

Lotion

17 Jan - 5 Feb 2022

Curated by Taylor Hall

Sticky and Slippery Encounters

Spanning twenty-two square feet, the human skin swaddles the body like a taut flesh blanket. Beyond being the final boundary between the body and the public realm, our skin serves as the symbolic interface, or mediator, between the self and the physical world around us. Our skin promises to be a barrier against the terrors of the outside world – greatly emphasised in current-day acts of slathering on ethanol to combat invisible germs – while its millions of nerve endings simultaneously make it our primary facilitator of touch and connection.

Even when we are but a three centimetre cluster of cells in utero, touch is the first sense to develop. With touch, we first begin to comprehend our physical beginnings and endings, and what exists beyond our boundary. Being our most sensitive and visible interface, the surface of our bodies is a place of encounter. Subsequently, it informs the psyche, and by extension has adopted a vital role in maintaining both our psychological and physical wellbeing. This nexus of skin and the psyche is often emphasised in metaphors: to feel touched by something or someone; to get under one's skin; to burn with passion; to feel porous; or to have thick skin.

To assume that the 'truth' and 'essence' of a being lies beneath the surface is a common misconception. Not merely just representing our likeness, the body's canvas has the ability to represent a plethora of complex dualities: exposure and protection; control and chaos; and naked vulnerability and fortified façades. In her diaries, Sylvia Plath offers an anxious reading of the obsessive display of her surface:

*"Nose podgy as a leaking sausage: big pores full of pus and dirt, red blotches, the peculiar brown mole on my under-chin which I would like to have excised ... Body needs a wash, skin the worst: it is the climate: chapping cold, desiccating hot: I need to be tan, all-over brown, and then my skin clears, and I am all right. I need to have written a novel, a book of poems, a Ladies Home Journal or New Yorker story, and I will be poreless and radiant. My wart will be non-malignant."*¹

Here Plath reveals the abject fragility and fetishized desire for flawless, smooth skin as a representation of a holistic existence. The journey to this perfect destination is of course unattainable (what is perfect skin?), though the desire is echoed in art history as far back as antiquity, whose immaculate, pore-less marble sculptures stood as the pillar of the ideal human.

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When in contact with an artist, materials embody and record gesture, while also relishing the spontaneous characteristics of these materials: oil will inevitably slip; fabric will submit to gravitational pull; paint may harden and crack. To carefully listen to and work with material as a complex, ever-changing entity with its own agency is to expose the whirling possibilities and entanglements of our lived, tactile experience. It emphasises the essential need to draw focus to our own surfaces, as well as all those that exist around us, in an inherently empathetic act.

Within the context of *Lotion*, each artist gives agency to their chosen material and follows its lead. The essence of skin is engaged in soft, corporeal forms and flesh-like substances to highlight and reevaluate our relationship with the all-

¹ 1983. *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough. New York: Bellantine.

encompassing surface, whatever that may be.

Revealed in this exhibition is a latent, errant and strange skin, as seen in Molly Smith's *Void*. Constructed from hand-dyed, stitched, and stretched squares of fabric, the shadowy watermarks of black dye indicate the material's absorption (as well as its rejection) of its prior treatment – what 'slipped through the cracks'. The result materialises as a surplus of fabric which creates soft craters and geometric sweeps of tension and relaxation. It is as if the work is the flayed surface of the moon, still grappling with its own gravity. Undulating over its terrain and with little to settle on, the unmoored eye reminds us of the slippage of bodily senses, a loss of control. The work settles into the grey areas of our external substrate and whispers memories of a body that once seemed whole and contained, but is now open, odd, slippery and incomprehensible.

Comparably, *Put to Bed* by Zara Rose Dudley evades control. Silicone takes the shape of a gristly, gelatinous pile. Resting on the brink between solid and liquid states, its cloudy exterior reveals artifacts from the artist's past, present, and future – rhinestones, lace, a wish bone, cling film –lodged into, and intertwined with, its material. Collected over time and stored by the artist due to their personal symbolism, this poetic archive of invested objects is compiled haphazardly within this material flux. The oozing materiality of the form alludes to mucus, a substance typically used to moisturise our critical organs and to trap irritants. Bridging the boundary between the internal and external surface, the goeey artwork references Humourism, a pre-modern system of medicine in which the body is governed by four types of bodily substances, and 18th century perceptions of skin being a porous sieve which lives in a state of constant, mysterious metamorphosis, or 'fluxes'². Contemporarily, bodily substances are viewed as a form of purification, the body's natural way of cleansing itself. Dudley's work highlights a need to preserve one's 'skin', or façade, and embrace our 'emotional mucus' to heal from within.

Bella Deary's use of latex in *Respire* and *Tender Terrain* attempts to dislocate our fondly held belief of the primacy of humans over matter. Presented as a latex

² Bodily substances.

chamber, *Respire* invites its audience beyond its external boundary and into its internal core. When inside, the viewer looks up to discover the curved oval-shaped symbol of the mitochondria, the powerhouse cell organelle contained in all eukaryotic organisms (animal, plant, fungus, human, etc.). This symbol reminds us of the collective and fundamental components of any living body, and decentralises the anthropocentric view of seeing humans as the principal being. If stuff of our existence is the stuff of other, non-human existence, are we really all that different? Further expanding on this concept, as well as utilising the anthropomorphic characteristics of latex, *Tender Terrain* creates an environment of skin with bumps and crevices which mimic the terrain of hilly landscapes. Traversing the space of the Metro Arts Window Gallery, the form of the landscape uncannily resembles the familiar and the unfamiliar – a bent knee or elbow, an arched back or voluptuous breast – each form of which we cannot be sure. The sensual, carnal landscape becomes both body and environment. Its endless, open and barren landscape symbolises the expanded skin as a platform to broaden the understanding of one's organic form beyond the human, and to accept and empathise with the skin and surface of other life forms.

The endless flesh-like qualities of latex, in both appearance and application, have an undeniable proximity to the skin, as is further explored by Evangeline Sines. In Sines' work, latex's connotative proximity to flesh is viscerally linked with sex, due to both its uncanny skin-like appearance and applied use in BDSM practices and in common items such as condoms and sex toys. *Nailed, Stretched* examines the suggestive and humanlike qualities of latex and, in particular, the material's ability to elicit confronting aspects of the human condition relating to violence and sexuality. Here the skin is seen as both palimpsest and witness. The latex's ability to 'remember' its prior treatment is exposed in its murky crevices, bubbled, thickened pools, and pore-like textures, which indicate that the painting and curing process took place on raw concrete. The enormous latex skin has then been stretched by the artist, its surface pressed against hers, and has submitted to the strenuous force of being excessively nailed to its beams. Referencing the structural qualities of painting, the work is in a state of spectacle, bearing its drum-tight skin to the audience. The viewer is urged to look at this odd, fleshy material as if it were our

very own skin. A desire to touch the surface emerges (does it feel like me?), as does the question of our own right to touch in the first place, and the pervasive issue of sexual assault in relation to the skin.

When shifting your focus to the internal skin, Alannah Dair's work *The patient. The doctor. The host. The vessel.* acts as a surrogate body through which the artist investigates the treatment of laparoscopic surgery, used to manage endometriosis. Dair's semi-transparent fabric is both fragile, with methodically burnt holes³ and carefully incised safety pins that hold the folds of her fabric/body together, and yet seemingly durable and industrial in its taut contortions which create a dramatic contraposto with the support of thrusting metal stabilising rods.

The work is both an inscribed surface and internal landscape with each one inflected in the other, existing in a volatile relationship that is both skin and body, vessel and soul. The stretched, suspended skin is a kind of crucified, gravitational landscape, representing the physical penalty one pays for existing tangibly within a contained vessel. In a state of disembodiment, *The patient. The doctor. The host. The vessel.* elicits a subtle violence through the artist's burning of the fabric as both an act of care (removing the disease) and an act of resentment for how the disease has affected her life. As the material stretches and contracts, a tension is held within the fabric which negotiates a state of being between health and illness, and calls into question the ambiguity and subjectivity of a 'healthy body'.

Dipping its toe into the boundless allures of both skin and materiality, this exhibition reveals skin as productive and provocative in its ambiguity, evading clear definition. Visible, sensitive, impressed, and profound, our skin travels with us and mediates our very existence. *Lotion* seeks to question the very nature of our matter and our relationship with both the physical and psychological. This exhibition calls for us to slather on sticky and slippery notions, to lull in the strange and unsettled, and to be tender and empathetic as we journey through this weird and wonderful world.

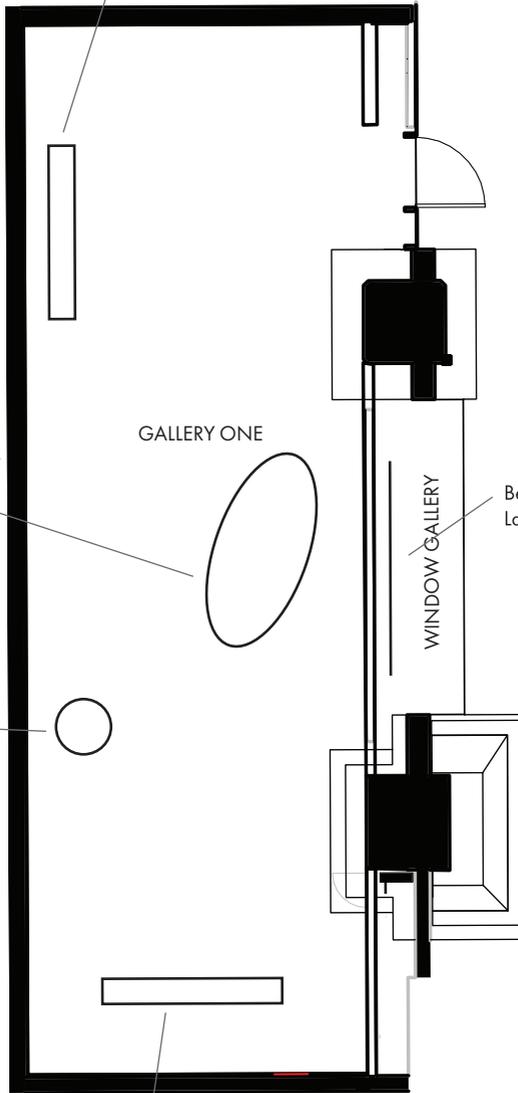
³ These burnt holes reference the removal of endometriosis through electrocauterization: in which electrical currents, via metal clamps, burn away the skin to isolate affected areas. As the skin burns it coils up and seals the blood vessels, creating warped areas of seared skin.

Molly Smith, *Void*, 2021
Silk, polyester cord

Bella Deary, *Respire*, 2021.
Latex, metal fixings.

Zara Rose Dudley,
Put to Bed, 2021

Evangeline Sines, *Nailed, Stretched*, 2021
Latex, Pine, Nails Cinderblocks.



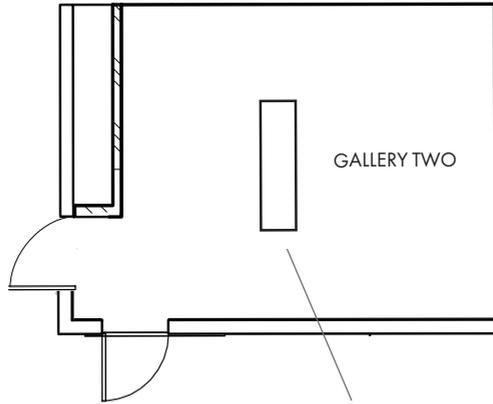
FACTORY LANE

FACTORY LANE

WINDOW GALLERY

Bella Deary, *Tender Terrain*, 2021.
Latex, metal fixings, foam.

FACTORY LANE



GALLERY TWO

Alannah Dair. *The Patient. The doctor.*
The host. The vessel, 2021
Flesh coloured lycra, metal hooks,
safety pins, metal poles, metal clamps,
steel wire, LED light source

FACTORY LANE

Metro Arts

Jo Thomas
Creative Director + CEO

Kyle Weise
Curator (Exhibition Program)

metroarts.com.au

97 Boundary Street, West End, Brisbane Qld 4000
(07) 3002 7100
info@metroarts.com.au

Metro Arts and the artist acknowledge the Jagera and Turrbal peoples, as the custodians of this land, recognising their connection to land, waters and community. We honour the story-telling and art-making at the heart of First Nations' cultures, and the enrichment it gives to the lives of all Australians.



**Queensland
Government**

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