



Mechanoreceptor, Catkins, 2016
Cast and Chromed Aluminium;
Copper Wire; Plastic-Dipped Hook;
Bramble
141 × 25 × 9.5 cm

Louisa’s Armour

by Louisa Buck

*To take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing, end them.*

– HAMLET

64 is quite a boring birthday. It doesn’t end in a zingy zero but is still emphatically old. A fact driven home by that annoying Beatles song with its desperately jaunty chorus: “Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I’m sixty-four?” (A refrain that underlines why I’ve always preferred the Rolling Stones, who, like me, have absolutely no intention of ageing gracefully . . .) But I was also happy to have made it this far, with three excellent offspring, a still serviceable body, and a multitude of sagas and dramas survived. I’m still not sure exactly when I decided, but 64 just seemed the right age for my first tattoo.

I’d often thought about getting tattooed, but never found the right time or subject. Tats were still a rarity in 1970’s Essex, more associated with army, navy or prison than rebellious teens; then during my punky years of sweaty gigs, scratchy mohair and a badly-dyed bright orange mullet, it was always more about piercings than inkings. Now, of course, everyone is subcutaneously adorned, including each of my children. Having left it so late, it was therefore crucial to get it right.

Inspiration appeared in the form of a small silver fabric patch in the shape of a bramble branch. Sewn onto a curator friend’s jacket, it had been a low-cost, limited edition made to accompany an Alice Channer exhibition at Turf Projects in Croydon, South London, a few years before. The

seed was sown. A bramble tattoo was immediately appealing. I could imagine a thorny stem stretching along my arm like a barbed badge of honour. And I also knew there was no better artist than Alice Channer to make it.

I’d long admired Alice’s unorthodox blending of the organic, the chemical, the manufactured and the natural to make work of complicated, uncanny beauty. Whether industrial racks of metallized spider crab shells; rock formations printed onto bolts of steam-pleated crêpe de Chine or an ammonite fossil nestling in coils of high tech lamé, her sculptures were sexy, disquieting and quite unlike any other artworks I’d ever encountered. “I weaponise glamour” she once told me, also declaring herself to be especially interested in “what happens at the edges of our bodies, in fingers and skins, how a body might be extended but also where its limits might be.”

Now I wanted Alice to arm me with the dangerous glamour of a barbed tattoo. I knew that the little patch I’d spotted was not a one off. Brambles have featured in Alice Channer’s work in myriad incarnations. But would she agree to rendering one in human flesh? I was cautiously optimistic, given her bodily, brambly track record. Back in 2016 she’d attached a dried out thorny stem next to a bunch of shining aluminium casts of her own fingers, dangling from a red plastic hook¹, and on another occasion taken two sturdy bramble sticks

and made lumpy, molten-looking casts in more gleaming aluminium, jutting out from the wall like inhospitable handles². Then there was her giant bramble briar, commissioned by Artangel and created out of bent scaffolding poles with welded-on spikes which burst like a Triffid out of a small brick shelter on the bleak shingle military testing ground at Orford Ness in Suffolk, UK³.

But the apotheosis of Channer’s bramble explorations is *Megaflora*, a spiky silvery column more than three metres high which she made during the COVID-19 pandemic. This towering sculpture has its origins in an eight-inch section of bramble branch taken from wasteland near Channer’s London studio and stretched, scanned and manipulated using the most advanced 3-D modelling and carving technology before finally being sand-cast in aluminium. Sporting a woody growth bump, vertical routed ridges and banded by seeping molten seams, *Megaflora* is marked by the processes of its making, but wears these scars with pride. Despite an imposing appearance, this is the most unmonumental of monuments, made from lightweight aluminium and unashamedly hollow, with a gaping split down one side offering an intimate glimpse of a puckered visceral interior. Formidable and fragile, tough yet vulnerable and shaped by forces both natural and human-made, I felt a strong personal affinity with the mixed messages of *Megaflora*.

To my huge relief, Alice enthusiastically agreed to be the creator of my bramble tattoo. We established that the tattoo was to be an artwork in its own right, not just a design. *Louisa’s Armour*, Alice called it. I liked this title. The brief was minimal: simply that I wanted a bramble stalk running down the outside of my upper left arm, tracing the line of the humerus bone. I instinctively knew that Alice would understand, and she did. The first drawing was exactly what I wanted. Without me needing to specify she’d

made a graphic iteration of *Megaflora*. The sculpture’s knotty growth bump and full length split did not translate into linear two dimensions, but were there in spirit. The size was spot on. We just lengthened and sharpened the thorns a tiny bit. *Louisa’s Armour* was good to go.

The making of the tattoo was intense but not unpleasant. An exact stencil of the drawing rendered in purple carbon was carefully positioned on my arm by Erik the Viking at King of Hearts tattooists in New Cross Gate. Then over two hours on a fiercely hot June afternoon, with meticulous accuracy and very fine needles, every one of Alice’s lines was incised into my flesh. It wasn’t painful, just a slight scratchy pressure. The whole experience felt like a benign ritual, me reclining in a large leather chair, with the buzzing of the tattoo gun accompanied by an intermittent clicking of the camera shutter as Eric inked, Thierry Bal photographed and Alice intently observed. Once it was finished, *Louisa’s Armour* looked completely at home.

My birthday came, and my family and I toasted my tattoo. What marked a personal rite of passage on July 10, 2024 is now a permanent part of me. For someone who usually tends to bare all, I enjoy that my personal armour is so private, only to be displayed when and if I choose. But hidden or not, I know it is there and feel its power. One of my favourite views is when I’m swimming and out of the corner of my eye I see its sharp thorns cutting through the water. I cherish *Louisa’s Armour* and the knowledge that, whatever happens, this gloriously enduring image of resilience lives and will eventually die with me.

1 *Mechanoreceptor*, Catkins (2016)
2 *Heavy Metals* (2021)
3 *Lethality and Vulnerability* (2021)



Heavy Metals, 2021
Chrome Plated, Vapor-Blasted
and Sand-Cast Aluminium
67 × 31.6 × 12 cm



Lethality and Vulnerability, 2021
Rolled Aluminium Tube; Mirror Polished, Lazer Cut,
Folded and Welded Aluminium Sheet
628 x 550 x 273 cm
Installation view at Artangel on Orford Ness, UK, 2021



Louisa's Armour, 2024
Tattoo under the skin of Louisa Buck's left arm, commissioned to mark her 64th birthday, inked by Eric the Viking following lines drawn by the artist over the stretched machined thorns and pleats of her sculpture 'Megaflora' 19.8 x 4.6 cm