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Craig Becker explores our dark side at the Maine Jewish Museum

'Lorica: Masks of Eternity,' at the Maine Jewish Museum, takes its name from a piece of Roman armor used to protect oneself.

Community: Portland

Posted March 27 | Updated March 28 | Jorge S. Arango

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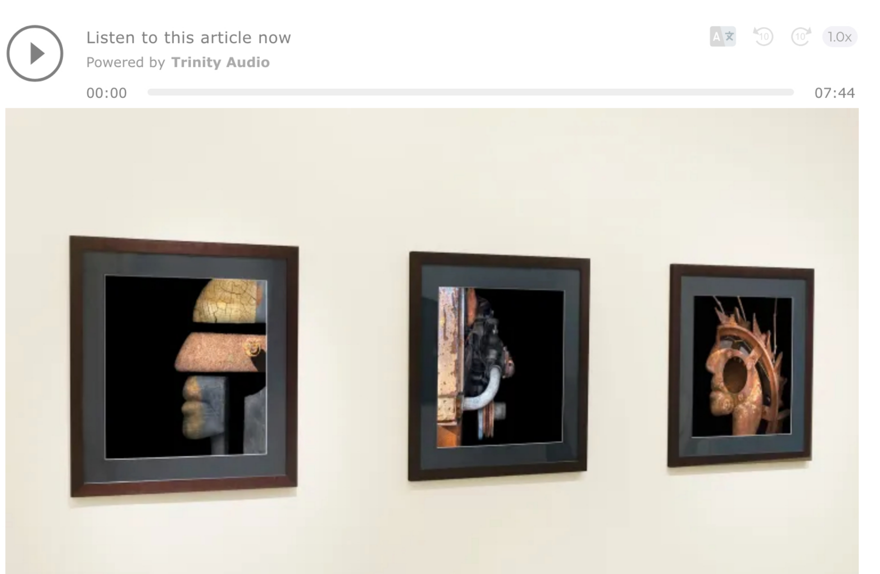
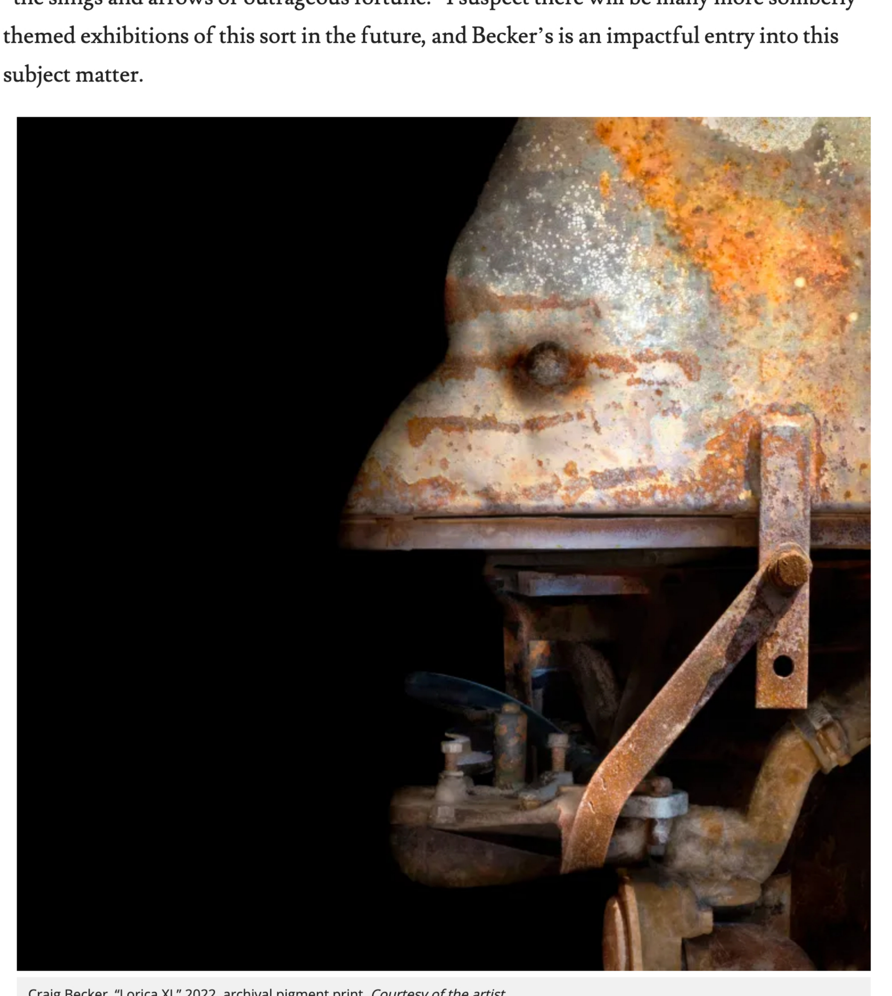


"Lorica: Masks of Eternity" is at the Maine Jewish Museum through May 2. *Courtesy of the artist*

"Lorica: Masks of Eternity," Craig Becker's photography exhibition at the Maine Jewish Museum (through May 2) takes its name from a piece of Roman armor — a back and breast plate connected at the sides, most often with leather, that protected the torso from physical blows and shooting arrows. The idea for it arose, Becker's statement says, in 2020 when "events rattled our country," by which he means the COVID epidemic and the first Trump administration. Now with the latter enjoying a return engagement, "The work is about our current state of vulnerability, the subconscious, and the corners of ourselves individually and collectively, that exist in darkness."

Many of us are understandably feeling the need to armor ourselves against, to quote Hamlet, "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." I suspect there will be many more somberly themed exhibitions of this sort in the future, and Becker's is an impactful entry into this subject matter.



Craig Becker, "Lorica XI," 2022, archival pigment print. *Courtesy of the artist*

For "Lorica," Becker photographed industrial materials and detritus such as cogs, bolts, levers and bicycle chains, then used them as components that form various profile views of a human head. These go beyond helmets or masks, which sit on the head and face. The fact that they are actually integral to the head suggests that they are not merely armor we put on and take off. Instead, they imply that the hardness and inflexibility of these components are much more fundamental to our very nature, part of what we are rather than just the way we may occasionally act.

These photographs can be fearsome and confrontational. They feel militaristic, robotic and cold-blooded or, at the very least, imply that a hard shell has crusted around whatever in us that is soft, human, kind and pliable. They resemble nothing so much as funereal masks from ancient cultures such as Egypt and Mycenae.

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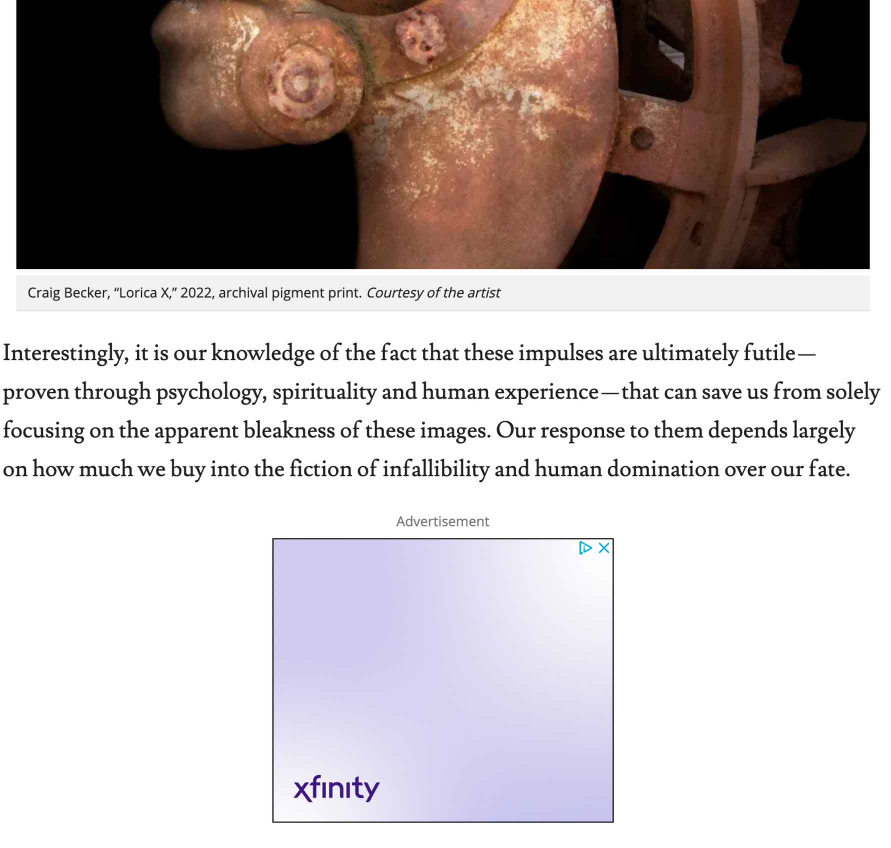
The components are also rusted and peeling, indicating the corrosive effects of the deadening impulses that lead us to crush all expression of empathy and sympathy within us so that we might feel unbreakable and in control.



Craig Becker, "Lorica X," 2022, archival pigment print. *Courtesy of the artist*

Interestingly, it is our knowledge of the fact that these impulses are ultimately futile—proven through psychology, spirituality and human experience—that can save us from solely focusing on the apparent bleakness of these images. Our response to them depends largely on how much we buy into the fiction of infallibility and human domination over our fate.

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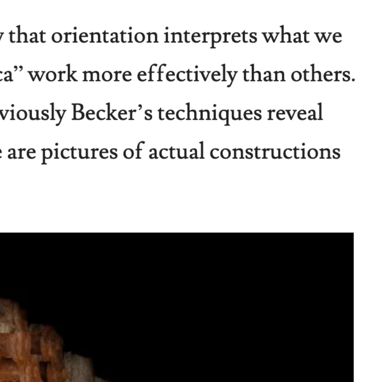
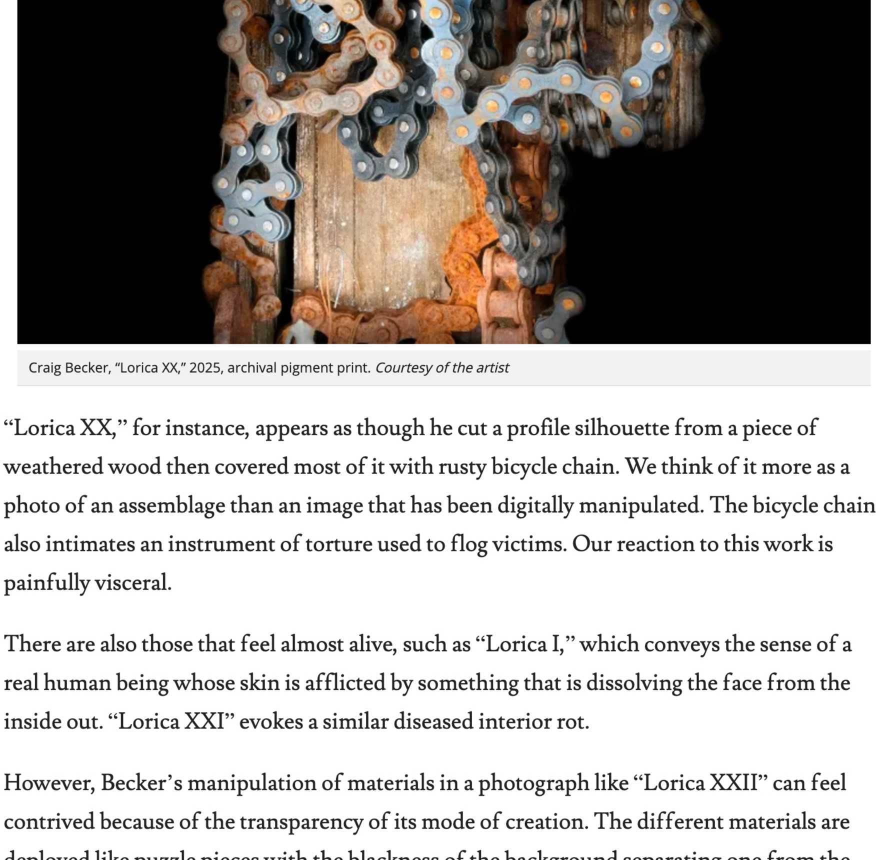


Craig Becker, "Lorica III," 2021, archival pigment print. *Courtesy of the artist*

Those wielding authoritarian power, or those who have simply cut themselves off from their more compassionate essence, might view Becker's works as strong reflections of their belief in their own impenetrability. Conversely, those who feel overwhelmed by helplessness and unable to connect with their essential strength will likely react with fear and pain. But if we view them from a belief in the innate goodness of our nature, we can sense the underlying sadness of these images. This last way of looking has the potential to open us up to our own compassion for those who have cauterized their psychic wounds and diminished the rich, full range of experience that can come with surrender and acceptance.

Quite apart from our personal orientation and the way that orientation interprets what we see, it is worth noting that some photographs in "Lorica" work more effectively than others. Their success, for me at least, rests in how subtly or obviously Becker's techniques reveal themselves. Those that make us wonder whether these are pictures of actual constructions that Becker built work well.



Craig Becker, "Lorica XX," 2025, archival pigment print. *Courtesy of the artist*

"Lorica XX," for instance, appears as though he cut a profile silhouette from a piece of weathered wood then covered most of it with rusty bicycle chain. We think of it more as a photo of an assemblage than an image that has been digitally manipulated. The bicycle chain also intimates an instrument of torture used to flog victims. Our reaction to this work is painfully visceral.

There are also those that feel almost alive, such as "Lorica I," which conveys the sense of a real human being whose skin is afflicted by something that is dissolving the face from the inside out. "Lorica XXI" evokes a similar diseased interior rot.

However, Becker's manipulation of materials in a photograph like "Lorica XXII" can feel contrived because of the transparency of its mode of creation. The different materials are deployed like puzzle pieces with the blackness of the background separating one from the other. Absent the illusion that this is either a photographed construction or a living being, it feels less artful in a way. It's by no means bad; just less impactful for its obviousness.

Collectively, however, "Lorica" telegraphs the urgency of contemplating our humanity at a time when the cruelty and corruption of despots and tyrants is in the ascendent. It implores us not to fall for the myth of our omnipotence, which invariably leads to our most primitive, fear-based instincts. It asks us, instead, to rise above this and behave from our higher selves.

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This column is supported by The Dorothea and Leo Rabkin Foundation.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Lorica: Masks of Eternity"
WHERE: Maine Jewish Museum, 267 Congress St., Portland
WHEN: Through May 2
HOURS: Noon to 4 p.m. Sunday, Monday and Wednesday-Friday
ADMISSION: Free
INFO: mainejewishmuseum.org, 207-773-2339

PORTLAND AREA

Cove Street Arts, 71 Cove St., 207-808-8911, covestreetarts.com "Emergent" (through May 10), Alice Spencer's prints appear as new life forms, though some also evoke existing organisms such as horseshoe crabs, trees and bushes. They are the result of experimentation, which led to an entirely new way of working, and we can feel their sense of spontaneous generation.

Greenhut Galleries, 146 Middle St., 207-772-2693, greenhutgalleries.com "Maine: The Painted State" (through April 26). The gallery's biennial landscape show.

Moss Galleries Portland, 100 Fore St., Ste. B, 207-804-0459, elizabethmossgalleries.com "Hunt Slonem: Aflutter" (April 19). Slonem's endlessly variable paintings of butterflies, rabbits, toads and parrots.

Space, 534-538 Congress St., 207-282-5600, space538.org "Envision Resilience: Shifting Tides and Evolving Landscapes," (Friday-April 26) includes work by seven Maine-based designers and artists who "engage in the same fundamental process of interpreting environmental shifts due to climate change and proposing how we might live alongside them. Works by Ben Spalding, Haley Nannig, Ian Ellis, Jordan Carey, Lokotah Sanborn, Michel Droge and POSEY (aka Pamela Moulton).

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ROCKLAND AREA

Caldbeck Gallery, 12 Elm St., 207-594-4935, caldbeck.com "March into April" (Friday-May 20) is a group show of gallery artists.

Interloc Gallery, 153 Main St., Thomaston, interloc.co "Spring Show" (through May 3). Work by Bee Daniel, Fred Gutzeit and Sara Stites.

Triangle Gallery, 8 Elm St., 207-593-8300, gallerytriangle.com "Spring Show II" (Thursday-April 26). Work by various gallery artists. And "Bob Richardson: Circle Paintings" (Wednesday-April 26).

OTHER LOCATIONS

The Parsonage Gallery, 8 Elm St., Searsport, parsonagegallery.org "Portal: Heather Lyon" and "3rd Annual Winter Exhibition" (both extended through April). Lyon offers an organic, transformative experience of walking through our current reality into something redemptive and hopeful. The winter exhibition presents work by Jennifer Amadeo-Holl, Avy Claire, Nina Jerome, Keri Kimura, Frederick Kuhn, Nathaniel Meyer, Jean Michel, Garry Mitchell, Matthew Russ, Lesia Schor, Kevin Sudeith and Sara Szwajkos.

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