armor portrays are very straightforward. The connection of armor to knights creates an instant correlation to chivalry, nobility, and the feeling of a protector, or warrior. Armor can also be perceived as intimidating, whom does this person mean into go to battle against? What are they protecting themselves from? Within my work I create metaphorical imagery of armor, and create a new form of dress that is both physical and psychological. I create images of the modern woman warrior by conceiving a trans-historical timeline that utilizes the symbolism of Renaissance and medieval armor in conjunction with modern/contemporary techniques women use to “arm” themselves. In my piece *Education is My Power* I have created a sword, its handle is made of a diploma, its hilt is made of pencils and pens, in an effort to discuss how one’s education and knowledge can be a metaphorical form of armor and empowerment. (See Figure 4)



Figure 4. Reilly N. Gordon, *Education is My Power*, 2020

I also take stereotypical feminine fashion items and combine them with armor motifs, merging their characteristics to make commentary on their re-claimed form. In my piece

Conqueror, I create this commentary by portraying a woman in a stiletto heel that has become plate mail armor, which grows up her leg as she poses triumphantly. (See Figure 4)



Figure 5. Reilly N. Gordon, *Conqueror*, 2019

Some pieces are more metaphorical than others, in my piece *Halo of Emotion*, I am discussing the stigma attached to a woman being 'too emotional to lead' and make commentary of how one's emotions are what make us our colorful selves. (See Figure 5) The central figure is painted in greys and silvers to reference steel and to portray that her very skin can be a version of armor. It also is intended to show the contrast between the figures behind her that make up the 'halo'.



Figure 6. Reilly N. Gordon, *Halo of Emotion*, 2019

In *War Paint*, I compare the similarities of modern makeup application to the ritual of putting on war paint in preparation for battle, discussing how women's makeup can be a form of contemporary "armor". Many women that I know, do not use makeup as a way to attract others, or for the pleasure of men. But in fact, wear make up for themselves, to feel confident and to express their individuality.



Figure 7. Reilly N. Gordon, *War Paint*, 2020

This combination of contemporary fashion with renaissance and medieval armor has been used in modern haute couture fashion. In the Christian Dior Fall fashion collection in 2006 designed by John Galliano; there was a parade of medieval warrior women, in gilded chainmail, metallic gowns, each equipped with an armored sleeve.¹⁷ (See Figure 8)



Figure 8. John Galliano, Christian Dior Fall Collection 2006.

This idea of taking the emotional or psychological associations of armor and using that to create fashion in the modern era can be seen throughout haute couture and ready to wear lines.

Influences, Style and Approaches

One artist that I find great inspiration from and see many connections to the imagery that I create is Manuel Nunez. Nunez's work encompasses many themes of spiritual imagery.

¹⁷ Mower, Sarah. "Fall 2006 Couture Christian Dior" VOGUE Runway Blog. 2006. <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2006-couture/christian-dior> (accessed November 2019).

He stated in an interview that, “My images are of strong women: beautiful, but not exploited, sensual and virtuous, wrestling with the underlying conflict over what life is versus what it should be.”¹⁸ In all his paintings, Nunez uses gold leaf around and within halos, representing the presence of a divine nature. While gold can symbolize decadence or indulgence, Manuel uses gold to represent God’s righteous purity.¹⁹ (See figures 8,9,10) I use similar symbolism throughout my work, each has a version of a halo. This aspect of halos relates to my own religious upbringing and feelings about automatic respect for divine authority. The halo imagery is intended to represent each woman I paint as a spiritual and divine person with the intention that they are perceived with that level of respect and admiration. This idea leads into the title of my series of wearable art pieces, *Domestic Goddesses*.



Figure 9. Manuel Nunez, *The Good Fight*

Figure 10. Manuel Nunez, *Keeping the Sheep*

Figure 12. Manuel Nunez, *Warrior Poet*

¹⁸ “Manuel Nunez.” Michael J Fox Fine Arts. <http://www.mjwfinearts.com/artist/manuel-nunez/> (accessed February 2020).

¹⁹ “Manuel Nunez.” Michael J Fox Fine Arts.

I had not considered the connection of pop art in relation to my work until I came across an artist exploring similar themes and issues, María Acha-Kutscher. Acha-Kutscher creates comic and pop art illustrations that discuss contemporary women's issues such as the #MeToo movement, and other feminist political activist movements.²⁰ (See Figure 13)



Figure 13. María Acha-Kutscher, *INDIGNADAS*. Illustrations, 2019.

I have always described my use of line work within my pieces as a 'comic book' style, reflecting on comics influence and my interest in hero-centric forms of art. I am highly inspired and influenced by narrative based art. I love art that tells a story, and I gravitate toward art or any form of entertainment that is a hero-centric narrative. Comics and comic book culture have become mainstream in current pop-culture over the past 10 years. Representation and challenging gender roles are now a new subject within comics, using this current popular form of entertainment as a platform for these issues. The use of the female figure/ portraiture to discuss current women's issues, and to challenge the stereotype of the male gaze has been present throughout my work. An artist who also uses sewing as a medium to make commentary

²⁰ Acha-Kutscher, María. "BIO." María María Acha-Kutscher Artwork. <http://www.acha-kutscher.com/information.html> (accessed January 2020).

on women's issues and domesticity is Katrina Majkut.²¹ She creates discussion of sewing as a medium of domesticity through her use of cross stitch. Her cross-stitching series focuses on women's reproductive rights and postpartum products. (See Figure 14)



Figure 14. Katrina Majkut, *In Control*. Thread on aida cloth, 2018.

Process and Mediums

My process for my body of work starts with many sketches. I begin by talking with my models. We discuss what makes them feel powerful, strong or confident, what is important to them, what they like to wear or do and why. Alternatively, I have ideas or topics I want to exhibit in my work and think of a person who embodies these ideals and approach them. I ask them if they feel connected to the idea and continue from there. Every model I work with is informed and approves of how I am using their image, and the message behind each piece. After I make my beginning sketches and know what model I will be working from, I schedule a photo session and plan the lighting, clothing, props, hair and makeup beforehand. I have found

²¹ Majkut, Katrina. "Paintings." Katrina Majkut Artwork.

https://katrinamajkut.format.com/mfathesis?fbclid=IwAR17L_kvzCXZXdO1IznSbkt6RaGIptBCHxaKXa6DLwZJddj4uIJs_aS7f0#9 (accessed January 2020).

that these well-lit, in focus reference photos are immensely helpful in my process. Then I paint from the reference photos and add elements, I use watercolor techniques that I would not be able to do with a camera. There is a softness, and beautiful quality to watercolor portraits that is different from captured portraits with a camera. I find that I have more control to every aspect of the painting, I can create brushwork, subtle change in tone, color, watermarks, texture that I would not be able to create with just a photo. My medium of watercolor connects to my philosophical ideas about my work. After I have fully rendered the skin tones, hair, and clothing I then start to fully consider the specific color palette I wish to create in each piece. I choose colors based on my associations and connect these to the concept of the work. For example, in *Conqueror* I wanted to use colors that I associate with royalty, passion and bravery. Reds, golds and purples were used to further these feelings. I utilize a variety of watercolor techniques throughout my work; blending wet on wet and wet on dry for textures and details. Unconventionally, I add outlines or line work done in black pen, or I use metallic watercolor for halos, or details. I intentionally paint my women life-size or slightly 'larger than life' to evoke the feeling of coming face to face, to create an interaction between the subject and the viewer. As if each woman I paint is approachable in the audiences' space and introducing themselves.

Conclusion

My overall analysis of this current body of work is that it is successful in communicating my themes and ideas to a wide audience. The reactions from my peers and the public have been overwhelmingly positive. In the future I plan to continue with creating versions of warrior women and further explore the different avenues women use to arm themselves. For the sculptural pieces I would love to have a cat walk where models wear and present the pieces on

a runway. I also would like to have the outfits on mannequins with the paintings on display, possibly with monitors that show videos of women wearing the sculptural work. I also hope to find a venue or exhibition of many feminist artists to contribute too. In the future I plan to move onto other themes and will experiment in painting people of different genders.

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