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Stein's leather and mixed-media art.

Art review: Emotional armor in the war for gender equality

By Ron Schira - Reading Eagle correspondent

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In times gone by, a metal suit of armor was the only barrier between a soldier, a knight or royalty, and a painful death by arrow, blade or bludgeon on the battlefield. I remain perpetually dumbstruck by all the tools of killing that humanity has devised centuries before (and after) the gun was invented.

Maybe I am more amazed at the persistence of our species to allow understanding to fail and tyranny to succeed.

Regardless, war will take place under any manner of circumstance, whether it be in violent physical combat, treacherous business deals or interpersonal relationships. One may need a different kind of battle armor in those cases when your assailant's weapons are not made of steel.

Addressing this idea of shielding yourself from harm, more mental than physical, is an exhibit of handmade body armor constructed by art activist Linda Stein. The exhibit is titled "The Fluidity of Gender" and views now through March 5 at the Freyberger Gallery of Penn State Berks.

Stein is the founding president of Have Art Will Travel. She is an artist-activist, lecturer, performer and video artist from New York City. The core of her work addresses issues of empowerment through gender justice.

Steeped in the philosophy of feminism, the show is strongly geared toward women's struggles for respect and gender equality. A piece or two pleads androgyny and "body swapping," as she implies, between the sexes but overall the appearance is female.

If you go

The Freyberger Gallery of Penn State Berks is in the Perkins Student Center, Broadcasting and Harper roads, Spring Township. Call 610-396-6140 for hours and additional information or visit www.bk.psu.edu/Information/Co

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About a dozen on display, these larger-than-life structures of thick black leather, hammered metallic sheeting and found objects, along with decouped images of Wonder Woman, Joan of Arc and other heroic females, behave as avatars, protectors that empower its wearer to step into the melee bolstered by its presence, wether in deed or concept.

Embracing such names as "The Sentinel," "Mascu-Fem," and "In Charge" for her titles, she considers her creations as modern-day knights. The costumes offer the impression of being 20 feet tall, solid and fearful of nothing. What is interesting as well is the manner of their display. That the works are poised like store mannequins on waste-high pedestals or hung by wires from the ceiling allude to something fashionable, that anybody could just don and face the world.

In her research, the artist has adapted actual designs from history, a Greco-Roman cuirass in leather for one example, to invest the pieces with more relevance and provenance. Yet the implications of sexist thought, such as bondage and other salacious references trickle out in the material with a weird sense of ironic misapprehension. Zippers, buckles, clasps and flaps, like battle scars, are located at points on their oily and/or shiny surfaces and open or close at whim.

Essentially, her purpose is to crush the paradigms that influence gender stereotypes and dictate how either sex is supposed to look or behave, exacerbated by the reference to historical battle gear and our present-day preoccupation with superheroes. This exhibit was organized by the Luce Gallery of Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa, and sent traveling across the country with Penn State Berks as one of its college venues.

Contact Ron Schira: life@readingeagle.com.

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