

OUT/LOUD: QUEER CAMOUFLAGE/COSTUME

BY JACKIE ANDREWS



IN THE FIRST INSTALLMENT of *Out/Loud, Queer Maximalism*, we explored the work of multidisciplinary artist Anthony Sonnenberg. In discussing some of the myriad inspirations behind his work, he mentioned a concept he described as “protection through projection”: the duality of confidently presenting your true self and shielding yourself through beauty.¹ This concept stuck with me, and influenced how I thought about my next topic, *Queer Camouflage* and *Queer Costume*: the apparent paradoxes presented by these ideas, how they intersect, and what the push and pull between them means—both for queerness and for aesthetics.

The complexities—and, too often, dangers—of visibility in the queer community feel omnipresent, especially in the wave of attacks on bodily autonomy happening across the United States: taking form in devastating anti-trans legislation and the erosion of reproductive rights following the Supreme Court’s overturn of *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022.

The emotional weight of these concerns—compounded by fears of what is to come—brings new urgency to the concepts *Out/Loud* and *Queer Camouflage/Costume* examines: How and when is visibility a celebratory and defiant act of resistance?

Several artists asking these questions in their work are enamelist and metalsmith Aaron Decker (he/him), multimedia sculptor Nick Cave (he/him), and multimedia artist Moises Salazar (they/them). On the surface, there are myriad common threads among these artists’ practices—they share an affinity for vibrant color and pattern, meticulous handcraft, carefully considered material use, and playful exploration of scale in the objects they create. But the shared sensibilities in their works go well beyond aesthetics; these artists take interest in reclaiming often harmful tropes, experiences, and/or materials in order to recontextualize their own narratives and empower themselves and others through their work. In this process, they playfully investigate what both *camouflage* and *costume* can mean in art and for its viewer.

Aaron Decker’s enameled works range in form from wearables to small, toy-like tabletop objects—and sometimes both simultaneously. The dual influences of Decker’s work—the complex impact a military upbringing had on his queer identity combined with a fascination with the aesthetics and mechanics of toys—feel paradoxical in and of themselves. Some of his most recent work from his solo show *it’s (not) all fun and games* at Ornamentum Gallery include *luke*, a *flying fish* and *fool me twice*, which bring to mind, respectively, fishing lures, clown faces, and toys with a sense of nostalgia.²

Combining vibrantly colored vitreous enamel in harlequin and striped patterns with chunky, almost industrial hardware, Decker translates the simple mechanical appeal of his myriad toy references into the puzzle-like modular configurations he’s imagined for the body.

In works like *mace face* and *strap in*, the military influences and memories Decker recontextualizes in his work become especially clear. Decker speaks about his interest in deconstructing militaria, medals, and regalia and reframing them through a queer lens in his April 12, 2022, artist talk “Gilded Heroes: Jewelry, Metalwork, Military Power, and Queer Longing” in conversation with curator John Stuart Gordon at Yale University Gallery. Over the course of the conversation, Decker draws parallels between the ceremonial, highly decorative nature of military regalia—including makeup, heels, and ornate clothing seen

Out/Loud investigates shared visual language in the queer community through the lens of adornment. The artists in this series are multidisciplinary and varied, exploring queerness, gender, and identity and interpreting adornment broadly through surface embellishments, color palettes, and engaging the body through installations, sculpture, and wearable objects and costuming. Each installment will explore a singular aspect or theme of queer aesthetics. The resulting works are celebratory, exuberant, defiant, and inquisitive—they pose questions about the politics of bodies and how we express ourselves; they disregard rules and examine the privilege, complexity, and danger that comes with visibility; and they imagine queer futures.

Aaron Decker
little bomb, 2021
 Locket pendant, edition 1 of 5
 Enamel, copper, silver,
 nickel, lacquer
 2 x 2 x 3 in. (pendant)
 22 in. (chain)
 Photo: Jenn Bondy



Aaron Decker

now you see me, 2021

Demi-parure (necklace, brooch, keychain)

Enamel, silver, copper, nickel, platinum

Flower brooch: 2 x 2 x 1/8 in.

Mouth: 4 1/4 x 2 in.

Badge: 4 x 1 1/4 in.

Necklace length: 34 in.

Photo: Jenn Bondy