



## A Conversation on the Art of Protection

When you're making art, you are immersed in periods of terrific, concentrated focus. But this can also create blinders, causing your vision to be narrow and restricted to your own ideas and experiences. When I feel this tendency coming on, I look for outside perspectives.

My current artwork is about the contradictions of the body: a miraculous, self-healing machine that has an equally powerful capacity to wreak havoc on itself. I've been studying different examples of protection, from the literal, like advances in immunology, to the metaphorical, like mythical figures in medieval armor (see "Medusa Is My Armor," November/December 2016). The broader the range of resources, the more my art is enriched.

So when a friend recently asked me to put together a panel for Brooklyn's Art Slope festival, I saw an opportunity. What if I could assemble professionals whose work addressed the same subject—our need to protect ourselves and our desire to protect others—but from different points of view? What a great way to expand my perceptions and knowledge! Selfish, yes, but I felt we would all gain from the exchange.

I titled the panel "Body Armor: A Conversation on the Art of Protection." I found four experts whose work responds to the body's strength and fragility in diverse disciplines: tattoo artistry, medical science, fashion design and photography.

Tattoo artist David Sena has many devotees—especially among those who find protection in metaphors. Sena showed us a stunning array of protective iconography: gods, dragons, evil eyes, writhing snakes and chrysanthemums, sometimes covering the entire body. Getting tattooed is a commitment to a long, painful procedure ending with a permanent adornment. That in itself is proof of strength.

Dr. Diane Felsen is a scientist who views the body as a different kind of canvas: she researches skin cancer and the immune system. Dr. Felsen described our skin as armor: it serves as a protective barrier for infection control, and it provides crucial sensing for temperature and touch. But if damaged, our skin can turn against us, generating abnormal cell proliferation and tumors.

Lucy Jones's creations provide both physical and psychological protection. She designs clothing for people with disabilities, marrying style and function by altering mainstream fashion's design process. In her project Seated Design, Jones modifies patterns to

accommodate the needs of people who are confined to wheelchairs as well as the needs of those who help them. The beauty of the garment (literally an art of protection) is vital.

No one signifies strength—in both body and character—more than Muhammad Ali. Peter Angelo Simon is a photographer who chronicled Ali at his training camp in Pennsylvania as he prepared to reclaim the title of boxing's heavyweight champion of the world. The resulting images were published in Simon's new book, *Muhammad Ali: Fighter's Heaven 1974*. In addition to physical preparation, the camp was designed to nourish Ali's image of himself as a champion. In other words, Ali was developing both his physical and mental armor. It is particularly poignant that Ali, once seemingly invincible, succumbed to a disease that may have been related to his own forms of defense.

After the panelists' presentations, the discussion was ripe with connections. For example, Jones described a conversation with a woman she was designing for. The woman, who had a skin disorder, told Jones that she tattooed the adjacent skin to match her ailment. As I listened, it occurred to me that trying to fit in and be "normal" is not always the desired form of protection.

I went home that night eager to put my new knowledge and insights to work. I planned to get up early and go straight to the studio. But the next morning, I checked the weather—unseasonably hot and sunny—and then looked for the fastest subway route to the ocean. I opened a tube of sunscreen (SPF 50) and was extra careful to cover all exposed parts of my body.

I arrived at the beach and removed my sneakers, even though I was nervous about pieces of sharp litter (my skin provides no protective barrier against glass or metal). I put my feet in the water and was startled by the cold; gradually, it became tolerable, then pleasant.

As I walked, I saw everything through the filter of the previous evening's event. I witnessed a barrage of all sorts of protection, from tattoos, muscles and cover-ups to bravado and quiet contemplation. By the end of the day, I felt both energized and exhausted: I had consumed an emotional, intellectual and sensory feast.

Armed with a surplus of new perspectives, I'm looking forward to spending a lot of time in my studio. I want to close the door behind me, put my blinders back on and see what happens. [ca](#)

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