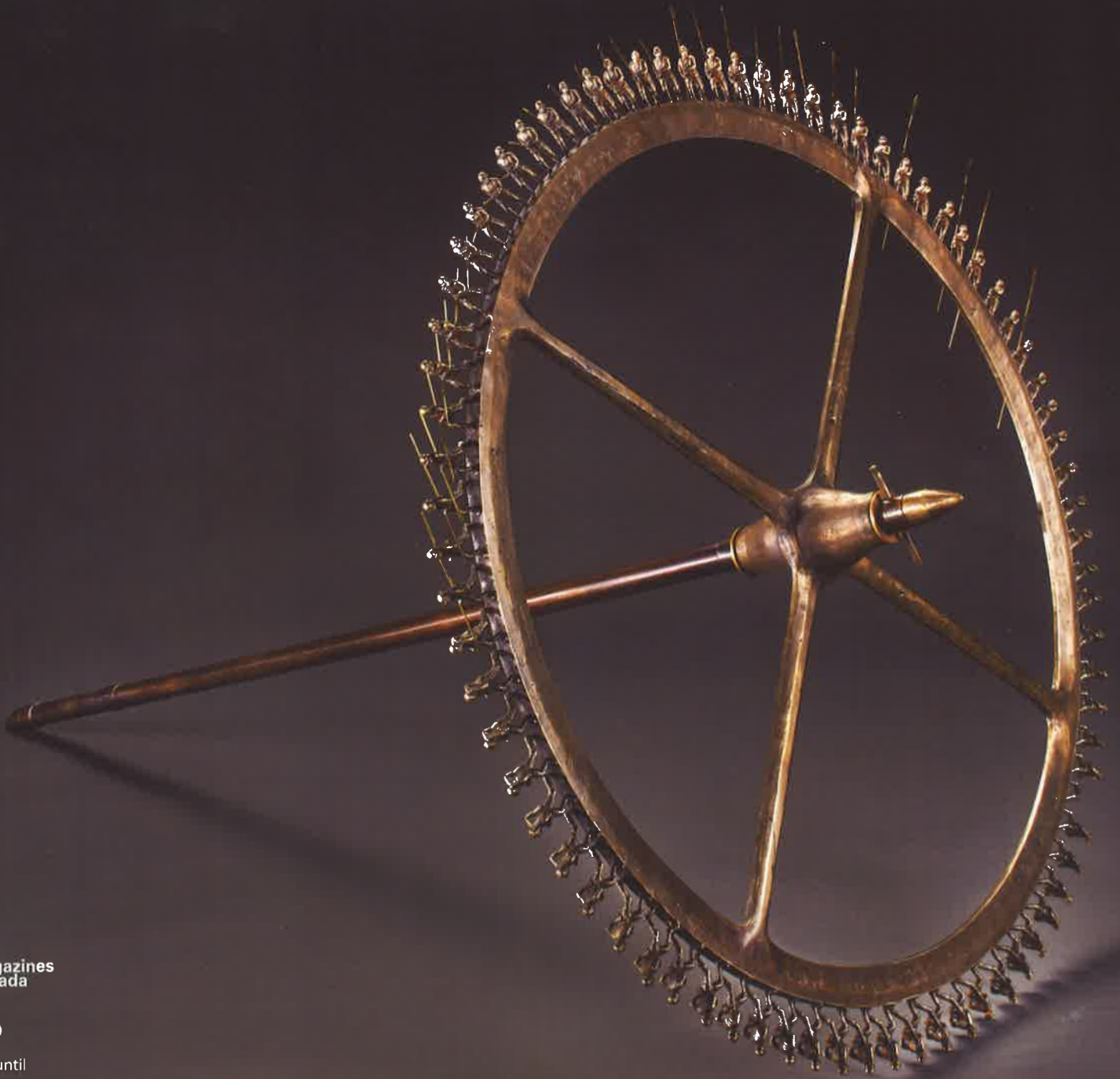


# Ornamentum

Decorative Arts and Design in Canada | Les arts décoratifs et design au Canada

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**SIGNS & SYMBOLS** Gun Shield Art | Myth and Metaphor in the  
Studio Glass of Donald Robertson | Rebus Plates | Chainmaille of  
Morris Fox | Quilting in Canada

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Editor Dr. Janna Eggebeen, editorial@ornamentum.ca

Online Editor Julia Brucculieri, online@ornamentum.ca

Art direction and design Adams + Associates  
Design Consultants Inc.

Pre-press and printing The Prolific Group

Advertising Gilles Latour, advertising@ornamentum.ca

Circulation Rashana Youtzy, info@ornamentum.ca

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Cover image: Donald Robertson, *Sisyphus*, 2014  
Lost wax cast and bronze and copper, 93 x 150 x 93 cm  
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# Morris Fox's Chainmaille

## A Queer Armour

Morris Fox, *Cairn*, 2022  
Annealed, stainless, and carbon steel chainmaille, sauna

*Cairn* is a plaid funereal display of decorative equipment commemorating the dead and lost based on the obscure practice of modifying colorful tartan clothes in greyscale for mourning purposes. Tartan became a codified cloth during the nineteenth century, both through romantic and mercantile ideals. I am interested in the translation of cloth from wool to

metal, and the possible ways in which fashioning identity can be a way of conveying Queer desire and mourning: where visual codes, flagging and flaunting in Queer cultures covertly signal to potential lovers, while acting as a protective armour, as passcodes for safety and community. A cairn is a landmark typically used for way-finding, commemoration, or burial.



Morris Fox, *Paladin*, 2024  
Glow-in-the-dark rubber and anodized aluminium chainmaille

Named after my favourite annoying D&D class, but also thinking of the connection between the words *cruising* and *crusading*, *Paladin* is a jockstrap under-armour for erotic end times,

a knight to remember (perhaps one to forget), goth by day in lily-yard green, glows gay by night's lay on hands, paladin or just a pal for that charge moment before night fades.

## Gladys Lou

CONNECTING CHAINMAILLE with queer codes, floral symbols, and memorial traditions, Toronto- and Montreal-based artist Morris Fox transforms medieval body armour into a contemporary language of care and protection. In Fox's hands, each interlinked ring becomes a sign, a symbol, and a testament to the labour involved in self-defence. From navigating gothic subcultures to inhabiting queerness, Fox's practice reveals how ornaments contribute to queer survival. His shrouds, handkerchiefs, and wall-mounted chainmaille soften solid metal into tender, protective talismans, inviting fantasy, intimacy, and play.

### Global History of Chainmaille

Chainmaille, also known as chain mail or maille, is often imagined and associated with medieval knights, but its history is far longer and more global. Likely originating with the Celts in the early Iron Age, it was later adopted by the Romans and eventually spread across Persia, Japan, China, and Africa, including the work of master metalsmiths in Nigeria and North Africa. Although often framed as European, chainmaille is a transnational technology of protection and ornament. Its military utility peaked in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries before declining with the rise of firearms, when it became costly and impractical. Yet traces of the tradition persisted, evolving into jewelry, decorative crafts, and even fashionable purses in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, evidence of the enduring fascination with the material's possibilities.

By the early twentieth century, chainmaille largely disappeared as protective gear. Its last military application was during World War I, when tank crews briefly wore chainmaille veils to shield against shrapnel. By the 1940s, it survived primarily through medieval reenactments and Renaissance fairs. Today, chainmaille-making is linked to fantasy media such as *Lord of the Rings*, though it still has practical applications: butchers wear chainmaille gloves to protect their hands while cutting, and full chainmaille diving suits exist for swimming with sharks. Fox situates this history within contemporary queer fantasy, reviving this anachronistic craft into a new artistic medium.

### Gothic Subculture and Queer Identity

Fox's interest in chainmaille began in adolescence, when his involvement in goth subculture protected him from being targeted for his queer identity. According to Fox, Gothic fashion emerged from blues, rock, and Black musical traditions, like Screamin' Jay Hawkins *I Put a Spell on You*, before entering suburban and white culture in the '80s and '90s. Goth dress incorporated horror motifs, chainmaille shoulder pieces, belts, and undergarments layered over black leather and lace. "In queer culture, it's always been about how we present ourselves, how we fashion our

own being, and also how we defend that in a world that has become increasingly hostile toward us," Fox explains. "Expression through fashion or adornment, even through forms like chainmaille, can operate both as metaphorical protection and, at times, as real protection. It's a way of signaling, of being recognizable to others who are queer, and making ourselves visible." The Gothic, inspired by literary figures such as Anne Radcliffe, Charlotte Smith, Bram Stoker, Mary Shelley, looks backward to ruins, remnants, and decay; chainmaille resonates with this sensibility as a protective garment that is historically rooted yet fantasized and fetishized in contemporary culture.

### Patterns, Codes, and Queer Symbolism

Fox experiments with a range of materials in his chainmaille. The base weave remains the same: four rings linked into one, known as 4-in-1. Blackened steel, silvery stainless steel, matte carbon steel, the iridescence of titanium, and aluminum's powder-coated rainbow palette each convey a distinct affective tone. Glow-in-the-dark plastic rings dramatize latency: absorbing light only to emit later, a metaphor for queer desire concealed in daylight and revealed at night.

Code and pattern are central to Fox's practice. From wearable helmets to plaid tapestries, Fox pushes the material toward both bodily defence and symbolic meaning. Plaid was a clan identifier in battles; for example, Scottish fighters resisting British invasion wore tartan, painted their faces, and ran into battle. Referencing this tradition, Fox examines how patterning can function as a system of codes, drawing on floral motifs adapted from weaving, knitting, and embroidery, techniques that originated not in Europe but in Egypt and Andalusian Muslim artisan practices. Reconfigured through pixel-art software, these patterns translate centuries of cultural exchange into chainmaille grids.

Fox's patterns refer to flower samplers or floriography, the language of flowers. It is the tradition of attaching meaning to flowers, especially in sentimental bouquets, which dates back hundreds of years. Fox brings the abstractions of queerness into chainmaille while still working with representable images. He looks through knitting charts and pattern books containing pixelated, diagrammatic versions of flowers to select motifs connected to queer history and culture, turning the patterns themselves into a coded language. Green carnations, famously worn by Oscar Wilde, signalled discreet queer identity. Violets are symbols of lesbian love, while lavender and orchids similarly became symbols of gender nonconformity and queerness. Since 1920, "pansy" has been a slur against effeminate men in American culture. Over time, these blooms became emblems of queer resilience, community, and belonging, transforming markers of stigma into symbols of pride. Compared



Morris Fox, *Pansy*, 2024. Chainmaille coif

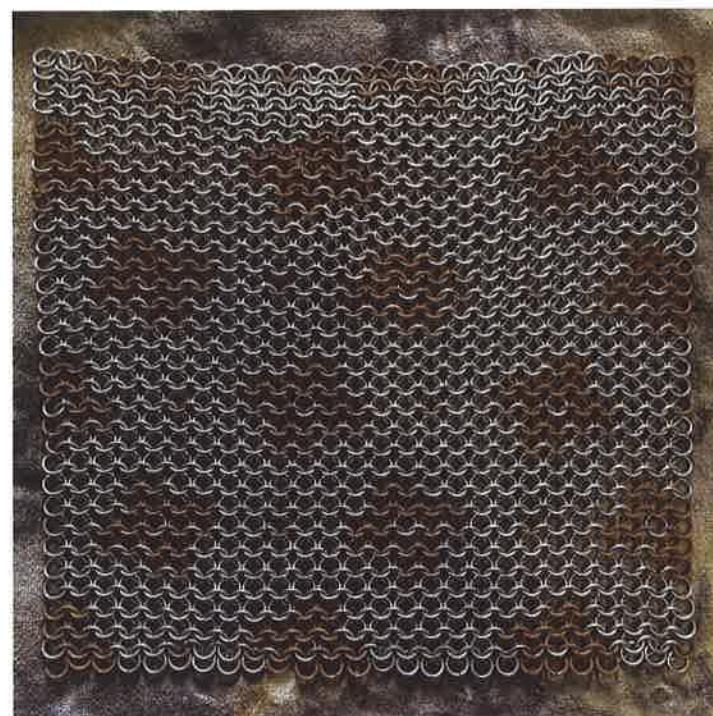


On the left is the source image—a knit floral pattern—and on the right a detail of Morris Fox's *Flower Sampler*, 2022.

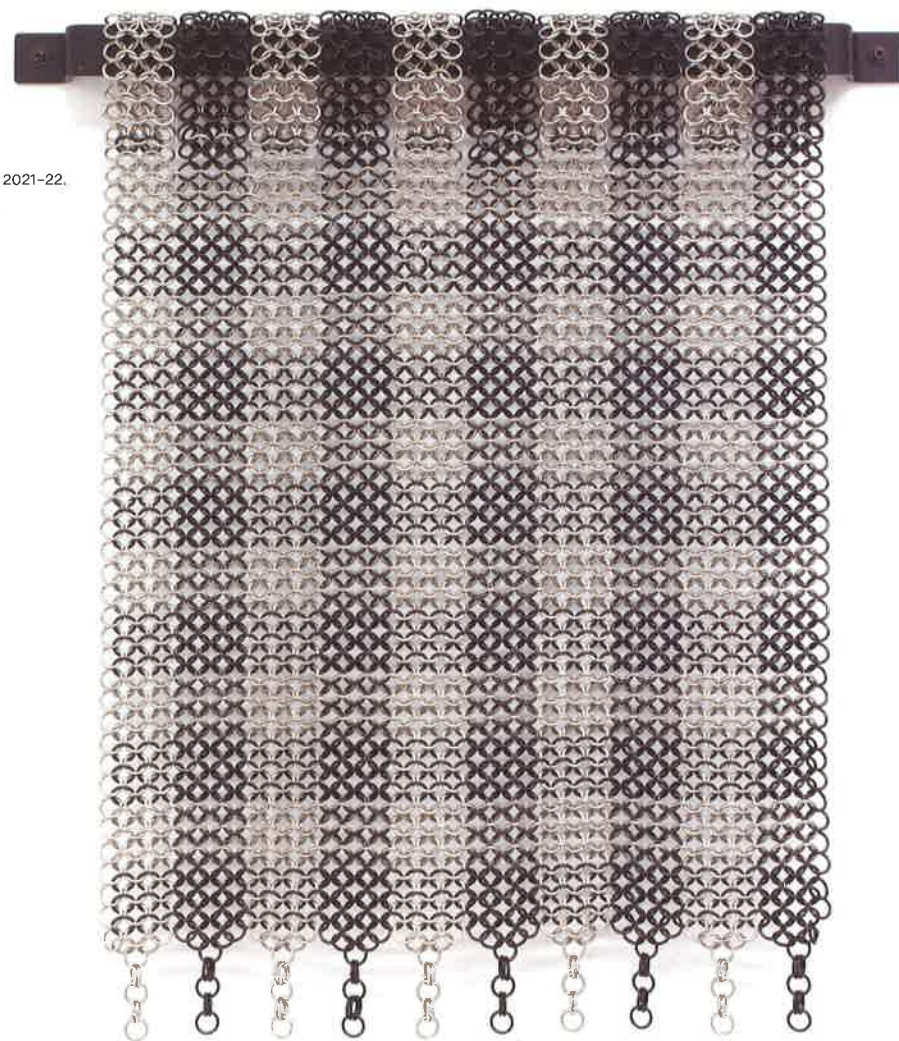
A flower sampler is both a textile sample of a pattern showing the crafter's skill (usually embroidery) and something/someone who samples flowers, who takes, analyses, and records from a sample of a larger collection. It can also be an exemplar—both the most desired and serving as a warning.

Morris Fox, *Creeper*, 2024  
Floral pocket square in carbon and  
hand-rusted steel maille.

Based on a Creeping Charlie knit sock  
pattern, *Creeper* evokes queer gothic,  
gardening, and seeding practices,  
transposing knit patterns to metal, and  
an ecological touch through sense and  
feeling. It is a stretch between the  
material and queer craft, and the  
imaginative connections of eco-  
neomedievalism and queer survival  
through a metaphor of flowering weeds.



Morris Fox, *Play Safe/Safe Play*, 2021–22.  
Annealed, stainless, and carbon  
steel chainmaille



to Gilbert Baker's rainbow flag, Fox finds flowers more  
compelling symbols of queerness.

For instance, Fox's *Creeper* (2024) refers to Creeping  
Charlie, a small wildflower, or more accurately, a weed. Fox  
is drawn to weeds as a metaphor for queerness because  
of their resilience: they keep spreading and cannot easily  
be eradicated. As he said, "People are always trying to  
kill weeds, and yet, they persist." For this piece, Fox used  
carbon steel and rusted select links by bathing and spraying  
them with a mixture of vinegar and salt. The rust-colored  
links form the flowers, while the surrounding sheet  
remains plain steel. The work was technically demanding  
because Fox could not touch the rusted links with his bare  
hands and had to ensure proper ventilation, as rust can be  
hazardous for the human respiratory system. Since rust  
naturally spreads, over time, it may corrode neighbouring  
links, allowing the flowers and the queerness they  
symbolize to gradually overtake the whole piece.



Morris Fox, *Heal Slut*, 2022  
Glow-in-the-dark and  
clear plastic chainmail


Heal Slut is roleplaying game slang for a character  
who provides support to their adventuring party,  
heals and resurrects. This character can eroticize  
the experience through roleplaying a power dynamic  
between who needs healing and who provides it  
(please heal me daddy). Glow-in-the-dark material is  
likewise supportive, absorbing and re-emitting light  
in the absence of it, offering that particular green  
glow of stars mapped across a ceiling at night, a  
playful signal activated by a switch. *Heal Slut's* plaid  
is an homage to care taken and pleasure given, to  
the gentle slink of bodies rubbing together.

Fox also created *Play Safe/Safe Play* (2021–22), a  
chainmaille handkerchief referencing the hanky code, a  
system signaling a desire to play safe or use protection.  
On one level, it is literally chainmaille, a form of armour;  
on another, it evokes safe sex practices and the idea  
of protection through courtesy and care. Its sense of  
protection extends beyond intimacy. In the context  
of contemporary threats—environmental, social, and  
political—Fox frames the piece as layered queer signalling:  
both an invitation to connect and a reminder of broader  
safety needs within hostile environments.

### Fantasy, Desire, and Contemporary Influence

For Fox, chainmaille carries a personal connection to  
fantasy worlds. "Fantasy can be dangerous if it blinds  
us to real-world issues, but it also opens up other  
possibilities of being—other worlds we can bring into  
being, especially for queer people," he says. He grew up  
playing *Dungeons & Dragons* and video games as a means  
of escaping into imagination, remembering the fantasy  
imagery of his youth: 1980s and 1990s heavy metal  
magazines filled with hyper-objectified characters—  
men and women in scanty chainmaille bikinis, rippling  
muscles or exaggerated breasts on display, with nothing  
underneath. Some of his work pokes fun at that campy  
aesthetic and medievalism more broadly. Contemporary  
associations with BDSM aesthetics, gaming subcultures,  
and fantasy role-play further inform the sensuous tactility  
of Fox's objects. In his practice, chainmaille operates at  
the intersection of ornament, desire, and protection,  
inviting viewers to touch and experience all these  
dimensions at once.

Currently, Fox is at work on *The Crushing*, a chainmaille  
blanket projected to weigh 100 pounds. Inspired by the  
therapeutic weighted blanket and the intense feeling  
of having a crush on someone, pushed to the edge of  
impossibility, the piece literalizes the tension between  
comfort and burden. The work soothes and smothers  
viewers simultaneously. Phrases like "It was a dark and  
stormy night" border the blanket, fusing gothic melodrama  
with the weight of lived experiences of invisible disabilities  
such as depression and anxiety.

Fox transforms chainmaille from the armour of  
knights into the armour of queers. Each connected ring  
becomes an act of care, memory, and a survival strategy,  
compelling the audience to reconsider chainmaille as  
both ornament and armour for battles toward freedom  
and liberation. 

*Gladys Lou is a curator and writer currently pursuing an  
MA in Curatorial Studies at the Center for Curatorial  
Studies, Bard College. Her writings have been published  
by ArtReview, ArtAsiaPacific, Public Parking, Studio,  
PhotoED, Femme Art Review, IMPULSE Magazine,  
the AMP, Pleasure Dome, and Hamilton Artist Inc.*