

Shields

From the depths of what daydreams do such images arise? They might come, of course, from the dream of the protection that is closest to us, a protection adapted to our bodies.

Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

I make, demand, translate satisfactions out of every ray of sunlight, scrap of bright cloth, beautiful sound, delicious smell that comes my way, out of every sincere smile and good wish.

They are discreet bits of ammunition in my arsenal against despair.

Audre Lorde

The work in this show issues from dreams of protection. It began in the spring of 2016 with an interest in ancient armor and shields, fueled by an obsession with a piece of horse armor made in Duro-Europos (a site along the Euphrates river in modern-day Syria) in the third century B.C. and displayed in a glass case on the first floor of the Yale Art Gallery. Thousands of small iron disks hinge together to make a metal blanket, which was presumably laid over the horse's back and sides as a warrior rode into battle. I visited this armor often, thinking about the weight of it and how much of the animal's legs, neck and head would still be exposed. In the studio, I began making drawings based on that armor, and then on other examples of ancient shields and protective coverings from various times and cultures: ornaments and instruments of deflection, masks, coverings, weapons, hiding places. Barraged with news of mass shootings, Black Lives Matter, the deaths of Prince and Bowie, and tides of desperate refugees flooding Europe, I was drawing to seek cover. After a few months, I had a room of paper shields.

The drawings reflect my thinking about the elaborate ways that we try to protect ourselves and the things, people, and other animals that we love. Sometimes it happens spontaneously: someone throws their body over another body. But often it happens in deeply ritualized, pre-meditated ways involving bizarre instruments and contraptions of insulation. Often the symbols of our protection are entwined with the insignias of our allegiances and what we value, fear, adore, or find beautiful. Like the woefully undersized horse armor, the shields we fabricate tend to highlight the ultimate vulnerability of the bodies they are meant to protect. Perversely, shields mark us for impact at the same time that they insulate us from contact.

A second component of work emerged in 2017, as the drawings gave way to experiments with felt and fabric and attempts to make more substantial, malleable covers. The tapestries in the show translate bits of the drawings into large felt icons. Fabric is original architecture: the tents and garments of ancient civilizations, the first defense against the elements, and the first forms of flexible, moveable housing. Fabric is also tied to traditionally feminine work such as weaving, sewing, dyeing, and washing, all of them gestures relating to the elemental ways we clothe, clean, decorate, warm, and house ourselves. The tapestries could serve as blankets, as wall coverings, tarps, or covers. You could wrap yourself up in them or slip in behind them. Hand-stitching is slow and arduous work, and it serves as a reminder that protection takes time and that strength comes in numbers. Handwork is also a way of caring for something incrementally as it comes into being. It was important to me that this work be soft and colorful, issuing an invitation to touch and to look. The fabric pieces may seem like the opposite of shields insofar as they are immediately penetrable, not at all sturdy or stiff. No one striding into battle would make a shield

out of felt. But like any shield, these could provide cover, and in attracting attention to themselves they deflect attention from something else. Part of the protective power of shields lies in their ability to distract or stun the opponent. Beauty is useful.

A different form of shielding I have been thinking about in making this work is camouflage. Shields offer protection by insulating the most vulnerable parts of a body from attack, but camouflage is meant to hide somebody altogether. Rather than stand out as defiantly armed for battle, the one who is camouflaged blends into her environment and slips away unnoticed. There are many ancient and mythological stories about helmets, cloaks, or rings that magically render a person invisible: the “cap of Hades” worn by Athena, Hermes, and Perseus; Japanese *kakuremino* (straw capes); German *tarnkappe* (cloaks of concealment), the ring of Gyges in Plato’s *Republic*, the One Ring in the *Lord of the Rings*, Harry Potter’s invisibility cape, or (my favorite), *Halibut Jackson*, the story of a painfully shy boy who sews his own suits in order to blend into the background of wherever he is going on a given day. He wears a book-covered suit to the library, a fruit and vegetable suit to the market. These elaborate costumes allow him to disappear into his surroundings, and all goes well until he mistakenly wears a crystal and gold encrusted suit to a party at the royal palace only to discover that the party is being held outside. Suddenly *everyone* notices him.

Camouflage only works in the right context. Desert Storm fatigues should not be confused with those worn in Vietnam; castle camouflage should not be confused with garden camo. Invisibility is always a precarious part of a dialectic with visibility, underscoring the degree to which our efforts to disappear in one situation render us all the more visible in another. I’ve sewn three invisibility capes for this exhibit. Each one can be worn in the setting of the show to blend in with the tapestries or the drawings, making visitors into temporary shields. Each cape relates to a specific threat and was created with a particular person and situation in mind. The child’s black and white cape is an anti-abduction garment adorned with scarecrows, initials, and symbols of defense. The red and blue adult cape is an anti-deportation cape intended for my friend Nelly, who is currently fighting a deportation order that would return her to Ecuador. Nelly’s name means “shining one,” and the large sun on the cape reflects her radiant light as well as the unrelenting glare of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) she and her family have endured over the last nine months. The pink and purple cape covered in orchids and rainbows is an anti-cancer cape for a friend and fellow artist. Some of the things we need protection from come from within as well as without. Could we disappear for a moment from our own sickness or injury? I imagine my friend dancing in this cape, which will brush the ground to clear a circle as she twirls.

As I began sewing these capes I realized they could go on forever. So many threats, so many people to protect, so many capes to make. The capes provide cover, but they are also regal reminders of the power of those whose strength has been underestimated or tested. My hope is that visitors to the exhibit will try on the capes and stand still for a moment with their arms wide to test the limits of invisibility and to briefly inhabit vulnerabilities and fears that belong to someone else. You can capture these moments with photographs and upload them with the hashtag #mcraighshields to help create a virtual album of collective participation and solidarity. Perhaps wearing these capes could be a way of protecting each other by trying on another’s pain or distributing the weight of fear across multiple shoulders.

Altogether, this is a body of work about precarious life and the heroic, often desperate, modes of our defense. In the wake of the last presidential election and rising tides of racism, guns, misogyny, and xenophobia in America, I surrounded myself with scraps of cloth. I committed to making something soft out of remnants. I thought about the people I love. I slowed to the pace of stitching and bent low to the colored ground. Had someone peered into the studio while I was working, it may have looked like a posture of surrender. Some days, my head an anvil, it felt that way. I am painfully aware that these shields can save no one, that all shields, like all bodies, ultimately fail. But this work envisions an environment where escape, security, and recovery remain possible and celebratory, even if our lines of defense are as tenuous as thread.

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#mcraigshields