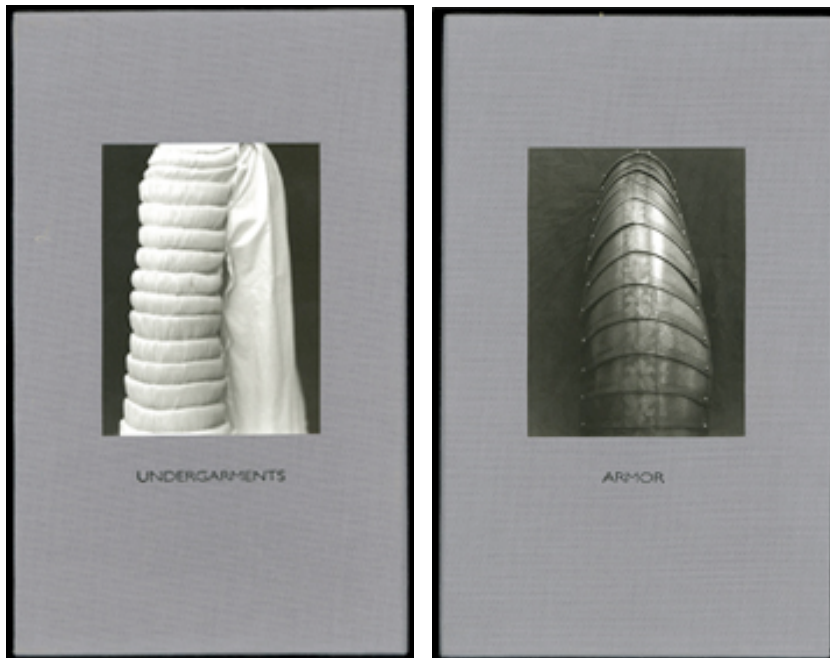


Undergarments and Armor

Photographs by Tanya Marcuse. Essay by Valerie Steele.

Nazraeli Press, Tucson, 2005. 112 pp., 53 duotone illustrations, 6_x10_".
Designed by Vyên Ngo. Three hardcover volumes in a slipcased set.



Tanya Marcuse, recipient of a 2002 Guggenheim fellowship, gained access to museum collections and archives, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Fashion Institute of Technology, to examine undergarments and armor ranging from the 4th Century BC to 19th century. Though she photographs the specialized and beautiful clothing, her main interest in the investigation is the human body and identity; she documents all the corsets, bolsters, codpieces and breastplates with a sensual eye for how the form might have inhabited the pieces. Presented here in three slim, clothbound volumes and housed in a slipcase, this collection of elegantly toned platinum prints makes a fascinating commentary on how we fashion our social identities and gender roles. At first, underwear and armor may seem to be on opposite ends of the spectrum. The undergarments featured here are meant to be hidden and private, to exaggerate the female form within it without revealing an underlying false structure. Armor, on the other hand, proudly bears itself as it conceals and protects the male body (and identity) within it, presenting a hyper-masculine and impenetrable facade. Yet both under and outwear shape the human bodies and identities they enclose.

Interestingly, it is the male armor that is more intricately detailed - featuring steely tendrils on a headpiece, and carved designs on breast plates - while the undergarments are often more rudimentary. Marcuse focuses her examination not on the lacey delicacies that we might associate with ladies underwear, but on the bone, wooden, and metal architectures of corsets and bustles for women of the Victorian period, as well as a stunning chastity belt and breast enhancer. Not only are these objects controversial because they shape the image of women according to the desires of men in a confining manner, but they resemble the male armor, revealing themselves to be a kind of under-armor, meant to attract rather than protect. Both under and outer armor were meant to bolster a specific gender identity directed mainly toward impressing men, whether on the battlefield or in the parlor. In this series, Marcuse challenges how different these objects really are and questions how what we put on our bodies shapes our identity. The intimate scale of the photographs and Marcuse's mastery of the medium make for a delightful and thoughtful reading experience. DENISE WOLFF