



Allison Armour's
STEEL EYE sculpture.

THE ARMoured GARDEN CONQUERS THE WORLD

*From shopping malls to
palaces, Allison Armour's art
has found a global embrace*

Story by Jeff Wing

“I’ve got this guy in my garden for like two and a half hours,” Allison Armour says pleasantly. “And I’m thinking, ‘I’ve got the school run coming up today, I haven’t washed my hair... *Who does this guy think he is?*’” The lightly bearded slouch was slight of build, extremely friendly and loquacious, and clearly oblivious to the homespun idea of “hours passing.”

Armour had long since made her reputation as a popular UK designer in the “Outlandish English Garden” scene – but had of late evolved into another gig. Still working with leafy spaces devised around tranquility, she’d discovered a hidden and inexplicable talent as creator of large-format, stainless steel expressionist sculpture, the sort that is polished to such a maddeningly high gloss that, in the proper setting – a lovingly stuffed garden, say – its mirror-like surfaces provide the illusion you’re looking straight through the thing. The chatty hanger-on in her own garden that day was an early adopter of Armour’s work –

an enthusiastic client for whose business she was grateful, but whose blabby disinterest in clocks wasn't playing well with the schedule-driven mother of two.

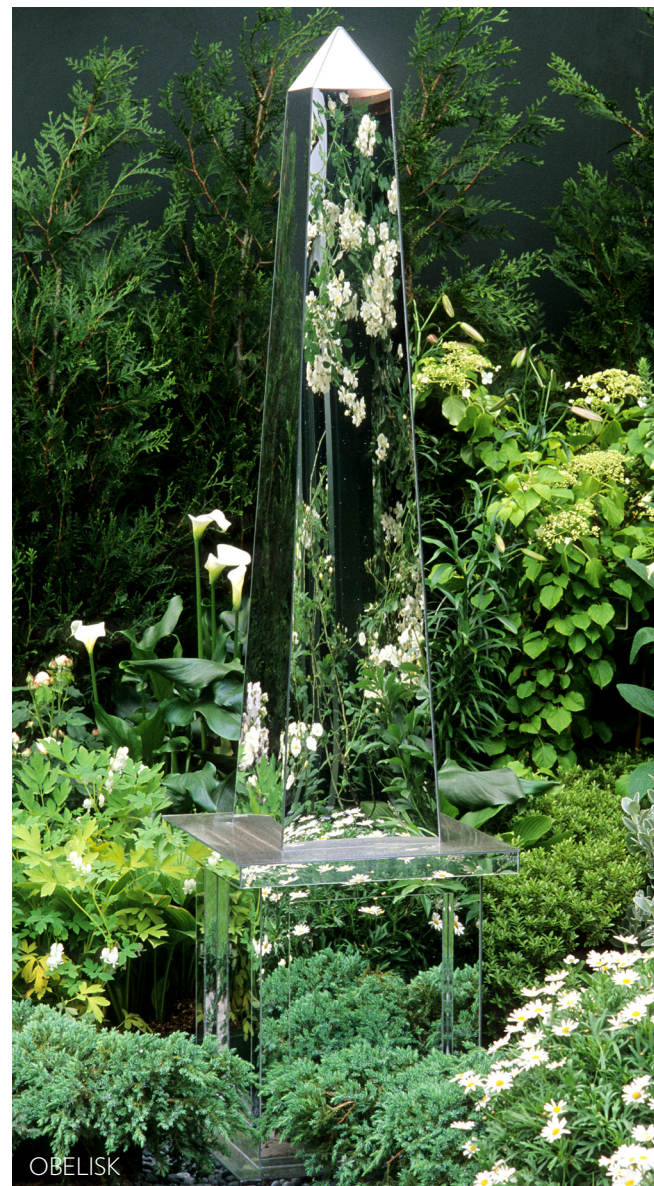
"And so, finally he leaves!" Armour says, eyes widening to mime exasperation. "My window cleaner was there and he just about fell off his ladder, scrambling down and hurrying over. 'Allison, how do you know Ringo Starr?!'" "What on earth are you talking about," I said. "I don't know Ringo Starr." She and her worker stared at each other for a long moment. We can imagine Armour's smile fading as the facts suggested themselves. "...Do you mean Mr. Starkey?"

ROCKEFELLER. DU PONT. CALDER. THE VIEW FROM THE GRAVEL DRIVE.

"Allison Armour" could be the nom de guerre of a strutting female All-Star Wrestler. The facts are even more jarring. Wryly soft-spoken, given to sudden laughter, possessed of a mild but detectable English accent, Armour is something else again – an artist of international renown whose clients span the globe. "Ghana, Tahiti, Norway, Russia, Israel. I mean, my work is all over Europe, the USA..." On paper, this may look like the swaggering cocktail party braggadocio that tempts one to fling a perfectly good Manhattan into the self-satisfied face of the speaker – but Allison Armour is as nonplussed as you by the broadness of her reach and is otherwise disarmingly transparent. "*It's absolutely ridiculous,*" she avers with a stunned smile, adding with a shrug, "...and I have no education."

Armour's portfolio is an interestingly varied grab bag of the regal and the retail. Ireland's Ashford Castle (A.D. 1228) and the MGM Mirage in Vegas (A.D. 1989) cozy up like two peas in a pod, while the outlandishly appointed Holiday Inn Dubai and dowdy Pioneer Ridge Independent Living in Lawrence, Kansas, similarly rub elbows and make pleasant conversation (possibly to do with swimming pool maintenance). The King of Sweden is a client, Armour's work having been installed at his summer palace on the island of Öland; likewise the Turkish presidential palace. Lest we start thinking of Armour as personal sculptress/dilettante to the world's blue bloods, her striking quicksilver statuary and ubiquitous Aqualens appear in retail spaces, casinos, and nightclubs across the Seven Seas – from Monroeville, Pennsylvania, to New Delhi to the Crocus City shopping mall in Moscow. An Armour piece resonates as both fine art and as a consumable instance of beauty that elevates the vibe of any setting.

How, exactly, did she come to this pass? "That's easy for me to answer," she says. "I was born into a very privileged family who... well, we knew a lot of privileged people. So as a kid, I was going around to these most incredible houses – country estates where the drives were lined either side by Henry Moores and (Alexander) Calder's and – it was unbelievable. And that was the Rockefeller's estate, and there was the Du Pont estate,



and this and that. And they all collected art."

As a young lady, Armour was not wanting for cultural input. At one point in her youthful travels, she was given a personal tour of Venice's Guggenheim by someone who seemed to know her way around the place. "My great-aunt had a palazzo in Venice. When I went to visit her, Peggy Guggenheim, who founded the Guggenheim Collection there, closed her museum and personally took me around it." Armour – seen here as a young lady being ushered around the Guggenheim on Venice's Grand Canal by Peggy Guggenheim herself – may be forgiven for having been drawn to a numinous art world that all but held its arms out to her. Was she aware, as a young person, of the cultural gravity of the works she was seeing? "It was commonplace in my world. So it wasn't like, 'Oh my God, that's a Calder!' It was just, 'Oh, doesn't that look great? I really like the feel of that. When I grow up, that's what I want.' And then when I grew up, that *is* what I wanted! But I couldn't afford it. So I thought, *Well, I'll have to do it myself.*"





The AQUALENS

ART LOVER RISING

Favored artist of kings, presidents, and The Beatles drummer – Armour has no airs. Whatsoever. “I never went to college,” she says. “Parsons School of Design I only did one year. The year I went to the Architectural Association in London, they’d decided that the best way to teach was to not teach. This was during Vietnam. So, there were no classes. My poor father paid for the tuition.” Her academic destination thus shuttered, Armour was more or less stranded in London Town. She made the most of her time. “There was no formal education. I discovered London, and that was an experience in itself.” We can broadly imagine the education Armour *did* receive in the “Swinging London” of that period which, apart from Petula Clark’s domination of Downtown, was a hotbed of “happenings” – Terry and Julie at Waterloo Station and reactive new art from the likes of Francis Bacon and David Hockney. Where art school formalism escaped Armour, she made do with a sponge-like absorption of the exploding London scene – and her own unerring intuitions.

“What would’ve happened if I’d gone to college?” she asks rhetorically. “They would have taught me that there was a certain way to do things. Well, I break rules. That’s part of what I do. Being a woman and not using a structural engineer, I want to make my work ethereal, with as little construction to make it sound as possible.”

CHELSEA BLOOMING

It was the 1999 Chelsea Flower Show – a tooth-and-claw affair disguised as a peaceable contest between gardens – that effectively launched Allison Armour. “You may not know about it, but the Chelsea Flower Show really is the Super Bowl of garden shows – and a really big thing in England,” Armour says. The RHS (Royal Horticultural Society) Chelsea Flower Show is indeed a globally prestigious floral event whose origins date to 1862. The show has been held at Royal Hospital Chelsea since 1912 and is traditionally attended by members of the British royal family. “I’d been making gardens,” Armour says of her vocation to that point, “and that’s how I started. I had a natural eye for garden design.” She broadly sketches her final project with the green stuff. “I took a 15-acre field and turned it into a series of gardens. That was my last one in England, and it was on TV and in magazines and all that. Then came the Chelsea Flower Show.” Armour had been working on designing garden sculpture and water features when she showed her ideas to friend and celebrated UK horticulturist Peter Rogers, OBE. He had the outlandish idea that she should try to enter the Chelsea Flower Show. When they accepted her proposed entry, she was flabbergasted. Over nine short, frenzied months then (Chelsea Flower Show habitués more typically spend years preparing to exhibit), she produced a garden design whose news-making character she hadn’t entirely anticipated. Her placement



STAR

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of dazzlingly brash modernist sculpture within the traditionally calming milieu of leaves and flowers in neatly delineated beds – this turned Chelsea on its ear, as did this first public unveiling of a spherical water feature she’d designed. She called it the Aqualens (no relation to Jethro Tull’s album). The Chelsea judges awarded her “Garden of Reflection” that year’s silver medal. It was Armour’s emergence from the chrysalis. She was 50.

“I’d been a housewife raising children, designing some gardens, and it’s like I suddenly... I just burst into tears. I couldn’t believe it.” Neither could the world at large. Her reputation exploded in the swarm of press that followed her Chelsea Flower Show debut – and has blossomed apace in the 24 years since. Her stainless steel “garden sculpture” designs have broadened and are in great demand everywhere. Armour is a working artist. Naturally, her success, moxie, and innate grasp of what we’ll call “structural engineering” have rankled the usual suspects.

THE TACTICAL LYCHEE MARTINI

Armour’s most popular item by far – the Chelsea Flower Show-stopping, world-conquering Aqualens – is a sparkling acrylic sphere filled to overflowing with gently pressurized water. The effect is approximately as mesmerizing and light-throwing as a crystalline droplet adrift in zero gravity. Following several unsatisfactory prototypes, she’d realized the base of the Aqualens should be shallow and dish-shaped. She began thumbing through the phone book, calling around to steel fabricators, the predominant attitude an amused “Who’s asking, honey?” – presumably due to the Y chromosome’s long affiliation with steel. “Four years later, they were flying down to see me. ‘Could we have your business?’” Armour’s delicious cackle is too good-natured and musical to suggest schadenfreude. But – for the record – living well continues to be the best revenge.

Her clientele is not always consumed by her work’s finer aesthetic details. “In the end, Ringo just said ‘Okay, Allison. I want the biggest and the best you can make!’ That is a very Ringo statement,” she says warmly through laughter. There is one client with whom Armour would not cross paths, possibly owing to an instance of charitable sabotage. “I had just finished installing his moon gate, which is 17 feet in diameter,” Armour says. “I was



DOUBLE Cs

working on the installation with an American. He is absolutely delightful, so creative and wonderful, and we still work together whenever we can.” They’d finished the installation at 5 pm, and her friend suggested a drink before the ceremonial unveiling they would be attending in the client’s presence at 8 that evening.

“He said, ‘Allison, how about we go over to Nobu for a cocktail? You have to try my lychee martini. It’s my signature drink.’” Armour agreed, and they toasted each other. “It was *delicious*,” she says extravagantly. “Then he wants me to have a second one. Okay, I’m good. I’ve got a driver...” They finish the second martini. Her friend is just getting started, it seems.

“He says, ‘You want a third one?’” Two nicely prepared cocktails tend to lay the groundwork for a third. Armour was easily persuaded. “Of course, we have the third one. By then I realize I’m way too drunk to go to the unveiling. I mean, it’s all I could do to get into the car and back up to my hotel room!” Her American colleague may have been doing her a service with a bit of lychee-infused subterfuge. “I adore him,” Armour says of her colleague. “But I’m an American and a woman, and my client is not that crazy about American women. So, I think Putin may not have known who the artist was – and that my colleague may have been posing as the artist to save me from an awkward situation.” Glass half-full. Armour sighs through a smile, saying of the missed meeting, “I didn’t have to shake his hand.”

Allison Armour grew up around art and it captured her. For all her success, she has yet to be invited into its executive lounge. “The art world has definitely shunned me,” she says without malice. Never mind. She’s drawn to something else in the calling. “When I was in the 6th grade, I had an absolutely



Photo by Kim Reiersen

terrific English teacher. We had to memorize poems – long poems. One of the first ones I learned was Keats’s *Ode on a Grecian Urn*...” Armour and I are video conferencing, and she looks straight at me though the screen. “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” she recites, her eyes shining. “That is all ye know on Earth, and all ye need to know.”

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