

At some point in their lives, everyone feels like they are holding back a part of themselves so that they will fit in. But for those of us who are neurodivergent,¹ this feeling is constant. We are always obscuring parts of ourselves—our behaviors, interests, even needs--in order to be treated as “normal” and feel safe in a society that sees us as “other.” Those of us in the autism community commonly call this self-suppression “masking².” It becomes second nature, so much so that many of us have a hard time stopping even when we’re alone, and it is exhausting. Shoving parts of oneself down every single day is not only painful, but never 100% effective. We never fully occupy the mask we put on. Something always slips through the cracks: niche interests that I know too much about, missing cues in conversations and scrambling to compensate, or being accused of rudeness for not making eye contact. I may have built myself a sort of armor of “normalness” to protect me from mistreatment, but armor is not invulnerable.

I didn’t discover that I was autistic until my early 20s. I always knew I had ADHD; I was diagnosed as a young child. My mother recalls that when she took me to be assessed, the first thing I did was run up to the psychologist performing the assessment and touch each of the buttons on her dress. I loved buttons. As a child, I sat in my grandmother’s sewing room, digging through her boxes of buttons and sorting them by shape, color, and size, then selecting the “prettiest” buttons for my own special pile. That’s not normal, at least not past a certain age. But it is joyful. Accepting myself as autistic has meant finding joy in the ways that I am different from others. I delight in finding as much information as possible about new interests. I wave my hands when I’m happy. I still enjoy sorting things, buttons included. All of that may be abnormal but it is joyful.

My work explores the restrictions I place on myself as an autistic person when presenting myself to the world. I consider suppressing my autistic and ADHD traits as a sort of armor I wear for protection; it is also limiting. I am creating literal armor for my body and combining it with sewing notions such as pins, thread, thimbles, and of course, buttons. The armor is an allusion to masking, while sewing notions represent the vulnerable, less desirable sides of myself leaking out, harkening back to the time in my grandma’s sewing room, where there was no suppression or ridicule of my strangeness, only joy. It is important to me that these pieces be worn by my body in particular because though created in response to an unaccepting society, these are still constraints that I have created and placed upon myself. This work represents my journey to feeling safe taking off my armor without being ashamed of the traits that lie beneath.

¹ Neurodivergent does not have a strict definition, but generally refers to people with autism, ADHD, or other neurologies which differ from what’s typical. Neurodivergent came out of the neurodiversity movement, which frames autism, ADHD, and other neurodivergencies as disabilities but not flaws, recognizes that disability, no matter how profound, does not diminish a person’s humanity, and acknowledges that neurological variations are a diversity vital to humanity, just like hair, skin color, etc. Read this article for more details: <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/clearing-up-some-misconceptions-about-neurodiversity/>

² This article on masking from NPR is another excellent resource for more details: <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/14/1092869514/unmasking-autism-more-inclusive-world>