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COMPLEXION: SKIN, SURFACE AND DEPTH IN CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I explore the skin as material, medium and metaphor in contemporary art. The skin is a supple semi-permeable membrane that maintains the integrity of the body, providing a boundary for the body, and serves as the medium of passage or interchange between the body and its environment. It is the body's most visible surface, a sensitive signifier, within which the body's sensory faculties are embedded, and the organ that offers the body the touch sense in particular. I look to skin as zeitgeist, and locate the significance of skin in metaphors of abject frailty and hardened impenetrability, which emerges from contemporary crises of identity, boundary and limit as conditions of a post-modern, globalised culture. I show how these crises have emerged through modes of medical, scientific and artistic practices that have attempted to order, categorise and delimit the body, privileging visuality and rationality in particular. In this process the skin has been 'separated' from the body, both physically in the act of medical dissection and metaphorically in the separation between skin and psyche. I look to associated, and deeply relational, concepts of surface and depth (the abject); opticality and tactility (the haptic); intimacy and distance (scale) to explore both how the skin has come to be framed through fragmenting and abstracting modes of knowledge, and the possibility of a phenomenological approach, which argues for an embodied engagement with, and knowledge of, the skin. I consider the work of two woman artists, Jeanne Silverthorne and Penny Siopis, who create 'actual skins' and evoke metaphors of skin in their respective oeuvres. In considering how my own body of work explores the notion of skin, I provide a critical framework for the reception of the body of work submitted for this degree.

DECLARATION:

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

Amy Watson

31st day of, March , 2010

For Beth Watson

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INTRODUCTION

Skin is both substance and signifier; at once organ and envelope, a protective container that houses the body and serves as its most visible surface. The skin is the body's largest organ, affording it shape and cohesion. As the site where the sense organs are inserted and connected, it is also the surface through which the body makes contact with and mediates the world, relaying stimuli and impulses both from within and without. While separating that which constitutes the body and that which does not, skin is also the very site at which we encounter and communicate with others and our environment. It is the 'performative'[1] surface by which we come to know and recognise ourselves, and through which, we are identified by others. Skin serves as the symbolic interface between self and world, the materialisation and site of meaning at which cultural identity is both formed and assigned.

Physically, the skin functions as a semi-permeable, protective and eliminative membrane that selectively absorbs and expels fluid and oxygen both into, and out of, the body. The skin ensures the body's essential liquid insides are safely contained, regulating the body's temperature via perspiration, while defending the body from harmful pathogens. As the body's first line of defence, skin is vital to the immune system. Mirroring its biological function of protecting the body from harmful bacteria and germs, skin has also acquired the metaphorical responsibility of safeguarding and sheltering the psyche. Skin houses nerve endings that animate the body's experience of the world providing the body with the sense of touch, allowing the body a felt interaction with its environment. While the skin affords the body physical sensation, it is also the site at which emotion, or *feelings*, may manifest. The skin, in serving as the medium of connection and communication, selectively reveals states of mind and body to the world, mediating some of the body's most significant interactions, 'mirroring' the state of the entire body; exposing youth, beauty, power, health, disease, joy, fear, weariness, embarrassment, affliction, and time spent in the sun. It appears, then, that the skin is everything, and yet, until recently, the skin has been 'invisible' as a subject in and of itself in cultural and aesthetic theory.

[1] By this I mean identity and subjectivity, which are both inhabited and enacted on and through the skin.

Recently, a number of cultural, visual theorists have engaged the lexicon of the skin in book length monographs: most notably, Claudia Benthien's *Skin: On the Cultural Border between Self and the World* (2002); and Steven Connor's *The Book of Skin* (2004). Similarly, in popular culture the skin is becoming visible:

> Everywhere, the skin, normally as little apparent as the page upon which is displayed the words we read, is becoming visible on its own account; not only in the obsessive display of its surfaces and forms in cinema and photography, in the massive efforts to control and manipulate its appearance by means of cosmetics and plastic surgery, and the extraordinary investment in the skin in practices and representations associated with fetishism and sadomasochism, but also in the anxious concern with the abject frailty and vulnerability of the skin and the destructive rage against it exercised in violent fantasies and representations of all kinds. (Connor 2004: 9)

The enormous investment and current obsession with skin is illustrated in the unprecedented sums of money spent in the United States and Europe on branding, piercing, tattooing, plastic surgery and anti-aging skin products. This is equalled only by the incredible rise in the number of incidents of skin disease, and the increased pathologisation of these diseases (Benthien 2002).

Both Benthien and Connor ascribe the huge investment in skin - manifest in the desire for smooth, perfect skin on the one hand, and the desire to mark and rupture the skin surface on the other - to a growing fetishisation of the surface in contemporary society. Late modernity has given rise to anxieties about identity, social status, as well as concerns regarding the future. Townsend suggests the body and its surface as increasingly the site of "trauma beyond limit", which Hal Foster ascribes to the dissolution of the body and to the apparent breakdown of modern Western society; increasing despair regarding invasive and auto-immune disease, systemic poverty, fear of crime and terrorism, and growing mistrust in the democratic welfare state. (Townsend 1998:8). This is increasingly played out on the body's surface, a surface behind which - through the adoption of bodily regimes - the individual is able to retreat into the prescribed cultural shell of the self (Prescott-Steed 2008). Such shells offer the individual "convenient guidelines, 'identities', and a feeling of security in a world that would otherwise appear to be a mass of 'humming and buzzing confusion'" (Bramann cited in Prescott-Steed 2008: 126). This metaphor of the skin as a protective shield is a prevalent and pervasive cultural metaphor of protecting individual identity, as "we all search for second skins when we feel that either our physical or mental boundaries require reinforcement" (La France 2009: 20). The skin is associated with protection and encasement, and yet, as the body's visible surface, it is also

something from which we cannot hide, always exposing the body to another's (and our own) gaze (Cataldi 1993).

This thesis explores skin as material, medium and metaphor as manifest in contemporary art practice. In doing this I look to skin's materiality as both a boundary and a semi-permeable membrane that divides the inside from the outside, that which maintains the integrity of the body, the body's most visible surface and the site where the touch sense is located. I consider skin in its role as an interface or medium upon which the inner world and outer world manifest themselves, the role of the skin as a medium of passage[2], interchange, and the vehicle in which our other senses are embedded. The skin, in its materiality and metaphorical significance, is always in the process of becoming rather than the bearer of a static and stable meaning. Meaning is ascribed to the skin, and the skin is further open to being read and interpreted; there are as many interpretations of skin as there are skins. These readings produce the legible skin in decisive and determinate ways. I examine the convergence of specific developments in medical, scientific and aesthetic discourses and their associated technologies of seeing in constituting the skin, and illustrate how the skin ultimately exceeds this framing. I question the predominance of modes of knowledge that these developments have brought about, and in doing so, point to their limitations in that they render the skin abstract and disembodied.

Through an exploration of the work of two contemporary artists, as well as my own art production, I consider the concept of embodiment (both lived and imagined), and the possibility of using a phenomenological approach to provide access to the lived and felt skin. In doing this I think not only *about* the skin, but also "*with* and *through* the skin" (Ahmed and Stacey 2001:1). This phenomenological approach - adopted by many feminists - provides and legitimates the knowledge of inhabiting a skin (Ahmed and Stacey 2001; Gallop 1988). As thinking about the body is necessarily thinking *by means* of the body (Johnson 1987). I propose that knowledge of the skin can only come about through the experience of inhabiting a skin, and so question the modern Western privileging of the cognitive and the visual over the bodily as the ultimate source of knowledge. For although, as the body's surface, the skin is predominantly engaged through visual registers - despite the fact that it is a feeling organ - it is only by attending to and incorporating all of the senses that we can have a more comprehensive knowledge of our embodiment, and so of the skin.

[2] The skin is the medium of passage for oxygen and carbon monoxide, and is responsible for discarding waste and toxins from the body through its pores.

In attending to the skin through this embodied approach, I highlight a number of cultural and theoretical issues and ambiguities surrounding the skin, both in its materiality as well as in its visuality. These include the associated, and deeply relational, ideas of surface and depth (the abject); opticality and tactility (the haptic); and intimacy and distance (scale). The tension between surface and depth engages the conflicting ideas within contemporary society of knowledge as hidden beneath - the idea of the 'hidden truth' as illustrated in the model of dissection - and as residing on top - knowledge obtained from surfaces. This tension touches on questions of the skin as both boundary and a site of abjection - i.e. the site where the limits of the self are unstable and the associated obsessions with the skin, which such concerns of self-dissolution give rise to. Opticality and tactility are two different modes of enquiry - one based on the visual, the other on touch. The visual has been progressively privileged over touch through the modern era. The skin, the site of our sense of touch, and the knowledge that it affords us, has therefore been seen as secondary to the knowledge gained from our sense of sight. Through the concept of the haptic I am concerned with establishing a conversation between the sense of sight and touch, destabilising the dialectic between the two, connecting looking and touching in theoretical and artistic terms. Following which I explore the technologies and power of scale, both intimate and distant views, in order to contest the primacy that the visual has been afforded. By taking views, at the scale of the body, out of all proportion I question the assumptions; 'seeing is believing' and 'the camera never lies', and highlight the vital role the skin plays as a reference point in mediating embodied encounters.

Artists have long engaged the skin and are in the process of opening up new spaces for thinking about our relationship with skin. Part of skin's allure for artists is that it is always latent - present but elusive. Skin is productive and provocative in its ambiguity, evading clear definition. I look to various artists who have engaged the skin and employed it as both subject and material for their practice, thus pushing the productive and creative possibilities of thinking *with* and *through* the skin.

In the title of this thesis, I use the term, *complexion,* which, in its current usage, refers to the tone and texture of a person's skin, usually the skin of the face (Oxford English Dictionary, Eleventh Edition, 2006). This might seem to imply a superficial connection between a person and their skin, for tone and texture are merely the condition of the body's exterior, only as meaningful as the colour of the hair or the shape of the face. However, the term originates in humoral theory,

which guided medical practice in the medieval period, where it was used to refer to the combination of the four bodily humours thought to control the temperament and constitution of the body, as made evident on the skin. This quality of the skin, as revealing the inner states of the body's mental and physical wellbeing, has been recognised throughout history: in the marks and surfacings on the skin that betray the psyche and expose the state of health of the inner body and the effects of passing time. The skin 'remembers' and records the body's personal biography, even if illegibly and inaccurately. As such, the term complexion, speaks to the skin as both surface and depth, proving a valuable marker in considering not only the history of the skin, but its current significance.

Outline of Chapters

In chapter one, through a survey of representations of the body, located in Western Enlightenment history, I demonstrate how the skin is implicated in contemporary cultural tropes of surface and depth - how identity and 'truth' simultaneously reside on the body's visible surface and are hidden or protected beneath the skin's surface. Exploring surface and depth is a dominant and pervasive way of acquiring knowledge and is used as a framework for knowledge production in historical, medical, scientific, aesthetic and cultural discourses. The skin is the site around which this mode of acquiring knowledge emerged most poignantly - in particular, in the convergence of advancements in medical dissection and new technologies that aided looking, both of which I address in the second chapter. Significantly, and conversely, the skin is also the very site at which the model of surface and depth is most problematic and contested.

I investigate how broader cultural understandings of the body and the skin have been influenced and shaped through developments in medicine and science, and the models of enquiry that these developments have cultivated. I look to the displacement of humoral theory by anatomical dissection as an example of the shifting understanding and significance of the skin in medical practice and science. I briefly explore how visual art has paralleled these developments, in particular with the *écorché* and depictions of the flayed body, which were born out of, and in response to, anatomical dissections, both of which challenged the dual nature of the skin as surface and depth.

I demonstrate how these methodologies of knowledge production continue to permeate

contemporary understandings and knowledge of the skin. In particular, how metaphors of 'breaking open' and 'piercing' in order to reach an elusive and unknown interior, which were immanent in Enlightenment practices of medical dissection, underlie broader anxieties about the vulnerability of the psyche in the contemporary era. This 'breaking open' is entangled in anxiety around the skin's surface being ruptured, and fear of the body's dissolution. I consider the concept of abjection as a way of thinking about, and critiquing, the skin as surface and depth. In exploring the cultural tropes of surface and depth, and challenging the methodologies of knowledge production which sustain them, I open up the potential for an embodied and phenomenological account of the skin, and for a knowledge gained through the act and experience of containing, protecting and feeling the limits of the body, which I explore in more detail in the following chapter.

In chapter two I briefly discuss the historical relationship between the skin and visuality. I explore seeing in terms of a visual art history, looking at the modernist preoccupation with the optic and later the concept of the haptic as an attempt to integrate touch and visuality. I reflect on the privileging of the visual in contemporary and historical modes of knowledge production, and how sight came to be considered the noblest of senses, partly as a result of the development of technologies that aided or advanced the eye's reach. I discuss modern tools for investigation and dissemination such as microscopy, radiography and photography, which placed the skin increasingly within a visual register, allowing access to a previously unseen world just beneath the register of the naked eye, and in so doing further privileged looking and its associated technologies.

Despite this historical privileging of the visual, I argue that the visual is only ever a partial and inadequate means of comprehending the skin. At the macro and micro scales of perception, the skin figures as something abstract and entirely more intricate than mere surface. By looking at these extremes of scale, I problematise the notion that looking at the skin's visible surface allows its invisible depth - its 'truth' to be perceived. I consider how the notion 'seeing is believing' has obscured the remaining bodily senses, in particular, touch. By only seeing the skin we are deprived of a central faculty of skin: it's tactility. Touch, the very sense that skin affords the body, not only allows one to feel and experience one's environment, it allows one to feel oneself and others, to experience the edge or boundary of one's own being, and the beginning of another's. To touch requires an intimacy, a physical proximity, an immediate presence. This compromises our ability to see what is before us in its entirety, yet simultaneously provides a new kind of

knowledge. I explore the concept of the haptic as a way of thinking through the separation between object and viewer, whilst highlighting the significance of the embodied experience, which offers a kind of counter-point between visuality and tactility. By challenging the primacy of the visual, initially through exploring the possibilities of scale and then by exploring the relationship between skin and touch in contemporary art, I suggest the possibility of an embodied and phenomenological knowledge of the skin. This provides a backdrop for the reading of two contemporary artists' work in the third chapter.

In chapter three, I consider the work of two women artists - New York based Jeanne Silverthorne and South African artist Penny Siopis - who explore skin in their work, as material, medium and metaphor. I examine Silverthorne and Siopis' practice, identifying theoretical and material connections between their works and their broader engagement with skin. Through the filter of the conceptual and physical implications of skin outlined in the previous two chapters, I look at the materiality of their works, the tools that aid their looking and the tactile nature of their work. It is within the work of these two artists that I further explore the concepts of abjection, scale and the haptic, touched on in the previous chapters.

Both artists employ materials that are suggestive of the different qualities of the skin, and use these associative materials to create new skins. Silverthorne's media is rubber latex, which shares qualities with the skin in its elasticity, texture and its ability to conduct heat. The works I consider by Siopis are constructed with layers of oil paint[3], which dry and age in a manner similar to skin. In Siopis' painted works, the surface dries, and often cracks, whilst the layers beneath remain wet and fluid. Both artists create surfaces that assert object-hood by projecting beyond the two-dimensional, and so encourage the viewer to consider their work not only through the visual sense, but evoking the desire to touch.

Silverthorne creates sculptural low-reliefs based on magnified views of the interior body, which project beyond the boundary or edge of the work. Through her careful sense of scale, using the electron microscope and magnifying glass, Silverthorne challenges the viewer's recognition of the body, the hidden laboured process of the construction of her works, and the connection between the visual and knowledge production. I explore notions of interconnectivity, scale, and intimacy and distance in Silverthorne's work.

[3] This is not to say that Siopis works solely in oil paint, in fact, in the *Shame* series (2002-) Siopis works in oil, craft and watercolour paints as well as stamp inks. And in Siopis' most recent works, the exhibition *Paintings* (2009), she works predominantly in ink and glue.

In the work of Siopis, I investigate a key early work in the artist's oeuvre as well as a work from the *Pinky Pinky* Series (2000-2004). Siopis explores the possibilities of paint as materially embodied surface, as flesh, wound and scar. I consider themes of surface and depth, sight and touch and the notions of the abject and haptic in my analysis of her work.

I suggest that these two artists' respective contexts influence the ways in which they engage the skin and the body. In her use of the electron microscope, Silverthorne ultimately considers the body from the inside out, whilst Siopis largely considers the skin from the outside in, a perspective that is reinforced by the way in which she builds up a dense impenetrable surface in her painted works. For Silverthorne it appears that the skin is the site of labour, and while it serves to protect, it threatens to suffocate, even deaden, the body it contains. For Siopis the skin is liminal, an unyielding and impenetrable site of trauma and abjection, where history and experience have left wounds and scars, an allusion to South Africa's recent violent and racist history.

In chapter four, I consider my own practice in light of the theoretical and critical discussions of the previous chapters, here I point to a tension animating my own practice between the desire to create a new skin and the desire to escape the skin completely. Through my paintings I explore paint as a physical and elusive surface. Initially an uncharted exploration of surfaces, my paintings have developed in an attempt to forge a new skin, through the materiality of the paint and the conceptual underpinnings of the works. I understand my painted works as verging on legibility, exhibiting a tension between the materiality of the paint deployed and the potential scene depicted. By foregrounding the process of creating the works, I point to the constructedness of the works, which themselves are positioned between figuration and abstraction. Through creating this tension I hope to allow my paintings to operate as skin – to be liminal, shifting, and to resist closure. In drawing attention to the materiality of the painting I appeal not only to the viewer's touch sense but also highlight the process of painting, thereby exposing the material and embodied nature of the process of their construction.

In my photographic work I explore the possibility of escaping the skin, through an investigation of the extremes and edges of the skin, with death as the ultimate escape of the skin. I show how shifting scales of perception and one's vantage point allow for new or varied 'truths' to emerge. This process has included imaging my own body tissue (both dead and living) through the electron microscope and imaging myself using aerial photography, the latter being part of an ongoing project of imaging bodies in a specific park in Johannesburg. I am concerned with how far into and away from my skin I can look, and how, at both extremes of scale, the skin slips into abstraction, where views appear both cellular and topographical. In shifting scales of perception, through the use of the electron microscope and the camera I offer a means of challenging the supremacy of the visual, where by visuality is questioned by its very tools. In exploring these extremes, I point to the instability of the photograph, and the lenses that aid this looking, as an objective record. Like the skin, the photograph operates as the surface on which things come to figure, both in material form and through metaphorical association. I point to the photograph's partial, fragmentary nature, as something which - like the skin - is subject to being read, reread and misread. Following this I demonstrate the relationship between my two chosen media and consider where the two bodies of work intersect; and discuss the significance of employing these different media - with their associated materiality and processes - for my exploration of the skin.

Finally, I consider how the skin locates and mediates my body's encounters with the world. I look at how, in doing this, the skin implicates and exposes me, encouraging the interconnected desire - evidenced in my practice - to create a new skin and also to shed or escape the skin.

CHAPTER ONE: SURFACE AND DEPTH

The skin, as both visible mediating membrane and container for the body, is a site at which ideas of surface and depth intersect and emerge. It is also the site at which surface and depth are most contested. Since ancient Greek and Roman times, an ambiguity has existed about skin, for it appears to have a dual nature, not only giving form and coherence to the body, and so operating as a marker of identity, but simultaneously existing outside of and separate from the body (Connor 2004). The notion of the skin as entirety, as the container we rely on to hold the body and hide the 'self', appears to exist side-by-side with understandings of the skin as inseparable from, and even constitutive of, both the body and the 'self'. On the one hand, the skin protects and contains the body. Here, the 'self' is considered to be hidden beneath the skin. The skin becomes a place of retreat. When we feel uncontained and under threat, both physically and psychologically, we are made aware of the skin as boundary between the self and the world, and act upon and tend[4] to this boundary in order to reinforce it. On the other hand, skin can be considered to contain one's identity and therefore expose or reveal the self. In this way the skin is the bearer of meaning and the site of inscriptions that come to shape and forge the self. In both of these conceptions the materiality of the skin is rendered peripheral; the skin in hiding the self is seen merely as the cover for the real which lies beneath the surface, as the site of self and as a reflecting and mediating surface, it is the reflections and projections on the surface that are seen and not the material of skin itself.

This problematisation of surface and depth as manifest in the body, and the role of the skin within this dialectic, has emerged primarily through scientific and medical models of inquiry as directed at the body. Humoral theory, the predominant mode of medical inquiry in the Classical and Medieval eras, was based on the idea that the skin reveals the inner workings of the body on its surface: in its colour, temperature and its secretion of fluids. This required a detailed reading and interpretation of the surface to reveal the inner harmony or discord of the body. However, the development of anatomical dissection in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, often performed as public spectacles, opened up the body for investigation, and instilled the premise that "to know the body is to attain its interior and open it up to vision," (Lyu 2005: 308). This intersected with a broader paradigm of examining the body as a proxy for examining the

[4] In tending to the skin we pay attention to, even apply ourselves to, altering and caring for the skin's surface. This can take the shape of practices of hair removal, tanning, piercing, tattooing, and in extreme cases intentional wounding of the skin.

soul - the basis for the aphorism 'know thyself'.[5] These two modes of inquiry, humoral theory and anatomical dissection, imply two competing structures of knowledge: one that moves along the surface: "in a horizontal path of circular tour, detour, and contour" (Lyu 2005: 317), and one that cuts or breaks through surfaces to reach the depth below.

Humoral Theory

Humoral theory allowed, initially, Greek and Roman physicians, and later, Islamic and medieval physicians, to diagnose and categorise disease, human characteristics and dispositions, based on markings and wounds on the skin. The skin was thought to reveal the inner workings of the body on its surface, and as such served both a "functional and symptomatic role" (Connor 2004: 21). Its 'surfacings' were seen as the result of inner (dis)equilibrium. For humoral theory, an individual's physiological make-up and health was thought to be constituted by the ratio maintained within the individual by the four humours or vital fluids (i.e. black bile, phlegm, blood and yellow bile), and the balance of the qualities of heat and cold, dryness and moistness that they connoted. For example, women were thought to be cold and moist, and men were thought to be hot and dry. Within these categories, (hot, cold, dry, moist etc.), individuals could be choleric, phlegmatic, melancholy or sanguine (Connor 2004). Humoral theory understood skin as a membrane for the exchange of fluids, and argued that any disequilibrium in the humours could be resolved by allowing the passage of elements into or out of the body through the skin (Elkins 1999; Connor 2004). The central tenet of humoral theory was the diagnosis of body through the revelation upon the skin of something out of equilibrium within the body, for example, in the form of bruises, warts and rashes. The skin was therefore seen as the surface upon which diseases within the body appeared. It therefore played an important function in early Western medicine, which was based on humoral theory. The physician examined the skin to diagnose ailments and affliction, which could be treated through restoring the balance of the individual's vital inner fluids (Connor 2004).

While the skin was seen as a symptomatic organ in early Western medical practice, (i.e. the symptoms of internal wellbeing were displayed on the 'screen' of the skin), it was also seen as a therapeutic organ; a filter through which the balance of the four humours could be controlled.

[5] The Greek dictum, 'know thyself' has been understood as knowing the self not only in a physical sense, knowing one's strengths, desires and relying on one's own judgment, but also as knowing the higher or true 'self', the soul. (http://www.theosophy-nw.org/theosnw/world/med/me-elo.htm, accessed 31 January 2010). 'Know thyself' takes on a moralising tone in the context of imprisonment and slavery, where it can be understood as 'examine the self', i.e reflect upon what you have done.

Physicians were less concerned about distinguishing between normal and pathological excretions, than they were about maintaining the ratio of humours. Medical intervention cleared a path through the skin to the hidden (and largely mysterious) interior. Thus, the skin was not only the visible exterior of the body, it was the reflection of inner identity, the visible surface of an 'invisible' interior, a container and mirror of the 'invisible' soul (Connor 2004). Humoral theory remained the dominant understanding of medicine and health through the middle ages, and the cultural imagination of the skin as interlocutor between body and world endured throughout this period (Benthien 2002).

Anatomical Dissection and The Flayed Body

The perpetuation of humoral theory can be explained by its position as part of a broader system of knowledge and cultural understandings of the world that predominated in the classical and medieval eras, in which bodies were considered to be interconnected, a microcosm of the cosmos, with the skin as the membrane that allowed passage between them (Benthien 2002). This broader system was maintained by, and also framed, medical, social, political and religious discourses. In particular, the system's emphasis on the body in the medieval period was reflected in the Christian taboo around breaking and cutting the surface of the body. This was due, in part, to the Christian belief that required the corpse to be whole in order for its resurrection to take place (Connor 2004). There were violations of this taboo: for instance, anatomical dissections of the body were common at the University in Alexandria in the third century[6]. However, it was only in the Enlightenment era that this taboo was significantly challenged by developments in anatomical dissection.

Modern medical conceptions of the body and the establishment of anatomy as a systematic science from the fourteenth century were primarily developed through the anatomical dissections performed by the Belgian physician, Andreas Vesalius. Developments in anatomy, and its correlates in visual art in the form of the *écorché* and the depiction of the flayed body, marked a distinct shift from humoral theory's understanding of the skin as the mediator for the health and disease of the body. Anatomy regarded the skin as merely the cover or container for the real interest: the organs and fluids of the body beneath (Elkins 1999). In 1543 Vesalius published *De Humani Corpus Fabrica* (*On the Fabric of the Human Body*), which was widely

[6] In Rome in the classical era, Aelius Galen developed a very basic understanding of anatomy, which was to form the basis of understandings of the internal anatomy of the body until the fourteenth century, but, unlike later anatomical practice, his understanding was based on examining battle-wounds and dissecting the bodies of animals.

regarded as the seminal text of modern anatomy (Connor 2004; Benthien 2002). Vesalius was the first anatomist to conduct dissections on human bodies himself, and, in so doing, began the scientific method of the observation and classification of the interior of the body[7]. Significantly for skin, Vesalius recognised that the skin has layers, veins and its own nervous system, and must therefore be able to feel. Until this time it was popularly thought that the skin was not capable of feeling and that the sense of touch was a faculty of the flesh, immediately beneath the skin. The processes of scientific inquiry made the skin knowable and finite, assigning the skin qualities of thickness and porousness. However, Vesalius gave little further attention to the skin, for he was interested primarily in the bone, muscle and vein structures of the body. Yet Vesalius' recognition of the skin's functions, and particularly its role in the sense of touch, was important in locating the skin within a new system of knowledge of the body (Benthien 2002).

Although the medieval Christian taboo around the integrity of the body partly sustained the salience of humoral theory, it was thought acceptable to violate this taboo in the case of the bodies of executed criminals; dissection of these bodies was considered simply as an additional debasement (of an already debased) body (Kemp and Wallace, 2000). An example of this is evident in Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, (1632), (Fig. 1), in which the body being dissected is that of the executed criminal, Aris Kindt. However, this practice was not common, for although, for example, dissection was permitted in Amsterdam, the Guild of Surgeons were only authorised one dissection a year, using the body of an executed criminal. Destroying the integrity of a corpse - of any corpse, even that of criminal - was seen as a 'disgrace', and Vesalius himself was apparently sentenced to death by the Pope for his dissection of cadavers, (although this was never carried out, and the fact itself has been subsequently contested). So dissection largely remained a clandestine activity, relying on gangs of grave-robbers, (resurrectionists), to ensure a supply of cadavers by robbing recent graves, at times even opting to murder the homeless and the outcast within the city (Wallace and Kemp, 2000).

This taboo around breaking the surface of the body, as noted above, was partly due to concerns for the individual in the afterlife. It had its origins in the ancient Egyptian belief that the skin was

[7] This is not to say that Vesalius was the first to dissect a human body, there were human dissections taking place prior to his, although mostly in secret. However, Vesalius was the first to dissect a human himself rather than having the body prepared for him by another, and, most significantly, he performed dissections for his students, using this method as a primary teaching tool. Prior to this, most teaching had taken place through referencing medical illustrations of dissections, particularly Galen's anatomical handbook, written 400 years earlier. However, due to the fact that Galen's dissection work had been carried out on animals, most of his human anatomy was guess-work, and so was discredited by Vesalius.

literally, a container of the soul in the afterlife, evidenced in rituals of embalming and mummification. The skin represented the fantasy of the continuation of life, despite the reality that, separated from body, the skin could only mark death (Anzieu 1989). This symbolic survival of the self in the skin removed from the body, provides a parallel to the religious belief in resurrection after death (Kay 2006). For this reason, the apparent lack of attention paid to the skin by practitioners of dissection in fact may suggest a recoiling from the identifiable individual (Benthien 2002: 23).

This concern can still be seen today in many medical students' first reactions to dissection. Jablonski (2006) describes the trepidation with which her students approach the task of dissecting a cadaver; partly the hesitation, fear and simple dread of touching a dead body, something new and unfamiliar. But much of their reluctance also stems from a fear of "trespassing a boundary". The integrous skin of the corpse, and particularly the facial skin, is a reminder of a 'real' person, very much like the person performing the dissection. However, as the skin is removed, Jablonski describes how the dissectors' reserve gradually disappears: "although the body was no deader without skin, the partially flayed cadaver lacked the covering that the students associated with dynamic personhood" (Jablonski 2006:4). Similarly, it might have been necessary for those carrying out early medical dissections to remove the skin, allowing them to psychologically deal with the horror of the cadaver before them.

In the Enlightenment period, artists were also seeking out the body beneath the surface (Kemp and Wallace 2000). But it was no coincidence that these developments in medicine, science and philosophy took place at a time when artists were also imagining and imaging the body in new and different ways. Artists were often employed to do anatomical drawings for medical practitioners, and used the advances in science to develop greater knowledge for their own figurings of the nude body and the *écorché*. *Ecorché* is a French term meaning flayed; the *écorché* was the body stripped of the skin, (drawn, sculpted or painted), to accurately portray the 'real' body, the internal muscle and tissue structure beneath. Anatomically accurate drawings, depicting how the body functioned together as a machine, illustrated the convergence of anatomists' and artists' interests. It was conventionally held that the 'real' body was that which was behind the skin.

In anatomical illustrations from the sixteenth century, the subjects were often depicted as active participants in their own dissection (Fig. 2). The representation of such 'self-dissection' implied

that the body ‘offering’ itself up for dissection was both alive and an active participant in the event, that "the body desires its own dissection” (Benthien 1999: 64). This suggested that the process of dissection was a ‘natural’ one, normalising this penetrative mode of gaining knowledge. These images depicted the figure holding up its own skin, (Fig. 3), thereby exposing its muscular system, digestive tract or reproductive organs. These depictions of bodies as alive and consenting to this violent intrusion and horrific overexposure are uncanny - for such bodies in reality would either be dead or in excruciating pain. Sawday argues that the suggestion of anatomical auto-dissection was based on Calvinist doctrine, which encouraged believers to continually examine themselves and expose themselves to God (Sawday in Benthien 1999). Thus, the preoccupation with the *écorché* during this period also suggests broader social, religious and psychological attempts to uncover ‘truth’ through metaphorically uncovering the body.

These developments coincided with the regularisation and organisation of flaying as a form of torture in the late medieval era. Flaying saw the body literally defaced, as skin was stripped away; this rendered the body unrecognisable to the victim and onlookers alike, thus reducing it to a carcass, with all trace or marker of the individual obliterated. Flaying was considered the worst form of debasement and torture, precisely because it tore the ‘identity’ away, leaving the body and its identity scattered and misplaced, perhaps in the hope that the criminal’s body may never be whole again, or afforded recognition in the afterlife - that it might have a ‘double death’ of sorts.

Just as anatomical dissections were performed publicly in auditoriums, flaying was often a public spectacle, though for different reasons. Flaying became a popular theme in the visual arts, in particular in depictions of the Greek myth of Marsyas the Satyr, (Fig. 4 and 5). After losing his challenge to the god Apollo in a musical duel, Marsyas is flayed and screams out, “Why do you rip me from myself?” (Elkins 1999: 43). Here the skin represents the whole body as being the place of identity, the self. Yet at the same time, the skin is not Marsyas, for his body still screams out (*Ibid*). The fascination with the flayed skin emerges from this paradoxical and ambiguous life.

Works of art and illustrations that depict dissection and flaying served to normalise the exposed body, making anatomical knowledge of the body pictorial, and ushering a dominant mode of medical and scientific knowledge into the cultural realm (Benthien 2002). In this way, artists were implicated in the constitution of a new mode of looking at the body, one that was not only

didactic, but separated the body into distinct constituent parts. Benthien equates this new mode of looking with what she refers to as the “horror of excessive exposure”, such a horror could only be deflected by incorporating these images into a lexicon of Christian imagery (Benthien, 2002: 63).

For Renaissance thinkers the flaying of the body was an initiatory experience located very much within a lexicon of Christian imagery. The skin was the site of possible renewal in reassumption. While paintings of Marsyas depict torture and death, they could also be understood to depict liberation from the skin’s surface, signifying both the loss and possible retrieval of the self. Connor suggests that flaying is accompanied by the notion of a possible re-assumption, either of the original skin that has been removed - through a process of healing - or of a new skin. Connor (2004) suggests that: “nothing is deader than a skin, peeled, shucked, sloughed […] and yet skins are often imagined as containing or preserving life and therefore having the power to restore it” (p.31). Marsyas’ flayed skin is rendered a dead hide, yet also holds the possibility for his renewal. Marsyas’ cry “why do you rip me from myself?” reminds of the ambiguity of skin – it speaks of the skin as that which contains the body, giving it form and identity, as well as of the possibility of a self, an identity, that transcends the skin. Marsyas’ cry highlights the fact that the skin offers the self-identity on a recognisable surface. This surface contains registers of race, gender and class, as well as inscriptions that speak of our past and the environments that have shaped our identity. This illustrates not only how inextricable the skin is from the body, but also how conceptions of self are intertwined with the liminality of surface. The ‘self’ does not reside on this surface, however, it is only *through* this surface that one possesses a ‘self’.

The figure of the flayed body was of particular fascination for Georges Bataille (1989), for whom there was a close association between extreme pain and pleasure, often eroticised pleasure. For Bataille this state was described as the ecstatic, where one is transported through intense pain or pleasure to a state of ecstasy.

> [T]he identity of these perfect contraries, divine ecstasy and its opposite, extreme horror. Religion in its entirety was founded upon sacrifice. But only an interminable detour allows us to reach the instant where the contraries seem visibly conjoined, where the religious horror disclosed in sacrifice becomes linked to the abyss of eroticism, to the last shuddering tears that eroticism alone can illuminate. (Bataille 1989: 205)

The ecstatic is a state of heightened emotional rapture, "the state of being 'beside oneself', thrown into a frenzy or stupor, with anxiety, astonishment, fear or passion," (Oxford English Dictionary, Eleventh edition, 2006). Both pain and pleasure are transcendental[8], having the capacity to take the self 'outside of itself'. This has been closely associated with religious sacredness - through extreme pain the soul transcends the body, and the boundary of the skin, becoming closer to God. The root of the word 'sacrifice' is 'the sacred'. In a context of sacrifice, pain is particularly associated with the ecstatic, and suffering is for a cause that lies beyond oneself. Experiencing immense pain for another, (usually the belief in God), literally takes the saint or martyr 'outside of himself' in ecstasy (Sullivan 2004).

So the fascination with flaying can be seen as freeing the soul from the body in the removal of the skin, potentially bringing the soul closer to God. The idea that God can be reached only through transcending the flesh explains practices of self-flagellation among some devoted Christians. It is also the idea behind the phrase "pleasures of the flesh", where flesh is represented as earthly-bound and as that which keeps man and God apart. In this instance, the skin is the site of both extreme erotic pleasure and pain, precisely because it figures as a boundary for transgression or transcendence. These boundaries can include both those associated with notions of taboo, as well as the literal boundary of the skin. However, some feminists have suggested that this conception of penetrative boundary transgression of the skin is based largely on masculine notions of pleasure and pain, whereas a feminine erotic could be considered one of the surface, which privileges the knowledge to be gained through embodiment and surface, particularly the touch sense.

Advances in anatomy also gave rise to more general advances in medical science during the Enlightenment era. Humoral theory strove for the balance between body and world. Humoral theory proposed a dynamic relationship between body and world where imbalances could be rectified through the skin. These included practices of leaching, bloodletting, scarifying and purging, amongst others. However, in the early seventeenth century, physicians such as Dr Tulp, developed a regime of hygiene that conceived of disease as a result of germs and bacteria entering and 'invading' the body. As a result, the body was seen as needing protection against infection from outside. So the skin was charged with protecting and insulating the body against infection and invasion, in contrast to the dynamic understanding of the body and the skin in

[8] In philosophy and theology transcendence is opposed to immanence. Where transcendence means beyond the world, immanence refers to presence in the world.

humoral theory. The inadequacy of humoral theory in understanding the spread of infection, and its emphasis on disease as a process instigated in the individual alone, sheds light on why, during epidemics of the plague and syphilis, doctors did not keep people apart from each other (Bohme in Benthien 2002). Later, the skin as membrane or filter became a site of anxiety about possible penetration and infection by disease (Benthien 2002). This shift profoundly influenced popular perceptions of the body in Western culture (Benthien 2002). Whereas before, disease was seen as an imbalance from within the body and manifest on the surface, in Enlightenment the skin is seen as the site of potential invasion of the external world, which threatened to introduce disease into the body (*Ibid*).

The holistic view of the body and the world of humoral theory contrasts with the model of the individuated and abstracted body striving for perfection, which emerged in the Enlightenment era. This illustrates quite clearly the different significance that the skin holds in these two historical epochs: skin as medium and interlocutor in humoral theory, and skin as the cover of the singular, individuated and internally coherent body during the Enlightenment. In the latter, ideas of truth were founded on the notion that 'seeing is believing'. This emphasis on the ocular as a means of gaining knowledge is one that remains prominent in contemporary society:

> Western thought since the Renaissance has been dominated by the fundamental notion that knowledge of what is essential means breaking through shells and walls in order to reach the core that lies in the innermost depths. (Benthien 2002: 7)

During the Enlightenment there was a profound desire to see through or into things, both literally and conceptually (Elkins 1999). Enlightenment anatomy peels away the skin to examine the inside body. The act of dissection is conceptually and methodologically about knowledge gained through “tearing apart” and “separating out” (Stafford 1992: 38). As anatomical dissection grew in stature as a subject of inquiry, the skin was gradually rendered further ‘invisible’. For Stafford, this reductive process leads inevitably to abstraction and rationality, and away from feeling (Stafford 1992). While this pervasive view of the body as individuated and compartmentalised has endured, our contemporary cultural understandings of the skin are influenced by both humoral and Enlightenment theories, resulting in conflicting understandings of the skin as necessarily both surface and depth.

Metaphors of Skin in the Contemporary

The ways in which medical and art history have considered the skin profoundly influence current cultural conceptions and metaphors of skin. This is evident in many idiomatic expressions that remain current in English, French and German usage, evoking the unresolved and ambiguous boundary of skin that is considered on the one hand separate from the body and on the other inseparable from the body. In some expressions, the skin is described as a deceptive cover or mask that does not readily disclose information. Foreign to the body, skin is seen as a boundary that protects what is inside: a perimeter fence, enclosure, or, at times, a prison cell of the self (Benthien 2002). Expressions that conceive of 'skin' in this way include, '*to get under one's skin'*; '*to jump out of one's skin'*; '*skin deep'* and '*to be thick-skinned'*. The latter describes the fragile interior of the body being protected by the skin against invasive 'looking' or insults that damage or embarrass a person. However, the skin also fails and exposes the body - embarrassment and shame are made evident on the skin through blushing. But this instinctive response also acts as "an impermeable, concealing, protective armor or mask" (Wurmser in Benthien 2002: 22). A person who is able to block out harmful looks and words can no longer be penetrated - an armoured individual (*Ibid*). In other expressions, the skin is not something 'other' than the self, but stands for the entire human being. Here, the fundamental nature of the individual does not reside beneath the skin, but rather the fate of the skin and the soul are intertwined (Benthien 2002). The skin promises wholeness and entirety, as in the expression '*to save one's skin'*, or '*to sell one's hide'* - here the self is the skin which is therefore understood as the most vital part of the body.

In the contemporary era, what may be referred to as 'the post-modern subject' is charged with the precarious act of holding both these metaphors of self in tension: being simultaneously all surface while protecting a hidden depth (Lyotard 1979). This is exacerbated by a context of amassing uncertainty about the past and future of the body in an era of mechanical and technological reproduction (Prescott-Steed 2008). This 'post-modern subject' is increasingly under threat both from without and within. Externally, new media technologies are increasingly disembodying the subject, calling into question the limits and reaches of the body. In the post-modern era:

> We contend with disembodied information […] we communicate with images of people, with 'artificial persons', existing as [...] bytes and bits of optical and aural

> messages […] flesh and blood, or tactility, recedes in the presence of mediated encounters. (Stafford 1990:26)

Internally, the body is predisposed to the proliferation of pathogens, and the possibility of harbouring, or being the host to, something alien, a social anxiety as illustrated in the film *Alien 3* (1992). Here, Ellen Ripley, played by Sigourney Weaver, discovers that there is an alien growing insider her, which threatens to rupture her skin surface. The skin, charged with keeping the body integrous and distinct, fails to contain the body, threatened from within. This further speaks to the idea of the unseen depths of the interior body as monstrous and abject, the interior body threatening its own containment. The body as implicit in its own destruction, speaks to the contemporary anxiety of diseases such as cancer, where the body's own cells mutate and divide excessively, invading adjacent organs and tissues - the body is destroyed by itself from within.

These metaphors have emerged quite strikingly in contemporary art. In *The Great Escape* (1998), (Fig. 6) British artist Marc Quinn suspended a pod-like rubber cast, which contained within it a life-size impression of the artist's naked body. In form and colour, the work resembles a banana skin, though it is also reminiscent of a cocoon, with the suggestion of some kind of metamorphosis having taken place. In this work, Quinn suggests that the skin functions as a housing for the self; a pod or encasement. Once this is removed, it reveals only the trace of the self - there is no being left, only a marker. This 'Great Escape' of the skin, of the peel, reflects a current sense of the self being 'imprisoned' in the skin - the skin and self are separate and embattled (Reilly 2008).

While Quinn's skin is the disposable peel of the body, British artist John Isaacs' *I Cannot Help the Way I Feel* (2003), (Fig. 7), suggests a body that is nothing but surface. Isaacs' morbidly obese figure is overwhelmed by flesh, so much so that the figure has no identifiable limbs other than two trunk-like legs, which are the only indicators, along with its 'skin', that allow the work to be identified as a figure at all. Isaacs' figure has lost its recognisable shape to flesh; it is a body that appears to be suffering, harbouring disease that is attacking it from within. The body proportions are grossly distorted, producing a mutant and alien figure, serving as a warning of the effects of physical and emotional overindulgence. The title of the work suggests emotions surfacing on the skin - inner sadness and self-loathing becoming manifest on the body's surface. Isaacs is perhaps further suggesting the relationship between feeling as affect and feeling as physical sensation. A figure engulfed in so much flesh would have an excessive capacity to feel both physically and emotionally. Isaacs' figure can be viewed as both microcosm and

macrocosm, from an individual as well as societal perspective: “A contemporary vision of the classical figure of Atlas who no longer carries the Globe on his shoulders, but incorporates it into his being, so as to both support and inhabit it simultaneously.”[9]

These two works expose how the tensions between surface and depth are played out in the very *materiality* of the skin, where the skin serves the body as simultaneously a protective layer and a permeable membrane. This is reflected in the unresolved cultural obsessions with exposure (beauty) on the one hand, and protection (anxiety) on the other. The intense desire in the modern world for perfect, smooth, unblemished skin is connected to the expectations of the skin to represent the individual. Women especially are encouraged to hide signs of aging and stretch marks, which bear "the shame of bodily evidence" (Ahmed and Stacey 2001:1). This is often done to reinforce a gender difference - much of contemporary culture expects women's skin to be soft, smooth and flawless: “this emphasis on the surface of the body […] invokes the familiar construction of femininity as nothing but surface: the visual construction of women as desirable objects for the male gaze” (Tyler 2001: 71). We are encouraged to read female skin as that which needs to be worked on, to be protected from time and the harsh external world, that which needs to be constantly cared for. Consumer culture has encouraged the idea of smooth perfect skin, and rouses women, (and more recently, men), to reverse markers of time and the effects of the world, to work towards this ideal of smooth, ageless, even-toned, blemish-free skin. The skin care products industry feeds on this desire for flawless skin. As long as the desire exists, there will always be a market for their products, for the desire can never be realised: active bodies will always bear testimony to their life on their skin, will be marked by time and lived experience.

Sunbathing, or tanning, is an interesting example to consider here. The act of sunbathing can be seen as the process of constructing a protective shield on the skin’s outermost layer through exposing the skin to the sun. The soft living tissue undergoes a process of change through the increased release of melanin pigment into the skin. This forms a protective layer that acts as a prophylactic against the sun. At the same time, the tanned skin is the fantasy construction of a protective second skin for the psyche (Connor 2004). This act of sun tanning and using tanning-salons, as the root of the word suggests, is a conscious ‘damaging’ of the body’s surface, where a scar is formed as the body’s response to a damage or violation of the skin. We wear sun lotion as protection to fend off harmful UVA and UVB rays, and yet, in order to be tanned - to achieve what is perceived as a ‘healthy’ and ‘beautiful’ skin - one requires that these rays penetrate the

[9] http://www.kunstaspekte.de/index.php?tid=14261&action=termin, accessed 20 July 2009.

skin. Exposing the skin to the sun also allows the skin to absorb necessary Vitamin D, which is perhaps where the notion of the tanned skin as “healthy” comes from. The skin thus acts as an aperture or filter that absorbs the necessary Vitamin D, while the melanin in the skin deflects harmful rays. Tanning is indicative of the current obsession with the skin and the maintenance of it as a smooth, shiny surface. Tanning encapsulates the tension between the desire for protection (from light, from being penetrated, from the inside self being seen) and the concurrent contradictory desire to expose a healthy body (Connor 2004). Yet the symbolism of the tanned skin has different significance in different cultural and historical contexts - while in some contexts tanned skin is indicative of the leisured lifestyle of a privileged minority, able to afford exotic holidays, in other contexts, dark, tanned skin is associated with the stigma of outdoor labour, while pale skin is associated with wealth and leisure. And of course racism reinforces the stigma associated with having skin that is considered to be ‘too dark’ - enormous sales of skin lightening products in Asia and Africa are indicative of this.

Shiny skin has an aura of impenetrability - it resists absorbing everything, reflecting light and the gaze. The sheen of shining skin reduces the body to reflected light across the skin’s surface, making it appear less human and more machine-like, creating an uninterrupted surface (Connor 2004). In the case of the body builder, this surface sheen is so articulated that it begins to suggest a biological shift from the human to the mechanical. The skin becomes an armour or shell that seems to be impenetrable and impermeable both from within and without. The male body builder exposes his defined muscle and vein structure, his inner workings, on the surface of the skin, allowing these to protrude from beneath, literally wearing his depth on his surface (Connor 2004).

The ‘model body’ is another archetypal figure of the contemporary obsession with the skin. It refers to the archetype of the altered body, the body that has been subject to and made through cosmetic or plastic surgery. It doesn’t speak of an actual body, but of the cultural icon of a modified body that strives towards an ‘ideal’, through reigning in the skin and ‘unwriting’ the skin. If “the skin is written by time” then it is a writing that is not intended, unlike the marking of a word, which is meant and decisive (Connor 2004: 90). Conversely, the concealing of this writing through cosmetic and plastic surgery, (facelifts, botox), involves the decisive re-writing, re-inscription of the skin by the subject as agent. The individual takes the body and moulds it towards the ideal of the ‘model body’: indeed the very phrase used to describe cosmetic surgery - ‘nip and tuck’ - is suggestive of the skin as a garment that can be worn and altered accordingly.

If “our bodies are the kind that are always in question, or transition, are always work in progress” (Connor 2004:30), then the figure of the 'model body' can be seen as an attempt to intervene in this process, and to keep at bay the changes that would normally expose the real individual. The body is still written, but the violent process through which the skin is cut and sutured inscribes a new story of alteration, of the insecure psyche and its attempts to ‘reverse’ its own aging.

In all three of these archetypal figures, the ‘sunbather’, the ‘body builder’, and the 'model body', the skin acts as the ‘canvas’ or ‘screen’ upon which the ego is projected. Yet there are conflicting desires at work. On the one hand, there is the desire to present the body as complete, attractive and confident, by displaying the ego on the surface. And on the other hand, there is an equally compelling desire to build a shell behind which the ego can hide, protected from the scrutinising gaze. This tension exposes the vulnerability of all three of these archetypes: the act of confidently displaying oneself is, in the same moment, an exposure of a more insecure sense of identity.

Dermographia: The Inscribed Skin

> The skin is [the site] of the most intimate of experiences and the most public marker of raced, sexed and national histories. (Ahmed and Stacey 2001: Unpaginated preface)

The medical term dermographia takes its origins from the Greek terms *derma*, skin, and *graphesis,* writing (Ahmed and Stacey 2001) meaning a form of writing on, or marking of, the skin. The skin is an effect of the inscriptions upon it. It is a material object, but even this materiality is dependent on the inscriptions that mark it in various ways. In the contemporary era, saturated by visuality, the surface of the skin is always already inscribed. Even at birth, skin is not simply a given material object, but constituted through inscriptions that mark race, sex, identity, beauty and history. Thus, the body is understood as a site of inscription, not simply a given biological truth (Betterton 1996). In order to 'see' the skin, we are drawn to the markings on the skin. We read each other, and are read through these markings. Yet these inscriptions are always necessarily incomplete, and the skin is continually subject to inscription by multiple sources.

These markings on the skin bring the surface into relief. Wounds, scars, bruises and blemishes bring it into sharp focus, and go some way towards making skin 'visible'. Scars and marks, however superficial or severe, bear testament to experience. As I illustrated earlier in this

chapter, contemporary society strives towards attaining a smooth, blemish-free skin surface, as demonstrated in the great sums of money spent on skin altering products and procedures (Benthien 2002). However, the skin will never be 'perfect' nor allow 'perfection' to be achieved, whether this is due to self-inflicted deliberate markings on its surface, accidental ruptures and bodily changes, the traces of time and experience, or through the interior body manifesting disease on its surface. One could speak of the skin as a memory device, as a personal account of the individual's life, which cannot be 'wiped clean'.

The skin can be considered a text; a palimpsest of surfacing and dissipating thoughts and past events, some of which are made permanent in the form of scars, forming an evolving 'map' of an individual's life. The skin also documents feelings, emotions and states of mind, albeit fleetingly, thus serving as "a writing surface upon which the body's thoughts are inscribed" (Elkins 1999: 46). Grosz (1994) traces the way in which the body's surface is marked from the inside, carrying the history of the inherent materiality and embodiment of the individual:

> Every body is marked by the history and specificity of its existence. It is possible to construct a biography, a history of the body, for each individual and social body. This history would include not only the contingencies that befall a body, impinging on it from the outside - a history of the accidents, illnesses, misadventures that mark the body and its functioning; such a history would also have to include the 'raw ingredients' out of which the body is produced - its internal conditions of possibility, the history of its particular tastes, predilections, movements, habits, postures, gait and comportment. (Grosz 1994: 142)

When surfaces are inscribed, they evoke both time and space: they remind of the time of the event of the mark being made, and often the place that it was made. The skin is a memory of actions that have taken place, recording a history of the individual, and of the individual recording time. Prosser (2001) suggests that, in part, our sense of the skin is captured through memory; the skin remembers, both literally in the markings on its material surface, and metaphorically in the way these markings are interpreted and come to signify race, sex, age and individual life histories. But if the skin is able to remember then it also has the capacity to forget – its recordings are often selective and temporary.

Berni Searle's *Profile* Series (2002), (Fig. 8 and 9), is a poignant example to consider here. While this series directly engages with the selective and temporary recordings on the skin, it also points to Searle's already inscribed skin, to a history that prefigures her. *Profile* shows the artist

repeatedly imaged in profile with various trace impressions of objects on, and in, her skin. Searle has adopted the format that references pseudo-scientific, ethnographic images, where subjects were often viewed in profile to 'accurately' catalogue the body and its 'difference'. Searle uses her own skin as the screen or medium on which to imprint historically loaded objects, which point to the varied origins in her own history and speak of forgotten or re-remembered histories. Although these marks are temporary, there is a sense that Searle is wounded by them. This alludes to gruesome practices of branding and slavery during colonialism. Time is implicit within these works - both the time it took to allow these objects to leave an impression on the skin, and the time it took for these marks to dissipate. The use of transparent duraclear photographic images, makes these works suggestive of the multiple layers of impressions that the skin holds, and reminds of the potential for new and varied inscriptions. *Profile* sees Searle re-inscribe history and identity on her skin, exploring both the skin's ability to hold impressions, albeit temporarily, and the skin's failings in its partial inscriptions.

Searle's *Profile* series suggests that the skin is always open to being inscribed, in a state of becoming. Through deliberately marking her skin surface, Searle attempts on the one hand to reject a given context, and on the other, to create some kind of permanence, a new context. Marking the skin can be understood as a rejection of the skin's constant flux and change and an attempt to create permanence (Salecl 2001). Searle's conscious marking of her already inscribed skin suggests that while the skin is marked, it is always yet to be marked. The violence of inscription is not simply actualised on the already marked skin surface, but on the skin as the potential bearer of meaning, as something which is not a static surface or substance but is always open to being inscribed and re-inscribed (Connor 2004). These re-inscriptions mean that skin is always in the process of becoming, that any reading of the skin is only representative of an instance. As the skin reflects and records the passing of time through accumulative marks and scars, it is also itself in the process of aging, as its cells renew less often. Markings on the skin also evoke the body's spatiality: stretch marks and excess skin remind of the skin's potential to expand and contract - as Grosz's passage quoted above suggests - and also its potential to envelope the skin of another in the figure of the pregnant body (Ahmed and Stacey 2001).

The skin's inscriptions are open to being read and, as such, (mis)interpreted. Society encourages the covering and concealment of the evidence of aging, sickness and wounds, the markers of time made apparent on the skin. These marks are testimony to private events in the

individual's life; they can often be associated with a kind of trauma, and/or carry a particular 'shame' that requires disguise through surgery or cosmetics (or simply hiding them from view). 'Shame', in that they often announce private experiences and feelings without consent or mediation. There is an inherent vulnerability when these marks are exposed to scrutiny. In considering the aging vulnerable body, John Coplans' photographic *Self Portrait* series comes to mind. Although these works are self-portraits, the viewer never encounters the face or the whole, entire body, instead Coplans offers depersonalised, cropped views of portions of his body. In choosing not to include his head, Coplans depersonalises his own body and skin, allowing these works to oscillate between the personal and the universal. Coplans images himself naked in black and white photographic works printed on a large scale. In *Self Portrait Torso* (1974), (Fig. 10), the artist's torso fills the entire frame, exposing in minute detail Coplans aged, wrinkling skin, covered with coarse, dark hair. Here the familiar becomes unfamiliar, and shares an uncanny formalistic likeness with landscape images. On this scale, it seems there is no escaping the aged, frail, abject body. The viewer is confronted with their own impending decay, and reminded that their skin is marked by time and so ultimately subject to change. Coplans' shameless, scrutinising investigation of his own body explores the body as both exquisite and doomed to decay. In exposing the relentless aging process, Coplans critiques unrealistic expectations of the body and skin, and, as Tim Etchells points out, demonstrates that "things that happen to the body, [are] things that can't be undone"(Etchells 2009: Unpaginated).

This vulnerability to exposure is particularly poignant in the social commodification of women's bodies as smooth and impenetrable. Biological processes such as childbirth, breast-feeding and associated surgeries, internal processes manifest on the surface, in addition to external social or individual inscriptions on the skin, render the skin necessarily 'imperfect'. Some evidence of traumas and pleasures are not made evident on the skin, at least not in a permanent manifestation, as such readings of the skin can be inaccurate and unreliable. The skin is also known to selectively conceal and expose one's emotions. Elkins (1999) reminds us that although the skin may expose states of being such as embarrassment and fatigue, we have little means, aside from context, to distinguish the blush of embarrassment from the initial signs of fever for example. And some illnesses are not made evident on the skin at all, meaning that they often go undiagnosed. Given that the skin selectively reveals and conceals information about the body's health and psyche, it is unreliable as a surface indicator of the body's depth.

Earlier in this chapter I addressed various markings on the skin's surface, including both the accidental and the self-inflicted wound. Below, I briefly consider tattooing as a cultural inscription on the body that, for the most part, is intended to be 'read'. Tattooing can be understood in its penetration of the skin's surface as a 'violence' enacted against the skin, and, in the material permanence of the tattoo, an attempt to claim an endurance on and through the skin. "The tattoo substitutes a surface for the actual surface of the skin, but it does so in a way that plays with the knowledge that the skin has been penetrated, since the technique of tattooing in fact requires pigment to be injected *beneath* the surface of the skin" (Connor 2004: 63). Here depth and surface merge between wounding and healing, reflecting a "secondary interiority" (*Ibid*). In other words, the tattoo is a marker of a second skin on, or just beneath, the surface of the skin; a projection of the surface onto itself. Through tattooing, the skin becomes visible, and touches itself. (*Ibid*)

Tattooing has always carried a stigma due to its association with the marking and branding of the bodies of slaves and prisoners from 500 BC onwards. These markings, while they served as signs of ownership or punishment, or to detail the offence, also served as messages to the slave or prisoner themselves. Slaves who had attempted to escape were often tattooed with the details of their crime and the letter 'E', which was thought to be a warning to "know thyself" (Connor 2004). In the nineteenth century, the French banned penal tattooing, which was followed by an increase of voluntary tattooing both amongst prisoners and free subjects, allowing an inversion of the power associated with inscribing the body (Connor 2004). Prisoners and gangs would voluntarily tattoo themselves to align themselves to a set of beliefs or a group lying outside hegemonic spheres of influence, marking the beginning of the tattoo as part of counter culture or sub-culture. The tattoo was seen to indicate a permanent commitment to these groups, and often formed part of an initiation ritual. If the tattoo was originally about impressing upon the slave or prisoner "know thyself", the voluntary tattoo is about making that claim 'thyself', a marker both outwards and inwards.

The tattoo also represents an attempt to implant permanence onto the aging, deteriorating skin, in that the tattoo marks a specific moment in time and will largely remain consistent and, in so doing, claiming permanence in a context of skin's instability, serving to resist the inevitable change that the skin and body will endure. Certain subject matters for tattoos serve to protect the skin, for instance, tattoos depicting scaled, hardened skin, mechanical machinery and inscriptions such as the crucifix can be seen as intending to protect and shield the body and by

extension the psyche. Thus the tattoo could be understood as resistance to the ever changing, aging skin, the frailty of the body and death.

Just as the body's surface can be read as a text of an individual's life, the site of the body's public and visible identity, tattooing can be seen as an attempt to inscribe ones own body with markers of identity. As deliberate inscriptions onto the body, tattoos mark portions of an individual's history and identity that the skin may not usually accommodate; such as marking events or moments in an individuals life, association or affiliation with group identities in the case of many prison and 'gang' tattoos, and desires and anxieties about ones public (or intimate) identities.

Even though we are aware of the skin's fallibility, its selective concealment and exposure, its ability to disguise illness and trauma for example, and its ability to be rewritten by the individual in a conscious attempt to disguise personal histories, we also take the skin for granted as a visual register for a range of cultural and social identifiers: age, race, sex, beauty, health, notions that are not 'true' or 'false', but which are read as some kind of truth. It also contains the 'truth' of personal history, information the skin provides whether or not one wants to share it.

The Abject

The understanding of the relationship between the ego and the skin can be traced to Sigmund Freud's development of the theory of psychoanalysis, which interestingly coincided with significant developments in dermatology. In both of these practices, the skin was understood as the sensitive expression not only of the body, but also of the mind (Connor 2004). Freud's body ego was key in giving significance to the body's surface; Freud speaks of the ego as primarily a body ego, which is a mental projection of the surface of the physical body: "the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface" (Freud 1984:364). Didier Anzieu's seminal text, *The Skin Ego,* comes out of Freud's conception of the body ego, taking the skin as the surface of the ego. Anzieu asserts that the ego is a skin ego: "a projection on the psyche of the surface of the body, namely the skin" (Anzieu 1990: 63). He argues that in early childhood development, the skin ego serves as the interface between inside and outside. For Anzieu, the skin-ego speaks of the projection of the experiences of the skin onto the ego as an important stage in the development of the ego. The skin is given a special significance in protecting the ego. As the ego is formed, the skin is charged with "a

certain kind of ego-reinforcing compromise between the ego and that which threatens to lacerate or destroy its fragile self-enclosure" (Connor 2004: 50). The skin becomes a shield behind which the psyche must hide from the excesses and impermanence of contemporary society (Connor 2004).

So, because the skin assures the body a measure of self-cohesion, there is a psychological need for some kind of certainty about the skin. Thus the obsession with maintaining and altering the superficial appearance of the body may expose a desire for "psychic integration" or "integumentation" (Connor 2004: 64). Marking the body's surface may be interpreted as an attempt at locating and fixing the skin, and therefore the self (Salecl 2001). The French performance artist, Orlan, questioned dominant beauty canons in her early to mid nineties performances, *The Reincarnation of Saint-Orlan* (1990), (Fig.11 and 12). In these performances, Orlan continuously underwent cosmetic and plastic surgery in order to alter her face to that of various 'ideals' of beauty as set out in the classical renaissance era. Orlan's performances allowed for the skin to be seen as a dress, not a 'natural' covering, but rather a worn item subject to cultural constructs. She demonstrates that the skin is not a predetermined container for the body, but is subject to practices of modification. In making the viewer complicit in her self-inflicted violence, Orlan invites us to reflect on the fragility of our skin, the beauty it affords us, and the fact that it is the skin that connects us, and is the site at which things are 'felt'.

Alongside efforts to achieve and maintain an integrous and perfectly smooth complexion there is the equally immense (though often hidden and pathologised) desire to split open the skin, to rupture and mark the smooth immaculate skin surface: in fantasies and inscriptive practices of tattooing, piercing, branding, tanning and scarification. As skin is constantly in flux, cutting or marking the skin could be seen as an attempt to create 'permanence' on the surface of the body. Renata Salecl (2001) suggests that body piercing and tattooing could be understood as a reaction against the contemporary discourse of the body as a site of continual contestation - ever-changing ideas of beauty that no one can attain. Individuals who cut their own skin can be seen as attempting to affirm the very integrity of the skin, establishing the limits of the body and the self (Connor 2004). In extreme cases of self-mutilation, such as that practiced by victims of extreme psychological trauma, inflicting physical pain onto the surface of the body can serve to actualise emotional pain, making it visible, giving it a location, a site that can be seen and revisited. In this way, emotional pain is 'realised', seen and felt, on the surface, (and made permanent in instances where the lesion forms a scar). Moreover, manifesting this psychological

wound on the body allows for the possibility of the trauma to be healed alongside the body's repairs. In these instances, the wound and the healing affirm the individual's emotional integrity. For these self-inflicted wounds could be seen as a process whereby the body is tested and given an opportunity to prove its regenerative healing qualities, reminding and assuring the individual of this, despite the severity of the trauma. So the healing process allows for catharsis. And as the wound knits itself together in the process of scabbing, there is an honesty and sincerity in 'wearing' these traumas as evidence of what is normally hidden beneath the skin's surface. This self-inflicted marking of the skin is one of the ways that skin is seen in and of itself, rendering it 'visible'. Abrasions, tearing and lesions of the skin hold a particular social anxiety. Since the skin contains the entire body, the threat of destroying the integrity of the skin is an immediate cause for concern. Like a balloon, it is imagined that if the skin was to be pierced, the body might deflate and lose its form, falling away (Connor 2004). Yet everywhere in contemporary society we encounter the skin as the fascinating site of "imaginary and actual assault" (Connor 2004: 50). This assault on, and rupturing of, the skin is a moment of abjection.

Julia Kristeva's term 'abject' describes the "collapse of the border between inside and outside", self and other (Kristeva 1982:53). It is the "place where meaning collapses" (*Ibid*: 2). It is what is described as liminal, that which defies categorisation, what simultaneously is and is not the body. It is that which threatens the subject's very being; that which "does not respect borders, positions, rules (...) the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (*Ibid*: 4). Once externalised, bodily matter, produced by the body's internal processes, no longer feels like a part of one's organic unity. Abjection is not only the necessary expulsion of bodily waste, but is also experienced in the unwanted lesions that befall the body's surface. These instances, where the (liquid) inside is outside, evoke a sense of horror and revulsion. It is in these moments that boundaries are most unclear, where something that once was a part of the body no longer is part of the body, but in some sense escapes categorisation: it is simultaneously both of the body and separate from the body. So, once dislocated, removed from the body, this bodily content escapes clear definition. The skin has a uniquely precarious nature - it is simultaneously surface and depth, the membrane that is responsible for the expulsion and absorption of fluids, while also being vulnerable to lesion and rupture. It is a liminal space: between inside and outside, but part of neither (Pitts 1998).

The skin has the ability to repair and regenerate itself when damaged. Scabbing is part of this process. The scab is neither the skin nor the liquid blood of the wound, but a mark of the

process of repair, and its temporal nature. Scabs mark the sight of a wound but are not the wound itself. Picking at a scab can be seen as playing with the threat to the wholeness of the skin (Connor 2004). This partly explains children's fascination with sticking plasters, for they act not only as protection but also as cover, which, once removed, often reveals the wound as healed. And unhealed wounds are also objects of fascination, for they function as reminders of personal history: for instance, of sites at which medicine entered the body to restore life; or of sites where death nearly realised itself in an accident; as well as of sites of intended acts of self-harm (Takemoto 2001). The scar "opens you up continuously to the previous time of the open wound, a continuous reopening of the wound" (Adams 1998:63).

'Defacing' and marking the skin are attempts to redefine the relationship between the body and its edge, bringing the skin into sharp focus. This process of challenging and so re-asserting the integrity of the skin, playing with the fragile boundary between surface and depth, comes from a need to feel whole, a need for the inside body to be reflected on the outside. However, these very attempts to take charge of the skin, to reign it in, suggest that the skin usually operates outside of our control, often betraying our own fallibility. And the apparently conflicting desires of protecting the self and taking charge of it by forging new narratives onto the skin's surface, simply echo the skin's own ambiguous position: as both hiding the self and exposing its history to view.

As the discussions in this chapter illustrate, humoral theory and the later development of anatomical dissection significantly impacted upon contemporary cultural understandings of the skin. Humoral theory considered the skin as connected to the body, operating as a medium of elimination and expression, whereas anatomical dissection conceived of the skin as that which was separate and separable from the body, rendering it a dispensable shell. This separation of skin and body has raised questions of where the self is located, and the enduring fascination with practices of flaying among philosophers and artists, as raising questions about the location of self, attest to this continued intrigue. It also raised questions of whether the skin could sufficiently protect the body, providing a recognisable limit or edge for the body. Contemporary preoccupation with the skin illustrates the same fundamental concerns, although it is now articulated through the desire for perfect skin and the concurrent desire to mark and rupture the already inscribed skin. Most significantly, the development of anatomical dissection in the Enlightenment, in both medical and artistic practice, contributed to a mode of enquiry of penetration and separation. This mode of 'breaking open' or 'peeling away' in order to arrive at

'truth', rendered the skin increasingly peripheral, a cover to be torn away to reveal the hidden interior of the body. This process served to fragment and abstract the body. This idea of skin as protective cover still permeates contemporary cultural associations with the skin, and underlies a collective anxiety about the vulnerability of the psyche. This anxiety is played out through a range of cultural and individual obsessions with the skin's surface, exposing the ambiguity of the skin as necessarily *both* surface and depth. The development of tools of looking which have extended the eyes' reach are closely allied to this methodology of tearing aside, and have contributed to a mode of knowledge that separates the body in order to make it a "recognizable and classifiable object" (Benthien 2002: 11). This is the subject of the following chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: SKIN AND VISUALITY

> The skin figures. It is what we see and know of others and ourselves […] it has become the proof of our exposure to visibility itself. (Connor 2004: 50-51)

Although the development and codification of the science of anatomy during the Enlightenment had done much to render the skin of peripheral interest, the concurrent development of optical lenses as visual aids brought the skin surface increasingly within a field of visuality. The Enlightenment was the key epoch in the invention and dissemination of optical instruments; in the pursuit of rational knowledge, magnifying lenses served to extend vision in the fields of medicine and science, reinforcing the idea of 'seeing as believing' (Crary 1991). Lenses increased the eye's reach, initially through a focused and penetrative looking using the microscope and telescope, and later through the possibility of 'panoptic' surveillance[10] and recording with the development of the camera in the nineteenth century. The development of these tools of looking, and the microscope in particular, were of specific significance to skin.

Although the microscope was used to increase knowledge of all parts of the human body, Connor (2004) suggests that skin tissue was among the earliest specimens to be examined under the microscope. This is largely due to the skin operating as the body's most visible surface, and so the part of the body most immediately available to looking. In this way, the microscope contributed to an increasing knowledge about the material substance of the body and its surface. Largely as a result of these observations, dermatology emerged as a systematic science of inquiry in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, observing in minute detail how the skin functions as a porous membrane for eliminating waste and absorbing fluid into the body.

Technologies that extend the eye's reach paralleled and reinforced developments in anatomy, not only in the development of new medical and scientific knowledge but also in the methodologies of this knowledge production. The microscope, like developments in anatomy, served to further separate and disassociate the skin from the body. Despite the increasing visibility of the skin, technologies of looking served a disembodying mode of knowledge

[10] Surveillance originates from French and means 'watching over', particularly those under suspicion. Panoptic originates from the Greek term *panóptes* meaning 'all-seeing'. The panopticon refers to a prison design by Jeremy Bentham, allowing for observation of prisoners from a central vantage point, without the individual necessarily being aware of being watched. This created "a surveillance which is global and individualizing" (Bentham 1977). The concept is explored in Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977)

production, dividing the body into separate constituent parts. Even as the microscope was able to see further into the surface of things, the ‘encounter’ was always at a distance, the eye separated from its object by the apparent neutrality of the ‘all-seeing’ lens. Under the microscope, the skin became less tangible, and increasingly disproportional to the scale of lived experience. Thus, the desire to see more, and to see more completely, was accompanied by a process of progressive abstraction of the body and its surface.

It was on the skin that this abstraction was most significant, precisely because in lived experience, the surface of the body offers a recognisable reference point (Connor 2004). By penetrating the "invisibly tiny", the microscope rendered the recognisable skin 'invisible' in the sense that the surface of the body is shown to in fact be beyond what the naked eye can perceive, (*Ibid*: 252). While this has created a cultural and social dependency on the sense of sight and visuality as the primary mode of knowledge production, with the scientific assuming a position of authority, it simultaneously exposes the limits of the unaided eye - the naked eye alone could no longer be trusted. As a result, this established a reliance on the rational and technological empiricism of science and encouraged a mistrust of the body’s own capacities as a sensory vehicle.

The progressive location of the skin within a disembodying visual field has contributed to the social anxiety around surface and boundary and highlights the thin defence the skin provides against violence and trauma (Connor 2004). The over-exposure of the skin in contemporary visual culture is evident in current obsessions with altering the appearance of the body’s surface, and the concurrent desires to mark the skin. In contemporary society the skin it seems is both ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’: ‘visible’ in that the skin can be seen everywhere in media such as cinema and photography, in what amounts to an excess of exposure; and ‘invisible’ in that the skin that we see does not reflect the tactile and lived skin that actually encapsulates the body.

Ordering the Visual Field

> The problem of the observer is the field on which vision in history can be said to materialise, to become itself visible. Vision and its effects are always inseparable from the possibilities of an observing subject who is both the historical product and site of certain practices, techniques, institutions and procedures of subjectification. (Crary 1992: 5)

The development of the microscope and later the camera, coincided with other developments in the rational sciences to effectively organise the field of visuality. Crary (1992) argues that, whereas seventeenth and eighteenth century conceptions of visuality had incorporated a relationship between the senses, invoking the sense of touch in particular, the eye in the nineteenth century was freed from the network of references that located it in the body. Looking became conditioned by the idea of an abstract and objective gaze, reinforced through the possibility of a mass production and consumption of images. This served to regularise the way in which bodies were seen and ordered in space. Technologies of seeing not only managed attention and visual consumption, but also largely dictated how the body was located within a visual field. These technologies served to discipline[11] the body. What I mean by this is that these technologies located the body primarily in a predetermined visual lexicon and thus framed the context within which knowledge of the body was constructed and received. As this happened, bodily comportment became progressively limited within these parameters of knowledge and power.

Through the microscope, the scientist isolated life, wielding it and extending it, attempting to gain control over it. Perception was disassociated from the feeling body and spread across a range of techniques and instruments. In preparing samples for the microscope, the body was fragmented; flat translucent segments removed from the body, stained and enlarged for examination. This reduced the three-dimensional and complexly layered living body to the disintegrating segment, or specimen, that purported represent the whole. This process of 'bodily fragmentation' and 'abstraction' displaced the corporeal body, in the same moment that it provided increasing knowledge of the body (Cartwright 1995). As a result, the familiar body was abstracted; the actual body and its living matter, when viewed with the naked eye, was rendered an unreliable visual surface, navigable and knowable only by the expert few: the scientist and microscopist. The growing mistrust of the organic body, as able to indicate its own condition, has resulted in increasing reliance on scientific method and the evidence of experts.

While the microscope opened up a new world beneath the surface, its overall view of the body, reduced to abstracted parts, was limited. This has been likened to the punitive corporal punishment of the Middle Ages, which exhibited a morbid fascination with meticulously planned and minutely detailed and localised pain and assault on the body (Foucault, 1979). The

[11] To discipline is to instruct a person to adhere to an order, a code of conduct, not to be confused with punishment which is the enforcement of this order. This formed part of the central argument of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977).

flattening and removal of the corporeal body served also to popularise microscopy, simultaneously exposing and domesticating the excess of corporeality within the hidden depths of the body's surface. This desire for flatness points to a larger rejection of the unruly, a rejection articulated by modernism, which favoured order, simplicity and precision. In removing the everyday signifiers of the physical body, the microscope claimed to exempt itself from addressing questions of subjectivity, history and identity. In this way the microscope produced a 'modernist text' devoid of historical and spatial context.

The popularisation of microscopy was due in part to an aversion to the body in its intricacy and depth. Through the microscope, science refigured its conception of the living body in order to present it as less unruly, less abject. While early microscopists enlarged views of organisms, they weren't certain that the distorted images they saw corresponded to the invisible specimen they were observing. With nothing to compare its accuracy to, the views revealed by the early single lens microscope were regarded with a degree of mistrust. The development of the compound microscope, which positioned an adjustable second lens between the eye and the specimen, allowed the scientist to sharpen the view of the specimen. Concurrent to the development of the compound microscope, tools and techniques for standardising calibration were developed to enhance the accuracy of microscopes. The introduction of the test object marked a shift in the nineteenth century, when the microscopist appeared to become more concerned with correcting and calibrating the instrument of his extended vision, and less with what was being viewed (Cartwright 1995). This attention to the microscope itself is suggestive of an unmanageable specimen. When a specimen was considered too unwieldy for conception, recalibrating the machine was the point of recourse, rather than confronting the visceral bodily specimen. Thus neither the microscope nor the ordering of the body that it produced were questioned, rather scientists fixated on refining the microscope instead of entertaining the 'incomprehensible' body.

Images under the microscope were initially recorded in detailed drawings by Dr Hooke (Micrographia, 1665). Later these drawings gave scientists and microscopists a reference point for their own observations - until the invention of the camera, with its ability to record and reproduce with apparent objective accuracy. Not only did the camera offer new ways of representing the body in everyday life, it allowed for accurate representations of dissections, and served as a tool in the scientific classification of the human body that far exceeded what the naked eye could perceive. The advantage of photography was that a great number of accurate

images could be recorded and produced in a short period of time, and reproduced with relative ease. Photography aided in the imaging of the interior of the body, allowing for knowledge to be shared and disseminated far more widely.

This notion of the camera as objectively recording reality finds its roots in the scientific use to which photography was put, in the early 19th century. Due to its mechanical process, and to the fact that the photograph emerged from light, it was considered an objective process, with no mediation on the part of the photographer or artist apart from operating the camera itself. However this would prove to be the site of the contestation of objectivity. The notion that the photographic image was not 'authored' in the same sense that an artwork might be, has maintained an illusion of objectivity - thus the photograph was purported to be telling the 'truth'. In operating as 'fact' the photograph was positioned as a tool that simply documented reality, its recordings contributing to processes of categorisation and ordering. However, photographers and artists have long been aware of the camera's ability to create fictive narratives. The potential for the photograph to 'tell' a narrative, or be read, made it susceptible to both interpretation and misinterpretation, for there are as many viewers as there are interpretations. If the camera represents the truth, then the body that it exposes and replicates should be a truthful reflection of what the body is like, and yet we know it is a construct of beauty, race, class and gender. The photographed body is not able to live up to the 'truth' that it is expected to demonstrate. Early photographs were employed in colonialist projects that imaged predetermined ideas of racial inferiority. In imaging 'indigenous' people with both a metaphorical and literal yard stick, the camera provided data that 'verified' the colonial trajectory, aiding the colonialist narrative of European racial superiority and the 'necessary' subjugation of 'indigenous' populations. Thus, in positioning the photograph as objective record, the camera came to operate as a tool of knowledge and power, this power being made most evident in its 'abuse' (Townsend 1998). As the 'truth' of the photograph becomes less trusted, it shifts from providing a stable position of 'truth' to providing a myriad of possibilities and 'truths'. A photograph always requires interpretation from its audience. Rather than an accurate representation of the 'truth', the photograph is proved to be unreliable, exposing a fundamental flaw in the objective claims of Western science (Townsend 1998).

Unlike other lens-based technologies, such as the microscope and the camera, Wilhelm Roentgen's X-ray[12], developed in 1895, allowed the eye to see the body free of the skin and

[12] X-rays were named X-rays by Roentgen to mark this unknown type of radiation.

internal organs. The X-ray penetrated the skin and organs, exposing the skeletal system without piercing or removing the skin. As such, the X-ray presented a pared down view of the body, illuminated from within. The X-ray figuratively dispensed with the skin boundary that that defines subjectivity and identity, undoing inscriptions on the skin and organs, including inscriptions of race and gender. So, by removing the surface of the body, but without the apparent violence of flaying and dissection, the X-ray served to heighten the recognition of the significance of the skin as an inscribed surface that gives an individual identity and signification. This transgression of the body's surface revealed that, in order for the body's signs and inscriptions to be read and interpreted, a skin is required to envelope the body and its organs – consequently, it was revealed that desire depended on a surface that enclosed a structure.[13] For some, the X-rayed body was too naked, seen as providing not only an image of health, disease and life, but also a premonition of death. Here, the skeletal structure that the X-ray revealed preempted death iconographically, and even quite literally caused decomposition and death, as prolonged exposure to radiation proved toxic for the body (Cartwright 1995). The image of the X-ray exposed "the stunning spectacle of death in life," (*Ibid*: 121). Thus the X-ray is both gothic and modernist: for the skeleton is not only an icon of death but the way in which it is viewed - in isolation, independent from history - is quintessentially modernist.

Roentgen's X-ray technique was also modernist in a further sense - for the idea light could expose what was hidden by darkness related to the Enlightenment's metaphorical understanding of knowledge production, in which knowledge exposed that which was hidden. Here light was associated with knowledge and darkness with ignorance. The X-ray made this metaphor literal, using light as a penetrating force able to uncover the 'truth' of both death and the afterlife. Roentgen's discovery further vindicated the model of visual knowledge -'seeing is believing'.

However, the X-ray's infiltration of the body created public frenzy as it signaled the entry of an unnerving technique of bodily depiction into science that had previously only appeared in arenas less accredited with authority, such as public entertainment (Cartwright 1995). So Wilhelm Roentgen conducted his initial studies in secret due to what he considered to be the 'weight' of the X-ray image of the skeleton. He considered the X-ray a potential cultural representation of death and therefore something metaphysical, which he feared would bring ridicule upon him in

[13] The X-ray has been widely adopted not only in medicine but in the stringent security measures at airports to scan luggage for potential weapons. Most recently, airports are using body scanners - the millimeter wave scanner, - which penetrates clothing, thus exposing the naked body beneath. Here the skin is completely exposed. Interestingly, this new technology seems more invasive than the X-ray, despite the fact that it doesn't penetrate the body.

the scientific world. The first X-ray photograph was taken of his wife, Bertha Roentgen's hand. In seeing it she too felt she was being given a premonition of death.

The photographic image of Bertha's hand under the X-ray, (Fig. 13), is widely considered to be the first recorded X-ray image. While the X-ray symbolically dispenses with her skin, fingernails, and musculature, her prominent wedding ring is suggestive of a personal identity, and is evident in the X-ray image, as radiation cannot penetrate certain dense materials, such as bone and metal. While the X-ray could metaphorically erase markers of gender and identity the image is powerful as it retains a shadow of surface signification, Bertha's marriage ring. So while the image is stripped of personal identifiers, it yet retains a narrative of intimacy. The image of Bertha's hand operated as vital evidence of the ray's existence and its potential to be harnessed for the purposes of science, the image also operates outside of these parameters, as the subject is named and connected to the inventor of the X-ray. Thus the image is both imbued with scientific objectivity and, through its associated narrative, an intimate subjectivity. The hand became a popular test subject outside of medicine, where women were X-rayed with jewelry on their hands in order to illustrate that beauty was as deep as the bone and not of the skin, as the popular adage would have one believe. In imaging the hand alone, the X-ray could be seen to operate much like the microscope in its compartmentalisation of the body. Furthermore, by imaging the hand alone, there is the suggestion of an aversion to imaging the whole body under the X-ray, which suggests that there remained a fear of viewing the entire body 'derobed' of its skin and organs - something that both fascinated and horrified. The boundlessness that this possibility represented is precisely what was both desired and feared. While the skin divides inside and outside, the body's public surface and private interior, the X-ray erased these distinctions and presented a view of the body where the body was exposed to its core. Through the X-ray, the body transcends and transgresses the boundary of the skin. These transgressive images of the body simultaneously exposed a limit to the body, i.e. the bone structure which when seen signals death, and yet the body is without an edge without skin to contain it. This highlighted the surface as the site of signification for the body, since a body without surface is an unknown, identity-less body. The X-ray images the body without boundary or substance, bereft of a threshold or dimensionality. A body without skin and flesh suggests death, but also escape - of the body without bounds or limits, a body whose edges are indistinct. Whereas the microscopic view operated as evidence of the existence of minute entities that were unseen by the unaided eye, the X-ray image indicated what was already known, but only through the existence of an, as yet, unknown natural source - hence the use of the letter X to indicate this

unknown (Cartwright 1995).

Early developments in technologies of seeing instigated practices and methodologies of surveillance and control by visual means, providing a premonition of the development of technologies of remote sensing and video surveillance in the late twentieth century. In this sense, these early technologies could be understood as forming part of a visual order of control and authority, contributing to the materiality of visualisation, and the construction of representation. As illustrated above, the microscope, the camera and the X-ray form part of a broader obsession with the conquest and control of the body. These tools served to regularise and standardise the body in terms of measurements of normality and abnormality. In so doing, they intersected with broader projects of scientific and cultural knowledge production at the point of the body.

However, at the same time that these developments served to control the body, they were also suggestive of a body that escapes these restrictions. The microscope opened up an entire world within the body that threatened to engulf the microscopist to such an extent, that as much energy was devoted to calibrating the tools as exploring the hidden world. It exposed the significance of the lived scale of the body. The camera served as a visual record for the sciences, replacing the need for drawings, and greatly increasing the dissemination of images. At the same time, it created an over-exposure to visuality, and a simultaneous blasé attitude to visual spectacle, along with a deep anxiety about the body and its surface. The X-ray promised to reveal the hidden body, but served also to expose the significance of the surface as a site of identity, the subjective and the personal. The skin appears as the site through which these abstract and disembodying modes of looking came under the greatest threat, exposing the significance of scale and the relationship between visuality and tactility. Herein is the beginning of a broader and more problematic relationship between the skin and visuality: for as a visual register alone the skin is only ever partial and unreliable.

Intimacy and Distance, Scale

> The body is our mode of perceiving scale and, as the body of the other, becomes our antithetical mode of stating conventions of symmetry and balance on the one hand, and the grotesque and disproportionate on the other. We can see the body as taking the place of origin for exaggeration and, more significantly, as taking the place of origin for our understanding of metonymy (the incorporated bodies of self and other) and metaphor (the body of the other). (Stewart 1993: xii)

It is through the scale provided by the lived and inhabited body that people engage with and make sense of the world. We consider objects in the world as bigger or smaller than the body, always in terms of how the body would use or navigate the object. This anthropocentric[14] view is imposed to such an extent that even fantasies are subject to this: in the common imagination, 'aliens' more or less mirror the human body, though always somewhat grotesque versions of it, often imaged with several eyes and three fingers on each hand. This is perhaps, in part, the reason that Elkins states that all looking is ultimately a search for the body: "vision, in its deepest source and impetus [...] may be the determined search for bodies," (Elkins 1999: 2). Even when viewing an abstract work the eye seeks out a recognisable referent, the bodily evidence of construction, even if this is not always a conscious process. This looking counters the looking of the microscope, which is disembodied and abstracted.

There is a need to understand what is seen in terms of the only reference that is available, the given proportions of the body. In perceiving the world we can only really conceive of it in terms of its relationship to the body, as this is the vessel through which we navigate the world. As Stewart argues, "exaggeration takes place in relation to the scale of proportion offered by the body," (Stewart 1993: xiii). This is precisely why the microscope was so fascinating, both in revealing scientific knowledge and as entertainment, for it opened up a new world in which the scale of the body no longer provided a stable reference.

The development of the microscope magnified not only the hidden inner workings of the body, but also of the skin - and the world just beneath its surface. This world appeared at first as a microcosm: "the microscope opens up significance to the point at which all the material world shelters a microcosm," (*Ibid*: 41). Magnification and medical discourse were responsible for making evident the interconnectedness of the body's own system, and the fact that these systems are replicated in all other life: the "nesting involution of the body duplicates the relation of the body as microcosm to the macrocosm of the natural world, the universe being articulated by an endless series of such enclosures of the same within the same," (Connor 2004: 18). Even when we examine our own skin in minute detail, of which we have an intimate knowledge at the scale of lived embodiment, we are not familiar with what we behold; under the microscope the surface of the skin appears as a landscape, an entire environment. It becomes apparent that the skin is a whole connected network.

[14] Anthropocentric is the notion that humans are at the centre of reality, or the conception and perception of the universe and reality through an exclusively human paradigm.

So technologies of looking were productive of new insights into the body and the natural world, destabilising older systems of knowledge. For this extended vision allowed for a new form of travel, the ability to leave the surface and escape into a seemingly 'alien' miniature world, new and unfamiliar (Stafford 1991). As a result, the microscope transformed the way people perceived themselves and the world around them (Stafford 1992; Crary 1991), allowing a space to subvert systems of subjectifying the body - in other words, a space to resist the ordering that technologies of looking also implied. It became apparent at this time that the skin was not a simple cover, "but had thickness and a complex interior" (Connor 2004: 251). It had several layers, constituted by the epidermis, dermis, and the subcutaneous tissue. By exposing this repulsive, alien core, the 'monstrosity' of human tissue-matter and, by extension, everything that lies just beneath our sight (Elkins 1999), the microscope challenged the conception of the 'perfect' human body.

The microscope, much like the X-ray, affected not only specialised medical and scientific knowledge but also popular culture and fantasy. The 'other worlds' that the lens opened up were not only used to extract knowledge, but served as a form of escapist entertainment. In the eighteenth century, a fascination developed with seeing the 'monstrous'[15] beneath, journeying into an abstracted fantastical realm detached from the prosaics of the everyday.

> If the microscope had done much to suggest the regularity of living process even beyond the domain of the visible, it also […] takes away the privilege of the surface, since what is inside or beneath the surface bears no structural relationship to how it looks on the outside. The more closely one looked at the skin [...] the more internally complex, dynamic and densely populated it seemed. (Connor 2004: 250)

Yet the microscope also served the objectification and de-familiarisation of the skin, dissolving the corporeal body and its subject (Cartwright 1995). The microscope as an instrument of analysis effectively manufactured not only a new looking, but also new bodies. Cartwright suggests that microscopy offers up a modernist text; it decontextualises, removing history and spatial depth. In the process of removing the microscopic specimen from the body, staining, enlarging and lighting it, the specimen loses its corporeal source as well as its function and history (Cartwright 1995). In chapter three I discuss how Jeanne Silverthorne uses the microscope to create tactile images, implicitly critiquing the modernist masculine and de-

[15] The 'monstrous', is that which is considered abnormal and associated with the 'other', but always takes its basis within our own constructions of 'normality', located within a "continuously shifting mental schema of the relation between our own appearance and our notions of ugliness or beauty," (Elkins 1999:162).

contextualising language of this technology.

The microscope fragmented and abstracted, ‘dehumanised and disembodied’ both the viewing and the viewed body. Ironically, the enlarged, hyper-real images of the internal world of the body took it further out of grasp (Stafford 1990); the closer one looked at the body the less one recognised the self. At the extreme ends of micro and macro scales, which I discuss in detail below, we discover that the familiar becomes unrecognisable. Even the body, with which we are intimately familiar, becomes distorted and abstract, appearing a strange and ethereal world.

The alien world that the microscope reveals highlights the significance of the body as a reference point for lived experience and exposes the literal and conceptual distance needed in processes and technologies of looking. The microscope ultimately exposed the limits of unaided human vision and brought about a mistrust of the body’s visual capacity in relation to the ‘truth’ it purported to show. It created a dependence on technologies that aid looking. Most significantly, the invention of the microscope saw the site of diagnosis shift from the body as a holistic system in which the skin operated as a medium, to the individual and de-contextualised body cell. Thus, the microscope marks the dissolution of the corporeal body. In this process of abstraction, the sense of touch, in particular, has been relegated to a peripheral role, the very sense that the skin affords the body. As Cartwright writes, "perception becomes unhinged from the sensory body and is enacted across an increasingly complex battery of institutional techniques and instruments" (Cartwright 1995:82).

A compelling example of an engagement with the microscope and scale in contemporary art is Gary Schneider’s work, *Genetic Self-Portrait Dried Blood* (1997), and *Genetic Self-Portrait Retinas* (1998), (Figs. 14 and 15), which employ medical tools of interrogation, including the electron microscope, to offer portraits of the artist’s bodily fluids and organs. *Genetic Self-Portrait Retinas* is a view of the eye from inside the iris, effectively a looking at the organ of looking. In these works the viewer is reminded of how alien and unfamiliar the interior of the body is. We will never hold, or even see, our own heart or lungs, and yet, these models of medical investigation present the viewer with images of the most private and miniscule parts of themselves. These works also remind that, up close, the body appears a distant world - the body, at this level of investigation, appears as a visual correlate for images of the universe. The fact that, as visual correlates, these two very different views of the body and the universe, appear the same also suggests a ‘hidden’ interconnectedness, a shared commonality and

repetition in nature. The body and the world seem to be intrinsically connected, reflecting each other, making the process of looking close up or far away infinite and unresolved. Depending on where the viewer is positioned in relation to what they are viewing, how near or how far, alters their perception. This altering of perception affects the sense of 'truth'. As soon as scale is radically altered away from that of the lived body, our sense of the world breaks down and our ability to navigate it begins to collapse. This highlights the importance of the body as a scalar referent. It also questions the visual as the primary mode of gaining knowledge and truth. Looking is always constructed and shaped by vantage point, often claiming an objectivity of standpoint, but it does not necessarily have any relationship to an intuitive or bodily experience. The skin is thoroughly intimate and beckons our other senses, particularly the sense of touch. The paradox of the embodied skin, therefore, is that to fully perceive it in its entirety we would have to be pressed up against it and yet simultaneously have a sufficient distance from it in order to be able to visually perceive it (Connor 2004).

This difficulty in perceiving the skin is articulated in Natasha Christopher's photographic work as conceived of for her Masters exhibition, *River* (2007). Christopher exhibited nine large-scale photographic works of her son. *Bath,* (Fig.16), is a colour photograph of Christopher's son in a bath, as viewed from above. The image is out of focus, with just enough information discernable to locate it to the actual, allowing the work to operate as both abstract and concrete representation. The scale of the work exacerbates the abstraction, at times allowing the viewer to become immersed in colour fields. Here, the camera operates as the eye would, losing focus when too close to the subject. Christopher uses this literal closeness to speak of an emotional intimacy, where the boundaries between figure and ground bleed into one another. Here, Christopher articulates an indistinct emotional, or psychological boundary between herself and her son through blurring the boundaries within the photographic image. This blurring reduces the perspectival depth between the photographer and her subject. This blurring speaks to the indeterminacy of psychological and emotional 'states' or desires and the inability of the visual to adequately capture these states. Here Christopher deliberately distorts conventions of photographic portraiture as an attempt to reinvest in the photographic image with what it negates. Christopher's close-ups and blurred images mark a threshold, beyond which, seeing is no longer a means of apprehending.

In this way Christopher's images oscillate between surface and depth; this 'slipperiness' escapes clarity, operating at both an intimate and a remote distance. In reflecting on her

enlarged images of her son Christopher explains:

> In my work, the distortion of photographic images in terms of their blur and their large scale, draw the viewer in - my visual language arguably encourages some sense of intimacy in that it re-creates the kind of blurring that happens when one is right against a beloved's flesh. (Christopher 2007: 50)

Laura U. Marks (2002) discusses the difficulty in looking at a lover's or beloved's skin with optical vision alone, and suggests that in beholding the beloved there is always a desire or memory of touch. This raises the impossibility of looking at the skin of a lover, or beloved, without evoking knowledge of what the skin may feel like. While the skin separates us from others it is also the surface that joins us. It is at *this* surface that intimacy is experienced, and onto which desire is projected. It is the very surface at which we meet and encounter each other, and by virtue of both inhabiting a body, both being subject to the experience of the body we could be said to share a skin. And yet this promise that one can share a skin with another, a desire at play with the body of the lover, is literally impossible. While touch opens up a space and a re-remembering of intimacy, it nevertheless reminds of the impossibility of being immersed and contained in another's skin. In this way I understand Christopher's work as using the camera, the visual, to articulate a condition of intimacy that can only evoke touch and the longing that this impossibility poses.

Visuality and Tactility, the Haptic

> The greatest sense in our body is our touch sense. It is probably the chief sense in the processes of sleeping and waking; it gives us our knowledge of depth or thickness, and form; we feel, we love and hate, are touchy and are touched, through the touch corpuscles of our skin. (Lionel Taylor 1921 in Montagu 1971:1)

Most modern scientific knowledge of the body and the skin comes from looking, and it is through this seeing that we have ordered the world and the people that occupy it. Contemporary mass culture is primarily visual, anti-sensual and mediated. The visual objectifies and creates distance and separation. Western systems of representation in both art and science have positioned vision as a central focus, introducing a marked distance between the viewer and what is seen. Information is increasingly disembodied and bodies and objects are reduced to visual images (Stafford 1991), making associated desires superficial. This privileging of the visual, initially through the development of the microscope and later through the development of the camera,

has obscured other modes of perception; "in particular, touch dropped out of our visive[16] experience of the world," (Stafford 1991: 36).

Unlike other senses, touch is not located at any one point on the body; other sensory receptors are limited to the face, while touch sensors cover the entire skin. The skin contains millions of delicate nerve endings that identify and process felt encounters. These nerve receptors surround hair follicles, covering the entire body, serve as some of the body's most significant touch receptors. These receptors are always at work, informing us of our immediate surroundings. The fine hair on the body moves in response to air currents and other minute inputs, the nerve receptors then provide information that is relayed to the brain providing a steady stream of information about where we are, the environment around us and who is with us, (Balin and Pratt-Balin, 1997). In this way, the skin plays an important function in orienting and locating the body in relationship to the physical world. Through touching, the skin sends information about the body's immediate environment - the shape and texture of things, whether they are hot or cold, smooth or rough – to the brain. And touching the world, we are touched back - when I come into contact with objects for a long period of time or in a violent manner, an impression is often made on my skin, a print of sorts. The shape of the object can be left, sometimes more than an outline, an exact negative, a trace, a reminder of something passing.

Art Historian Alois Riegl adopted the term 'haptic', which is borrowed from physiology. Most important to Riegl's distinction between the optic and the haptic is the different relationship the two images have with the viewer (Marks 2000). A haptic image appeals to the viewer's sense of touch through sight, whereas an optical image invites a distant view that allows for the viewer to assume the role of an all-perceiving subject. In perceiving a work haptically, the viewer perceives the surface of the work for some time before realising what is being looked at. The works reveal themselves slowly, and sometimes don't develop any figuration at all. A haptic work could also take the form of a detailed densely worked surface on a small scale that negates a distanced view, drawing the viewer close to the work.

"While optical perception privileges the representational power of the image, haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image" (Marks 2000: 163). The haptic is the point at which the sense of sight and touch meet. According to Laura U. Marks, haptic perception can be understood as "the combination of tactile, kinaesthetic and proprioceptive functions"; the way in

[16] Visive: of or pertaining to sight, the visual.

which the body experiences touch felt on the surface of the body and within the body (Marks 2000: 162). In haptic visuality the eyes themselves function as an organ of touch. Whereas optic visuality - which is how we usually conceive of vision - requires a distance between subject and object in order to perceive depth and to see objects as distinct forms in space, haptic visuality looks over the surface of the object, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture: “It is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze,” (Marks 2000: 162).

A haptic visuality allows for the viewer to incorporate other senses of experience, such as touch and movement, into their engagement with the work - the body is therefore more directly evoked than it is by optical images. So, considering the haptic in art is a small move towards beginning to understand the various ways in which artworks can and do appeal to the entire body (Marks 2000). Haptic images allow one to consider the singular image without being drawn into a narrative, whereas optical images often presuppose that all the information the viewer may require is to be found in the image - by offering this illusion of completeness it lends itself to narrative. A haptic image often provokes a viewer into a visceral and emotional consideration of the work, thus encouraging a bodily relationship between the viewer and the artwork. As Marks points out, haptic images can give the impression of seeing anew, of seeing for the first time, discovering what an image is, rather than coming to an image or a work already knowing what it is (Marks 2000).

Betterton’s (2004) discussion of contemporary women artists working in paint suggests an emerging emphasis on materiality in contemporary art, the thickening of paint and material, here ‘meaning’ resides in the embodied and inter-subjective relationship between work and viewer. Contact and touch, and not only representation and the visual, become important ways of engaging the practice and reception of art, allowing for a mutual “sensuousness” between the viewer and the artwork. Meaning occurs in the interaction between subject and work, more than in the singular and abstracted interaction of representation and viewer. When optical looking fails to relinquish access, a haptic mode of looking can provide new insight into both the work and the relationship between the work and the viewer (Marks 2000).

Recent works, especially by a number of women artists (for example, Laura Godfrey-Isaacs, Penny Siopis, Susan Hiller) actively employ the haptic as a visual strategy in order to investigate and depict alternative engagements with the embodied subject. It is argued that the optical is an abstracting and masculine tradition of seeing, in contrast to the intimacy and sensuousness of

haptic looking. Much recent feminist theory problematises logocentric vision,[17]seeking out new ways of representing and imaging women's bodies (Betterton 1996). These theorists see a need to return to the body and all of its senses, trusting its experiences and perceptions. Rosemary Betterton (1996) suggests a shift from questions of representation (how the female body should be represented) to questions of subjectivity (what does it mean to inhabit the female body). For Betterton this raises questions around looking, which requires distance, and embodiment, which incorporates all of the senses. Acknowledging the location of the body in systems of culture and knowledge, this feminist perspective also recognises the body as "the instrument of lived experience, a place of mediation that remains irreducible beyond the already-structured reductions of the sensory, the direct relation between the body and the world it acts upon," (Stewart 1993: xiii). Stafford similarly argues that there is a need in contemporary culture for an "ethic of 'embodied' diversity or complexity," (Stafford, 1991: 36).

The skin connects all of the senses, it is the means by which all of the senses are able to cooperate with and reflect each other. It provides the form in which these other senses are embedded. It is the site at which sensory stimulation encounters the body – the organ with which we sense the world. Skin, as the place of feeling, providing the conditions for and experience of embodiment, where the skins of different bodies touch, it allows for inter-embodiment, a shared, empathetic experience of feeling.

Disembodied and abstracted modes of looking have shaped our understandings of the skin as a surface to be moved aside. At the same time, they have served to further subject the body's surface to the projections and inscriptions of a culture saturated with visuality. The development of tools that aid vision raises the significance of a scale referent, and so draw attention to the body as a crucial key in both undermining the visual's supremacy and mapping a distanced and an intimate viewing. Contemporary women artists have explored the possibility of tactile engagements with the skin's surface and the body beneath as a form of resistance and critique of the pervasiveness of the penetrative gaze, epitomised in tools such as the microscope. In the following chapter I demonstrate how artists Jeanne Silverthorne and Penny Siopis have used vision and the tools that extend vision to critique reliance on the visual alone. In doing so they have tended towards producing haptic figurations and sought to create a cooperation between looking and touching in knowledge production. In eliciting these embodied perspectives, they point to a knowledge of surface beyond the visible and visual.

[17] *Logocentric* takes its origins from the Greek term *logos,* meaning 'reason'. Logocentric vision seeks out 'truth', which is thought to be singular and derived from scientific methods of enquiry.

CHAPTER THREE:
SKIN IN THE WORK OF PENNY SIOPIS AND JEANNE SILVERTHORNE

The development of Western medical science and technologies that aid looking form part of a paradigm of knowledge within which the body has been framed as individuated, abstracted, fragmented and thus 'disembodied'. Within this framing of the body, the skin has largely been rendered 'invisible'. In the Enlightenment era, the skin was considered as something to be torn aside, and was given only cursory illumination through the microscope. The embodied skin exceeds this framing that attempts to settle its meaning and significance. However, the skin is now becoming 'visible' of its own account, escaping Enlightenment framings, both through its literal excessive exposure and in the heightened anxiety over its inherent vulnerability, which is articulated in the concurrent desire to both protect and assault it.

South African artist Penny Siopis and American artist Jeanne Silverthorne are two contemporary woman artists who have engaged the materiality and meaning of the embodied surface in their practice. I've chosen to consider the way in which skin figures, and figures differently, in the work[18] of these two artists, developing out of their differing contexts.

Based in Johannesburg, Penny Siopis is one of a number of contemporary South African artists who has engaged the skin. This interest in the skin is hardly surprising in a country that has historically and openly inscribed race, social position and exoticism onto skin, making skin a marker of the country's specific traumatic history. South Africa's recent history of apartheid (and longer history of colonialism and slavery) is clear evidence of the politicisation of skin. During apartheid, skin was seen to signify a culturally static state, in other words, meaning associated with skin was seen as self-evident and existed within closed cultural reference points, with no room for contestation of meaning. Skin colour, by operating as the signifier of race, came to signal social and political standing, with no room for social or cultural mobility outside of these parameters; in this way class was literally inscribed on the skin. The skin, in these cases, became the defining marker of what was seen as an essential identity, and was used to separate 'racial' groups in order to conduct social engineering. Moreover, the skin was the site at which the violence of the apartheid system was inflicted onto the body. In her engagement with

[18] My assessment of Silverthorne's work is made using secondary material, documentation of the artist's work and her exhibitions in magazines and catalogues. In the case of Siopis' work I have had the benefit of both published and first hand accounts with the artist's work, and the artist herself.

South Africa's history, Siopis has addressed the skin, particularly the wounded skin, which has come to signify and embody the physical and emotional violence and trauma of that history.

David Bunn (2004) has suggested that, while Western painters have tended to depict skin in their artwork as a transparent, fragile surface, South African painters depict it as a hardened impenetrable surface, speaking of a wounded embodiment, as a result of violent inscription and scarring. Bunn refers to the works of Lucien Freud, in which the discernible veins, muscles and skeletal structure beneath the translucent painted surface provide a 'window' into the body. For Bunn, this is perhaps suggestive of the anxiety concerning surface in contemporary Western culture, where the surface threatens to dissipate and dissolve, unable to contain the body and the psyche. By contrast, Bunn suggests that for South African artists the skin is often opaque and impenetrable, a stultifying and inescapable container, articulating a problem of mediation, where the surface has become disassociated from the armature beneath. The opaque scarred surfaces of Siopis' work signal not only trauma, but an "uncertainty about the future of the body, time, and the conditions of intimacy that have yet to be built" (Bunn 2004:24).

Many artists in South Africa have engaged skin through other media such as sculpture and lens based media. For example, artists such as Leora Farber, Nandipa Mntambo, Berni Searle, Kathryn Smith and Paul Emmanuel have all touched on the skin at some point in their oeuvres[19].

[19]Leora Farber's work takes the body and the skin as its locus, exploring both the exquisite and abject nature of the body and the skin's surface. Farber explores dress as an extension of the skin, subject to tailoring and suturing, which speaks of the contemporary skin as garment, one that can be removed and altered to fit the desires of the subject (*Skin-Less* Series (1996-1997), *Skin Craft* Series of 1997). Mntambo's work sees the artist repeatedly casting her own body using cowhide, inviting the viewer to change places with her, to step inside the outline of her body. Cowhide, while seductive and soft to the touch, is also a reminder of the abject flayed carcass of which it contains a residual smell, (*Idle, Deity, Balandzeli* (all 2004), *Purge* and *Stepping Into Self* (both 2005), and the exhibition, *The Encounter* (2009)). Searle uses her own body and skin in documented performance, exploring her interest in identity, racial classification and the effects of colonialism. In *Profile* (2002-2004), Searle pushes the limits and signification potentials of her own skin, impressing objects into it. Searle's earlier *Colour Me* series (1998) saw the artist considering her own mixed parentage, and more broadly, the effects of colonialism and classification. In *Jack in Johannesburg*, the artist Kathryn Smith was tattooed in a public performance. Although Smith's oeuvre is largely concerned with narrative disjuncture, serial murder and forensic methods of producing art (O'Toole 2003), her work also engages notions of death and of the public and the private, issues which are often played out on the skin. In Smith's early work in a Johannesburg morgue, the surface figured prominently: the artist projected images of cadavers onto her own body, suggesting the skin as a surface of projection and violent inscription. Paul Emmanuel's *The Lost Men installation (Grahamstown)* (2004), explores the implications of his gender and identity, where the artist impresses upon his skin the names of men who fought in wars in South Africa

These artists, though not working solely with the skin, begin to suggest the poignancy and potency of skin in the South African context, in its register as a race and gender marker as well as in its role as a site of transgressions, where violence and trauma through public and private inscriptions, are both manifest and hidden.

Originally trained as a painter but working predominantly in sculpture and installation, New York artist Jeanne Silverthorne engages the skin in a context less immediately associated with race, although race remains a persistent social anxiety in the United States; skin colour and value judgments associated with skin remain prevalent, even after the civil rights movement of the 1960s, which attempted to abolish institutionalised racism. Silverthorne, unrelenting in her use of the lens - both of the magnifying glass and the electron microscope - is more concerned with scrutinising the abstract surface of things: the skin, the organs of the body, and the residual matter found on her studio floor. In doing so, she takes the abstracting gaze of Western scientific rationality to its logical conclusion, where all is subjected to and produced by it. In doing this, Silverthorne exposes both the power inherent in looking and the powers of scale, signalling the way in which different scales affect the perception of objects. Much of the work that Silverthorne creates is representational, in so much as it's a duplicate or translation of an object or view. However, the scales in which she works - both the enlargement of the fragment of debris from the studio view and the microscopic view of the cell - mean that these representations operate as abstractions.

In the work of Siopis and Silverthorne, skin figures both as the subject matter, and in the materiality of the work. Siopis and Silverthorne's chosen materials share actual and associative qualities with living skin. The works I consider by Siopis' are painted primarily in oil paint, a material that operates as a skin, drying superficially and remaining wet and viscous beneath. Silverthorne uses rubber latex, an industrial material, which is soft and pliable, able to translate immense detail in casting, and which shares an elasticity and tactility with skin. These constructed, 'synthetic' skins also make reference to the skin through what they are not, through what they lack that the living skin possesses. So each artist doesn't simply represent skin, but build up a tactile skin through the materiality of their chosen media. Both artists' use of specific skin-like materials allows for their works to operate on two levels - the viewer oscillates between

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during the nineteenth century, pointing to the skin's capacity to 'remember' and to 'erase', suggesting the skin's wounding, while also alluding to its healing capacities.

considering the work up close and from afar. Viewed from up close the work evokes a sense of touch, creating an intimacy between viewer and work, whereas a distanced viewing allows the viewer to take in the entire image. In creating skins they highlight the role of the skin as a tactile surface that gives information about our environment, encouraging an intimacy between viewer and artwork that isn't limited to an optical or cognitive experience. For both artists, this is part of a broader engagement with the significance of modes of encountering their work that go beyond that of looking alone.

For this reason, I consider the way in which both Siopis and Silverthorne have been concerned to incorporate technologies and practices that aid looking in their work. In *Glory* (1994), (Fig.17), Siopis uses a magnifying glass to suggest a closer, yet more detached looking at a history that is written onto the surface of the black body. The two figures in *Glory* appear to be attempting to investigate beneath the surface. In the *Pinky Pinky* series hyper-real glassy false eyes are often inserted into her works, which return the viewer's gaze, creating a sense of being surveilled. Both of these strategies create self-consciousness and encourage a relooking and reassessment. Ultimately, Siopis points to the limitations inherent in the act of objective and disembodied looking; in both instances the 'truth' is embedded in the materially embodied surface. Silverthorne also frequently uses lenses in her process. She takes the flat images that these lenses create and moulds them in rubber, lending a tangibility and tactility to something that would normally be seen only as a flat image - a 'view'. In doing this, she uses tools of visuality to critique the primacy of the visual: bridging the distance between object and subject by bringing the object up-close, making it tangible; shifting scale relationships to alter the context of the skin, to dislocate and abstract it, to alter our understanding of it. These works evoke the senses of sight and touch, even though the work, like most artworks in a gallery or museum context, cannot be touched.

Through their references to the lens and the eye, Siopis and Silverthorne critique the historical privileging of the visual and its associated forms of knowledge production and acquisition. In Silverthorne's abstraction she points to technologies of looking that have penetrated and fragmented the body, and illustrates how the body exceeds this framing, drawing a parallel between the architecture of a building, and its hidden plumbing and wiring, and the body surface and its abject innards. Silverthorne demonstrates the all-encompassing visceral body. Siopis emphasises the tactile surface and abject body it purports to maintain, and in doing so destabilises looking in order to re-establish embodiment. In their work I read an alternative,

embodied engagement with the skin, offering new ways of feeling and knowing. In drawing attention to technologies and practices of looking, Siopis and Silverthorne suggest a process of making visible the invisible, thus *resisting* invisibility. Similarly, issues of surface and depth, intimacy and distance, visuality and tactility, which I have discussed in the previous chapters, are relevant in considering the work of these two artists.

The Wounded Surface in the work of Penny Siopis

> 'Flesh' is at once the site of our lived wounds, felt traumas, and ongoing fears, and our greatest splendour, our utmost glee, our deepest humanity. (Nuttall 2004: 137)

For Siopis the skin is simultaneously both the material surface of sensory intimacy, and a conceptual surface imbued with and inscribed by meaning and power. Siopis explores the conditions or experiences that befall the embodied skin by creating surfaces that are subject to the conditions and processes of living skin, such as the effects of gravity and 'aging' – Siopis' painted surface is thick, viscous and opaque, at times threatening to rupture and 'bleed'. The painted surface is elusive in that it can simultaneously expose or conceal the process of its making; it is both material surface and surface of meaning, depending on how and from where it is viewed. These two extremes of surface, as material and meaning, correspond, for Richards (2004), to the skin and the mirror: the former the embodied material surface, and interface between surface and depth; the latter, a reflective surface, "quintessentially pure surface as depth" (Richards 2004: 14). These two opposing surfaces might correspond respectively to the haptic and optic modes of seeing, the former involving tactility and embodiment, the latter involving disembodiment and representation (Marks, 2000). For Richards (2004), Siopis' work frequently places these two forms of visuality in tension, thus displacing the viewer in the process of perception.

In her painted works, Siopis consciously explores metaphorical and literal interpretations of human skin through the surface, layers and textures of oil paint. Oil paint, in its materiality, is much like a skin; it dries on the surface yet remains wet or 'alive' beneath. This tension, over time, causes the surface to wrinkle and crack. At times, unable to bear the weight of the wet paint beneath, the dried paint surface breaks, leaking out its fluid 'innards'. Like human skin, the painted skin functions as a container, containing the fluid insides. It takes on the role of a

protective covering, yet is also vulnerable to processes of time and to lesions. It is on this fragile boundary between the surface and the body living within, that both the integrity and the longevity of the human body and the painted surface are dependant.

The tactility of skin was a key concern in Siopis' *Cake Paintings* (1982-), which explored the deliberate similarities between the skin and the dried surface of paint, and the ways in which the wet paint beneath impacts on the surface, rupturing it like a wound (*Plum Cream*, 1982, Fig.18). In these works, Siopis has provided the conditions for her painterly skin to undergo the changes of human skin, allowing it to crack and age, and ultimately to lose its integrity, becoming defunct. Imbuing the surface of the painting with both age and experience, in this work, "passive medium becomes passionate materiality," (Richards 2004: 17). As in other works by Siopis, such as *Melancholia* (1986) (Fig.19), the painting reflects a psychological vulnerability and anxiety that goes on behind and beneath - occasionally appearing upon - the skin's surface. This (selective) revealing of the depths below the surface, is another way in which Siopis' chosen material of oil paint acts as skin.

Siopis' painted surfaces, in their varying thicknesses, use the entire canvas as the field and screen on which other things come to figure, much like human skin. This background, this screen, is often taken for granted, remaining unseen, almost *a priori* – a given. In the work of Siopis, the given, the skin's surface, the screen against which all else plays out, is the very thing which is in question. This surface, through which we engage with each other, is unstable. In summoning the numerous and volatile qualities of human skin - the intimacy of lived, experienced skin - Siopis allows the viewer an intimately tactile and visceral access to her public and private narratives. She focuses on the permeability and fragility of the skin, in particular, its wounding. In Siopis' work, the skin is a bearer of narratives: counter narratives; yet to be completed narratives; and what Richards refers to as "arrested narratives" (Richards 2004: 23). David Bunn describes Siopis as an "archivist of trauma", expressing the catastrophe of history and collective experiences of trauma (Bunn 2002: 4). Siopis' early work clearly examined the trauma of apartheid as it was inscribed on the body and the landscape (*Patience on a Monument: 'A History Painting'*, (1988), *Exempli Gratia*, (1989), (Figs. 20 and 21). The gendered and racialised body is re-inscribed as concrete and conceptual presence, one which profoundly shapes our responses and desires, creating what Moira Gaten calls an 'embodied perspective', (cited in Betterton 1996: 18). In considering Siopis' exploration of the painted surface as material

and metaphor, I look to trauma as not only an inscription on the skin but a materially inhabited condition that is experienced through the body, as illustrated in the work *Glory*, (1994).

***Glory* (1994)**

Glory, (1994), (Fig.17), is an assemblage depicting a skinned, flayed, dead body, with two figures on either side, who appear to be examining the body in a scholarly way. One holds a book open while the other points to the exposed interior body. The area of apparent interest is enlarged beneath a magnifying glass. The flayed body is imaged in a glow of red, reiterating the dissected figure as a gaping wound, where all is exposed. This removal of the skin allows us to understand both more and less about the figure, more in the sense that the body can reveal scientific knowledge, but less in that the removal of the skin makes one unable to identify a person. The process of removing one's skin is the process of removing one's identity, making the body simply an object of enquiry. Despite the skin being removed and the suggestion of an identity-less corpse, we know from early dissections that the dissected body often wasn't identity-less, but was identified as that of the criminal. Similarly, recent dissections are mainly performed on unclaimed unidentified bodies, donated by morgues to medical students for their studies. In Siopis' work she has clearly given the body some semblance of identification, but only a partial one. The flayed body references the history of flaying which served as a means of both gaining medical knowledge and of extreme torture, a figure much like the ubiquitous *écorchés* of Enlightenment imagery. While referencing the *écorchés,* the dead black figure under scrutiny also clearly suggests South African history, and the skin on which, and through which, the black body is constructed. In the work it appears that the two figures are performing a lesson in anatomical dissection, or an autopsy, in the hope of finding the cause of death. This is pertinent to the numerous deaths of prisoners from 'unknown causes' in apartheid South Africa: people were often imprisoned without trial and then 'found dead' in their cells. This work could possibly be referring to Steve Biko (1946-1977), an anti-apartheid activist, who died of 'unknown causes' in detention. Here, Siopis' assemblage could be understood as the act of making evident, or making visible, the hidden, resisting invisibility.

This work could be further suggestive of a needed dissection of the apartheid system, which is to a large degree hidden and buried. Here, Siopis' assemblage sees the painted and collaged

body uncovered, and yet there is the impossibility, even when employing forensic and scientific methods of dissection, of completely uncovering this body and finding the 'truth'. In creating this work through assemblage, Siopis points to the process of making visible: gathering or piecing together evidence, found material, in order to construct a 'body of evidence'. In *Art Johannesburg and Its Objects* (2008), David Bunn outlines the problem of mediating surface and depth, suggesting that depth has become unanchored, unhinged from its corresponding surface. Although Bunn speaks of this difficulty of this mediation in terms of Siopis' *Pinky Pinky* series, I suggest that this difficulty may also be illustrated in *Glory*. For, in this work, Siopis seems to be expressing the desire to locate evidence in order to arrive at some form of 'truth', while also showing that this 'truth' cannot be arrived at. Siopis particularly draws attention to the limitations of looking alone in attempts to find truth: for instance, the magnifying glass, while serving as a means to look more deeply into a particular area of the body, in fact doesn't appear to reveal the required knowledge.

The two white figures examining the body, though interested, appear to be detached and impassive, unmoved by the vulnerable and clearly traumatised body: the face appears to be violently distorted, although part of its skin remains, revealing the flayed body to be that of a black man. The body appears pitiful, vulnerable, without defence - the skin's absence reminds of its normally protective containing qualities. This work is suggestive of early paintings depicting dissection in the Enlightenment era, in which scholars and physicians would take a learned, dispassionate look at the body, often referring to a book of anatomical illustration. The pointing figure in *Glory* reiterates the scholarly or forensic nature of the work, drawing attention to the very notion of investigation. However, it also suggests an allotting of accountability or blame - a patronising gesture. Richards suggests that while the gesture of the pointing finger evokes both touch and the haptic, it is simultaneously a violent, jabbing gesture (Richards 2004). So Siopis equates the action of pointing and examination, the methodical and controlled meticulous looking, with a violation and violence inflicted on the body. But the closer looking, aided by the magnifying glass, reveals very little and appears quite abstract, allowing one to reflect on the body's beauty despite the horrific violence of the act. And while the work explores the vulnerability of the body and the liminal nature of the skin, the title *Glory* suggests some kind of sacrifice, even sainthood. However, here the term, which would usually celebrate the wonders of creation, takes on a sarcastic tone in the presence of such a loss.

***Pinky Pinky: Wounds* (2004)**

Both the *Pinky Pinky* and *Shame* series (2002 -) consider the relationship between individual and collective trauma or wounding, how personal tragedy and trauma is interpreted by the collective, and manifests itself in collective anxieties. The term 'shame' refers precisely to the schism between personal and public, personal thoughts and feelings becoming public and exposed. This boundary between the personal and the public is the same liminal space that the skin occupies, and it is on the skin that shame is manifest: in scars, in blushing. Mythical figures like Pinky Pinky - whom I describe below - come into being as a means of locating and allotting accountability, precisely because we don't have the capacity of expressing our shame both individually and collectively.

Pinky Pinky is a mythological character that exists in the space 'between' the girls' and boys' toilets at primary school; is neither explicitly male nor female, neither entirely human nor animal: "a figure then of extreme instability" (Nuttall 2004: 138). Pinky Pinky is a character that is essentially liminal and appears to be free of the constraints of skin's inscriptions, such as race, gender, class and age. It preys on young schoolgirls who are alone in the toilets, and who wear pink underwear. Toilets are a liminal space between public and private, a space of abjection where one retreats both for private moments of expelling waste and moments of reflection. Pink underwear could be understood as a young girl's first, often misunderstood, menstrual cycle, and as such acutely articulates the idea of shame - the shame of one's own body behaving out of the ordinary, and the shame of having a private moment become very public when it is clear to others the events of one's body.

Pinky Pinky is a character from the time of Siopis' own childhood, emerging at a particular moment of anxiety in South African history. However, the character seems to have re-emerged, perhaps in response to the new social anxieties in post-apartheid South Africa, such as the high prevalence of rape and sexually transmitted diseases: "Pinky Pinky seems to have lived in the 'old' South Africa - and to have been resurrected today and is living in our cities now" (Siopis in Nuttall 2004: 138). In recent years, Siopis has made a number of works about the mythical character.

Pinky Pinky: Wounds, (2004), (Fig. 22), is a larger than life-sized work, (380 x 122 cm), consisting of five canvases, which divide the figure of Pinky Pinky into head, torso, abdomen,

upper legs and lower legs. Each of the five panels comprise fields of all encompassing fleshy pink, which form a totalising skin. From these flat fields of colour, Siopis allows the figure and background to (e)merge. The figure is articulated by what appear to be wounds marked onto the paint's surface, tracing the outline of a body. In many ways the five panels allow for the painting to unfold much like the game of *Exquisite Corpse*[20]. Pinky Pinky, laid out on a table, exposed to our scrutiny, seems to be torched, dissected and possibly even dead, its image marked out in wounds on an existing and all encompassing skin, a skin that possibly isn't even his/ hers.

Pinky Pinky: Wounds, is installed in such a way that the work looms ominous and imposing above the viewer – an unavoidable force. This serves to overwhelm and even intimidate the viewer, actualising the mythical figure of Pinky Pinky in the gallery. Siopis has given Pinky Pinky agency and power, through her/his domination over the viewer, highlighting the significance of scale, and locating Pinky Pinky in a realm beyond the proportions of the human body. Here, Pinky Pinky comes to inhabit the monstrous, the grotesque, not as the body becoming unfamiliar landscape, as in Silverthorne's work, but as an enormous emotional anxiety.

The colour pink has a great deal of significance in terms of its relationship to skin and flesh, and so to race and inversions of race. Pink is a faux register of white skin, yet can also be understood to be the living flesh beneath the skin's surface and as such, present beneath all skin colours. "[P]inkness is a fear of corporeal engulfment" (Betterton 1996: 96). Pinkness in Siopis' work appears to mock femininity - by putting on a show of the feminine it also undercuts it. Pink is also closely connected to internal emotions and anxieties: fear, embarrassment, sexual desire and shame. Some of the *Pinky Pinky* works are painted in a dirty pink, this violation of the colour suggesting the violating acts that the character Pinky Pinky is thought to have enacted. Sarah Nuttall describes some of Siopis' brighter registers of pink as "the colour of the carnivalesque, a party pink" (Nuttall 2004:139). But although normally associated with young girls and careless frivolity, in the *Pinky Pinky* series, its excessive use and the fact that it is never balanced with complementary colours imbues it with sinister undertones (Nuttall 2004). Nuttall further suggests that Siopis consciously uses excessive amounts of pink not simply because of the mythical character's name and the nature of his/her crimes, but because pink allows her to play with the close relationship between the inscriptions of the skin and the flesh and the performance of the self and race (Nuttall 2004).

[20] Exquisite Corpse is a game whereby an image, usually of the body, is assembled collectively. Each participant adds to the image in sequence, after seeing only the end of the previous person's drawing. The resulting image is often a bizarre match of head torso and limbs, depicted in various styles.

In *Pinky Pinky: Wounds*, the 'wounds' depicted, although all over the figure, are particularly concentrated in two areas; around the mouth and nose and around the genitals - the body's orifices - where things are both incorporated into and expelled from the body. These two areas refer to the nature of the crimes that Pinky Pinky commits. The female genitals figure as wound, as lack, reinforcing the idea of shame that young girls experience in the public and private negotiation of their own bodies. And yet, as I discussed in chapter one, wounds always imply an inherent possibility of renewal, of healing and regained entirety. But through the site of the scar, the healing wound also remains a site of possible re-rupture, a reopening. As a figure comprised of wounds, Pinky Pinky is permanently vulnerable to the possibility of re-rupture. However, the irony is that these wounds are all that define Pinky Pinky, it is his/her wounds that give her/him his/her identity. The painting is the skin, the markings on the skin constitute the figure; the subject is written onto the skin only through the skin's rupture. Likewise, her/his crimes are only felt or 'seen' in the impressions or wounds enacted on his/her victims' skins. If these wounds healed, the figure of Pinky Pinky would no longer exist, Pinky Pinky is all flesh, wounds and eyes. In figuring Pinky Pinky in this way, he/she is made carnal and desiring, reflecting the nature of his/her crimes. It is suggested that he/she is only felt or 'seen' in the impressions or wounds enacted on his/her victim's skins.

Through this work, Siopis alludes to the phenomenon of violence creating violence; that those who endure violence come to re-inflict violence, for this is all that is familiar and known. A figure who is literally constituted and outlined by wounds, can only have endured a violent past that has shaped the self. Moreover, it is not clear where Pinky Pinky's wounds come from - they could be from the outside world, the manifestation on the skin's surface of the inner psychological and emotional world, or physically self-inflicted. This speaks to the skin as both a signifying, retaining surface and a materially embodied tactile surface. The anxieties that are present on his/her skin seem to be his/her own but also suggest society's own anxieties around the feminine and the perpetrator. And one cannot help but feel some empathy for Pinky Pinky who stands tall despite the innumerable violations that constitute him/her. There is a sense that Siopis had intended Pinky Pinky to be seen as operating as a scapegoat for unexplained violence. Here we are reminded Pinky Pinky is both victim and perpetrator, suggestive of the traumatic apartheid past and processes of reconciliation. *Pinky Pinky: Wounds* suggests that not only are we defined by our wounds, but by the skin on which these wounds figure. For this work not only shows that our environment and our very personal experiences manifest themselves

through our wounds, but that these wounds are articulated on an overwhelming, all encompassing skin. As such, we ourselves are simply skin, reiterating James Joyce's aphorism that "modern man has an epidermis rather than a soul" (Joyce sited Connor 9: 2004).

Eyes play a significant role in Siopis' work, giving them a haunting quality, and giving the viewer the uncanny sense of being watched - the inserted eyes 'following' our movement. If only in one's peripheral vision, there is a sense of Pinky Pinky's sinister omnipresence, suggesting surveillance and encouraging us to watch over our shoulders, to be uncomfortable in our own skins. Siopis reminds us here that we are always implicated in that which we witness - we are never innocent bystanders. Protruding eyes are also suggestive of living eyes behind or within the painted surface, which remind of scenes in cartoons of criminals hiding behind paintings, secretly surveying. This insertion of an object into the work juxtaposes the materiality of the painted surface, while it serves to give life to the figure of Pinky Pinky.

In *Pinky Pinky: Wounds,* Pinky Pinky boldly stares out at the viewer with bulging, hooded eyes, which confront the viewer, seeming to afford Pinky Pinky some agency, and reminding the viewer of their own implication in his/her hurt and pain. Pinky Pinky's hooded eyes suggest a calmness and unaffectedness despite his/her abject state, which contributes to the horror of the image. We come to understand that the figure of Pinky Pinky is a tragic one - one that re-inflicts the hurt and wounds that have come to constitute who he/she is, and that in many ways are all that is familiar to him/ her.

What resonates in this series is that, although the figure of Pinky Pinky itself is imaginary, it speaks of real people who are defined by their wounds and who act out their own violent pasts on others. Pinky Pinky reflects poignantly on South Africa's recent traumatic past, both during and post-apartheid, and points to bereaved individuals whose wounds cannot heal and who know little else besides these wounds.

Both of these works, (*Glory* and *Pinky Pinky: Wounds*), refer to the complexities of skin in contemporary South Africa - the racialised and wounded skin. Although in *Glory* the black body is silenced and controlled, the scarred and tragically wounded figure of Pinky Pinky seems vague and unknown, and, as such, uncontrollable, the locus of fear. The figure of Pinky Pinky defies racial categorisation, and yet speaks to the deeply racialised traumas of contemporary South Africa, traumas that play themselves out on the surface of the body.

The Powers of Magnification[21] in the work of Jeanne Silverthorne

In her early works, Silverthorne investigated the materiality of the body and its surface, seldom portraying the body in traditional figurative ways. Her works were concerned “more with the means and materials of sculpture, than with its end product" (Glueck 2000: unpaginated). Silverthorne’s work references the skin through exploring the scale and materiality of surface. By using the electron microscope in her investigation of the surface and substance of the body, Silverthorne places in question the lived body as a primary reference point of meaning. Her abstracted, grotesque and fractured representations of the body are connected by a thin ‘umbilical cord’ that literally runs through her larger oeuvre. There is a suggestion that the close up views of the body and its surface that Silverthorne’s low relief sculptures are somehow uncannily alive, growing beyond the frames issued to contain them. In these earlier works, the body under the microscope seems to be in conflict with its regularisation and delimitation through the scientific scopic methods that Silverthorne uses. As such, the works project beyond the parameters of the frame, ‘straining’ against the controlling view, that simultaneously denies the body a visceral and tangible presence while failing to contain these bodily fragments.

Silverthorne’s primary media is rubber latex, which she employs partly for the qualities it shares with the skin - for instance, its elasticity and its ability to contain and insulate. Rubber allows her works to take on a three-dimensional form, suggesting the three-dimensionality of the body. Moreover, the materiality of rubber evokes eroticism and a sense of touch. Silverthorne’s use of this industrial material speaks of a masculine minimalist aesthetic and influence, yet, up close, rubber is soft and pliable, inviting touch, thus more suggestive of the 'feminine'. “Rubber is Jeanne Silverthorne's medium and muse. With its industrial and erotic associations, it lets something dark, absurd and possibly sinister into the house of fine art,” (Johnson 2003: Unpaginated). The ability of rubber latex to retain impressions with accuracy and detail suggests the skin and its own potential to retain impressions. Moreover, rubber used to cast objects potentially speaks of the skin itself as a cast of the body. Silverthorne uses rubber to cast and contain the body, holding the insides in, maintaining the integrity between inside and outside, private and public. Her process is one that necessarily speaks of skin. In casting clay models of her sculptures and low-reliefs Silverthone’s works are ‘cast off skins’ of these models. Yet her media, rubber, in its opacity, has an uncanny ability to deaden, almost suffocate as it insulates. Perhaps, in her use of rubber, Silverthorne points to the similarly contradictory nature of skin - its

[21] ‘The Powers of Magnification’ is on loan from a review of Silvethorne’s work by Raphael Rubinstein, Art in America, 1997.

ability to both protect and insulate, offering the body agency to move, touch, and feel the world, and yet also constraining and imprisoning the self. Idiomatic expressions that reference skin, as discussed in chapter one, often play out this contradiction - sometimes the word 'skin' is used as a substitute for the 'body' or 'person', and at other times it is used to describe that which imprisons and disguises the self (Benthien 2002).

Silverthorne's early practice, in creating her biomorphic[22] sculptures, involved a process of enlarging residual off-cuts found in her studio, off-cuts from the production of her previous works. Here, one work feeds another, much like the cells of the skin - which have also often formed the subject of her work - 'flaking off' in the process of regeneration and renewal. Silverthorne's early works possess an unfinished quality, bearing trace evidence of the unseen - their construction and the site of construction, the studio. In showing these traces, Silverthorne creates "objective correlatives for the nonsubstantial" (Silverthorne in Siegel 2004). Silverthorne uses the studio and the gallery as an extension of the body: "the studio turns out to be incarcereal. We shall not be released. As there is no projection without incorporation, we are the space. The wall of the studio becomes covered with our skin. Its guts are our entrails, dangling wires our ganglia, plumbing is intestines," (Silverthorne, quoted in Neff 1996: unpaginated). Here, the body and the studio are interchangeable - "[b]ody and architecture seem to merge" (Cotter 1999). Silverthorne's references to the studio in her work suggest not only the place of creation but invoke, in the process of creating an exhibition, the process of eliminating and hiding the trace of the studio. Silverthorne resists the traditional expectation on artists to present work unfettered by the traces of its production, for that which is usually hidden and unseen is precisely what she is preoccupied with:

> Looking around at the room [is] a potential source for my sculptural forms. Then as now, the room I'm looking at tends to be the studio and in that particular studio there were a lot of exposed wires and old-fashioned electrical boxes. I thought that would be a nice metaphor for internal organs, the plumbing of the body, the neurons, the ganglia and so forth. (Silverthorne Interview with Rubenstein 1995: unpaginated)

Silverthorne's early works engage the skin directly. *Normal Skin II,* (1990), and *Sun-Damaged Collagen,* (1992), (Fig. 23 and 24), serve as "portraits" of healthy and sun-damaged skin as seen under a light microscope. The works are electron-microscope images that are enlarged and cast

[22] The term biomorphic combines two Greek words, *bios*, meaning life, and *morphe*, meaning form. Biomorphic forms or images are ones that, while abstract, refer to, or evoke, living forms such as plants and the human body.

as three-dimensional sculptures in latex rubber. In a later series of sculptures, Silverthorne images the chemical reactions within the body that take place when aroused by extreme emotional states, which ultimately come to manifest themselves on the surface of the body, for example, *Crying Eyes*, (2002), (Fig. 25). In *Gall, Wall of Bladder (Large)*, (2000) and *Ulcer, Bacteria Promoting,* (2002), (Fig. 26 and 27), she depicts the inner, hidden linings and tissue of the body.

In Silverthorne's *Gossip Series* (1982-1984), (Fig. 28), a modelled prosthesis is paired with words. The pairing suggests that language is a kind of prosthesis, extending Silverthorne's reach beyond the limits of the body. Yet within this is a sense of the body being hindered, 'injured', which acknowledges the potential damage that language has done to the body: "language weighs heavily upon the body in Jeanne Silverthorne's work, perhaps because she gives it weight, embodies it in sculptural form, or perhaps because in Silverthorne's work language always represents loss or damage to the body," (Isaak 1996: 203). Here, language is literally a crutch, and the body is literally written by language. These works prefigure a more explicit engagement with the materiality of the body and the skin, to be found in Silverthorne's later works.

Silverthorne's tactile seductive views of the body offer an intimacy and tangibility to a scientific – and so usually abstracted and dehumanised - view of the body and it's surface. In doing this she reconnects the abstracted, 'scientific' body with the tactile and lived body. However, although she creates these connections - between tactility and visuality, intimacy and abstraction, the skin, the body and the literal fixtures and electrical connections that are woven throughout her installations - the viewer's position in relation to them is never resolved. The electrical cables and bulbs are rubber casts, and so the potential illumination the originals possessed is forever lost; the 'lights don't go on', the connection isn't made. The installation remains unanimated, a deadened substance, much like a peeled and discarded skin, only a cast of what it could be. This visual trickery is key to Silverthorne's practice, where nothing is as it appears to be. The viewer has to do a 'double-take' - a cursory glance across the work is not sufficient. In this way, Silverthorne questions not only the value of the original, but also questions the viewer's sense of sight, showing it to be partial and unreliable.

Despite much of her work exploring the body; its interior, its abstraction in her microscope works, and the use of the studio/gallery as metaphor for the body, the body in its recognisable form and scale is largely absent from Silverthorne's work. While, for instance, Silverthorne's enlarged microscopic images of skin offer unequivocal access to the body, this absence of the body in a recognisable form is unsettling. Silverthorne's reference to the body without explicit representation allows for an absent presence, the body a ghostly apparition. Moreover, in this intentional omission Silverthorne makes the viewer hyper conscious of their own body and the space itself as designed to be inhabited and used by bodies. Perhaps here Silverthorne speaks of the absent body of the sweatshop factory worker who once occupied the building, making this body 'visible'.

The Gallery as Body

I have chosen to consider Silverthorne's 1997 McKee Gallery exhibition, *Jeanne Silverthorne: New Sculpture*, as an entire installation (Fig. 29 and 30). Silverthorne's exhibition at the McKee Gallery consisted of a number of works that responded directly to the specific space of the gallery, a loft-conversion in downtown New York. Such spaces - which were converted into 'luxury' domestic living spaces in the gentrification of the 1990s - often operated as sweat-shop factories in the early twentieth century. These spaces still hold residues of their previous urban functions. Although the exhibition consisted of several individuated sculptures and a series of low relief works depicting the skin, it can be considered as a single and entire installation (Silverthorne made the exhibition with this space in mind). The individual works in the exhibition do not act independently of each other: "while the works could be appreciated individually, there was also a sense, subtle but insistent, of the show as a single interconnected system or organism," (Rubenstein 1997: 100). Moreover, the works themselves and their installation speak of Silverthorne's guiding interest in the architecture of both the building and the body, each operating as a correlate for the other. In considering the exhibition space as a single and entire environment, Silverthorne alludes to the skin as a single, all encompassing and connective environment:

> I almost never think of a piece as standing completely alone. Even though I may show it on its own, it's quite likely that later on it will be combined with another element to make a new work. Shifting and combining is a way of keeping meaning on the move. I believe that meaning is something to always be making but never to arrive at. (Silverthorne Interview with Rubenstein 1995: Unpaginated)

One of three freestanding biomorphic sculptures within the installation, *Untitled (Fragment)* (1996), (See installation view), is a sculpture based on an enlarged view of a discarded debris from her sculptural process found in her studio, which is also included in the exhibition. Using a magnifying glass to examine the fragment, Silverthorne modelled a larger version of the fragment in clay and then cast it in black rubber (Rubinstein, 1997). Here Silverthorne has magnified the by-product of her own labour. The sculpture appears to spill uncontained off its plinth, and is literally connected to the works on the wall by rubber cords, one of which is roped around the plinth of the work, yielding a rubber light bulb. The exposed light bulb resting on the plinth appears to have the potential to illuminate, and yet, being only a cast of rubber, it is impotent to do so. In fact it does the reverse, for black rubber absorbs any light on its surface, thus inverting the light bulb's intended function. The rubber also operates as a kind of synthetic skin, reiterating its potential capacity to insulate. Just as rubber usually serves to insulate the vulnerable wires within, so the skin insulates the vulnerable organs and tissues that constitute the body.

The rubber wires that run throughout Silverthorne's installation read not only as electrical wiring or plumbing, but also as bodily networks and systems, and so expose what is normally hidden behind the walls of the gallery or the skin of the body:

> […] my wire pieces were, for me, especially at that time, were less about wiring and more about neurons and ganglia and intestines. Although it was an architectural installation – taking what is usually behind the walls, the plumbing and the wiring, and disgorging these innards into the space – it was very much about the human body. (Silverthorne Interview with Isaak 1996b: 16)

In their organic installation, the wires contrast with the stark minimalism of the linear and angular framing and installation of the surrounding works - serving to map out and link separate parts of the exhibition.

The exhibition included a series of painting-like sculptures of skin at various magnitudes surrounded by ornate frames. Silverthorne's rubber frames are casts of ornate frames, and bear traces of their construction. The framing of the works that serve to contain these intimate views of the body, and keep these works suspended between sculpture and painting, are part of the works themselves. Here the framing is a contested border, both part of and separate from the work. Even the boundary of the frame is liminal and incorporated, engulfed in skin, thus Silverthorne speaks to the liminal framing and containment that the skin provides for the body. This 'framing' of her work is further suggestive of the traditionally framed portrait or landscape. Such homely 'kitsch' seemed oddly out of place in the austere contemporary gallery space, which tends to value minimalism and its understated frames. The fact that even the framing is 'false', goes some way towards encouraging a sense of mistrust in what is presented and seen throughout the exhibition.

Silverthorne's framing encourages the viewer to look beyond appearances, to seek out what lies beneath the surface of the gallery walls, for in these framed works there is a tension between, on the one hand, the confining regularity of the frames, which contribute to a 'curiosity cabinet' or museum-like display of the exhibition, and the excess of the objects that they contain, on the other. The interior of the seemingly neatly framed work threatens to spill beyond the confines of the frame, and the sculptural three-dimensional objects invite touch. In this exhibition, framing, which traditionally has been used to make artwork intelligible, and to separate work from the surrounding space, has become part of the work of art itself.

In presenting these framed fragments of the skin, just as a scientist takes specimens – fragments of a whole - Silverthorne suggests a larger whole, of which the viewer sees only a part. The part suggests the missing whole, what is not represented, what cannot be represented in its entirety. The skin is everything; we look at only a portion, a single cell, but it is an entire network. This is evident in other works by Silverthorne, where she takes fragments of her process, off-cuts, and enlarges them with a magnifying glass, giving significance to something that appears little and insignificant but suggests a larger whole. Thus the framing acts as a device for peering into these alternative worlds, suggesting windows to the body beneath the walls, and going some way towards highlighting the skin that the walls provide to the gallery. Benthien suggests that this body-house metaphor emerges from Enlightenment understandings of the skin as container: the flesh and skin being likened to the hard exterior walls of a house; the windows being the eyes, not dissimilar to the notion of the eyes as the windows to the soul;

and the mouth and anus as doorways into the body-as-house. The metaphor also works inversely: the house as body. However, both Benthien and Silverthorne find the metaphor insufficient, for the body-house metaphor operates as an abstract spatial arrangement and doesn't incorporate the sensory and physical body (Benthien 2002). Even so, Silverthorne consciously refers to the spaces in which she works as body-like. Buildings carry the residues of bodies that enter them and that live between their walls, and at the same time bodies carry the imprint of those spaces that they inhabit - it is this tactile and sensual contact that interests Silverthorne:

> […] spaces one spends a lot of time in are intertwined with the body. When you're in a studio or a place of intense and long occupation, you almost feel that the walls are your skin and that the innards of the building are your innards. It's not just metaphorical; it begins to feel like a physical swap of some kind. Your body learns the space, and an osmosis occurs (…) the space literally begins to imprint itself on you. (Silverthorne Interview with Isaak 1996b: 13)

Silverthorne gives voice and substance to thoughts and abstraction through the placement of the strange with, and within, the familiar. By doing this she destabilises the expected functions and behaviour of familiar objects, rendering them unfamiliar and impotent.

In this installation, Silverthorne points to, and encourages, closer inspection of underlying systems in buildings, bodies and language. She draws attention to the system within the system - the house in the body, the body in the house, and points to the visual as well as functional correlates between these systems. The very spaces that contain the body also echo the body, there are residues of the body in the house, and of the house in the body. The systems that Silverthorne evokes are often failing or defunct, and though they are suggestive of function and illumination they remain impotent.

Sweat Pore, (1999)

Jeanne Silverthorne's *Sweat Pore,* (1999), (Fig. 31), is a low relief rubber sculpture of a framed human sweat pore, cast from a clay model based on an enlarged electron-microscope image. *Sweat Pore* sits between painting and sculpture, deliberately challenging the distinction between these two disciplines. *Sweat Pore* is a circular work, referencing not only the circular nature of a sweat pore, but the circularity of the lens of the microscope or magnifying glass, the technology which Silverthorne has employed to magnify the body. Here the body is depicted as both familiar

and unfamiliar. Familiar in that sweat pores populate our entire bodies, and yet - at this grossly exaggerated scale - unfamiliar, foreign, seductive and monstrous. *Sweat Pore* is “[o]stensibly scientific, it also exists as an absurd 'sentimental' portrait of an anonymous individual toward whom we feel attachment and revulsion,” (Taplin 2001).

This attraction and repulsion may be due in part to the fact that the sweat pore is an orifice, a liminal site of entry and exit to the body, the site of potential abjection. More than this, we feel attached to it as representing a part of our bodies, but we cannot identify with it at this alien scale, so we feel repelled by it. When confronted with the materiality of the body in this way, the individual is made to feel uncomfortable, to feel some self disgust at what their body looks like at this level of magnification, perhaps quietly reflecting on ways in which to control and manage it.

The title of this work - *Sweat Pore* - operates as literal scientific rhetoric, serving to dehumanise its intimate view, in contrast to later works exhibited at Shoshana Wayne Gallery, *Thin-skinned* (2000) and *Aching* (2001), where the titles speak to the sensations that they depict, reclaiming these sensations and placing the works within a corporeal lexicon (Myers 2002). While *Sweat Pore* serves to abstract from the body on one level, the title also serves as a key that activates the body as a scalar referent. Here, the microscopic image is relocated to the scale of lived experience, the scale of embodiment. Silverthorne’s stark, monochrome reliefs also reference the electron microscope’s ‘other worldly’ quality - images from the electron-microscope are usually black and white photographic images - and simultaneously invite the viewer into a tactile engagement with the work, through its flesh-like qualities of rubber. In doing this she gives tactile presence to an unfamiliar view of the very organ that offers the body a sense of touch.

Silverthorne’s process questions ideas of the singular original; some works are cast and editioned, and others made by the lost wax model process, in which the original is lost in the process of casting. Thus, as I understand this the surface, or skin, comes to constitute the whole work. Further to this in the process of creating work, Silverthorne leaves behind recognisable trace evidence both of her process and her own body. Silverthorne’s own fingerprints and marks appear as recognisable traces of a body in the laboured construction of her work. The fingerprints evident in the work bear evidence of her hands having manipulated the clay, which testify to her laboured process and remind of the possibility of human error in her translation of the electron microscope image.

Silverthorne's work is preoccupied with formalism, particularly where enormous scale shifts mean that representation registers as abstraction. Her accuracy appears at first glance to be abstraction, suggesting that the closer we look the less we actually recognise and know. It is, in fact, only the titles that allow the viewer access to the actual subject of the work. Seen at this magnified scale, the sweat pore is not simply a hole in the skin, it appears to be a complex volcanic landscape, an evocative foreign world, or possibly an aerial view of our own planet. The unfamiliarity of the object means the viewer is dependent on the work's title in order to understand what it depicts. One of a series of similar sculptural paintings that Silverthorne has made from magnified images of the skin and body tissue is *More Collagen*, (1998), (Fig. 32). The title serves to (re)locate the apparently foreign abstract object - microscopic matter - as part of a living body (and even as part of the viewer's own body). In this process of presenting the familiar body as unfamiliar, and creating such a reliance on the title of the work in order to locate the work, Silverthorne suggests a mistrust of our own senses as a means of acquiring and interpreting information.

It seems poignant that Silverthorne has chosen to image a sweat pore found on the surface of a human body, one of millions of pores that populate the human skin, a pore through which our skin breathes and perspires. It is possibly the act of labour and the residue of this labour that Silverthorne is here considering, its traces left on the spaces which we inhabit. Indeed, the building that houses the McKee Gallery, where Silverthorne first exhibited the work, was thought to have once been a *sweat*-shop factory. Yet the sweat pore also points to the possible markings of labour left on the body. So, by making the sweat pore the subject of this work, Silverthorne draws attention to the skin as the surface of interaction between the body and its environments, and signals the openings that populate the lived body surface.

Silverthorne has given both an intimate portrait of the landscape the body, one might even say a more insightful view of the body than a more traditional representation of the body - one that allows the body to be seen as more than surface, one that gives the surface depth.

The inner body in Silverthorne's work while a place of abjection and aberration, is seductive and beautiful. Silverthorne has transformed the body as messy and abject to being exquisite and relatively contained, though this containment is always threatened. This is achieved through not only framing the work but by reducing her palate to one colour, allowing for a close consideration of surface and texture. The framing of the *Sweat Pore* suggests also that the pore is singular,

that we are simply presented with a fragment, a small portion of a larger field that is the skin and the body. The image of a single sweat pore is abstracting and reductive, since the body is a field of millions of sweat pores. This leaves the viewer in awe of the magnitude and complexity of the body at the molecular level.

Silverthorne's work on the skin could be understood as an attempt to revive the skin, which is rendered disembodied by the technology of the microscope. Silverthorne questions what medical imaging technologies have given and taken away. Medical imaging has allowed a closer looking, and yet this process is simultaneously disembodying and alienating. This suggests the way in which medical imagery standardises the human body, which ultimately fuels the idealising of the body and the idea that anything that differs from this ideal is 'abnormal'.

While Silverthorne works within what could be described as a minimalist aesthetic, she destabilises this minimalism through humourous interruptions of context and scale. In scrutinising the very act of looking, Silverthorne highlights the masculine, penetrative and abstracted gaze that has framed both scientific knowledge and art production, turning the gaze in on itself. Silverthorne's work contains a complex engagement with the scale, viscerality and tactility of the body in a contemporary society that is often disembodying and abstracting. At the scale of the microscopic, Silverthorne reveals instability, spaces where the body resists the limitations of the gaze. She also gives substance to the apparently non-rational, to bodily emotions and experiences that are manifest both on the skin's surface and at a cellular level. This is an attempt to critique the authority of scientific looking, and to allow the uncontained organic body to exist.

Silverthorne penetrates into the depth of the surface, offering a frighteningly tactile and visceral confrontation with the abstract and microscopic body. She mimics the materiality of skin in the rubber extensions that connect her works like umbilical cords, with a physicality evokes the ultimately body. Similarly, for Siopis, the process of painting is a process of making visible the invisible. Her paintings operate as a literal and conceptual practice in which the act of making visible is an act against invisibility, that is, Siopis' painted surfaces are an attempt to create the conditions for making evident and inscribing personal and collective traumas. She is concerned with the overwhelming, anxious and scarred surface beneath which lies an ominous unknown

CHAPTER FOUR:
I'M NOT HERE: SKIN IN MY OWN ART PRODUCTION

The concepts that I have considered in this thesis - surface and depth, visuality, intimacy and distance, opticality and tactility, the abject, scale, and the haptic - inform my own art practice. In it, I have engaged with and developed the material discussed in the theoretical component of my research. The first and second chapters challenged and destabilised the predominant modes of inquiry through which skin is understood, i.e. the reading of the surface as superfluous covering, and privileging looking as 'objective'. These approaches to knowledge have contributed to the abstraction and individuation of the body and the skin. In critiquing these forms of knowledge I have argued for an embodied understanding of the skin, which would look to the insights to be gained from all the senses in conversation with each other. I suggested that inherent in inhabiting skin, are a number of anxieties connected to the liminality of surface. These anxieties are largely contained in the tension between expectations of protection and containment on the one hand, and anxieties about exposure and excess on the other. In this chapter I want to connect these anxieties to what I see as two concurrent desires: that of escaping the skin and that of creating a new skin[23].

The title of this chapter, *I'm not here,* [24] is an attempt to capture this elusive life of skin. It points to the skin as intertwined with questions of identity; as potentially separate from the body yet inextricable from the embodied self. 'I'm not here' reads as a paradox, since both 'I am' and 'here' imply presence. The statement implies an 'absent presence', reflecting the way in which the skin and self are separate, as well as the impossibility of this. On the one hand, the skin is here but 'I' am not, suggesting that the self and skin are not synonymous - the self extends beyond the skin's limits. In this sense, 'I'm not here' suggests that 'I' am more than this skin, exceeding and *escaping* the skin. In other words, the subject is more than its surface. On the other hand, 'I'm not here' suggests that the 'I' is elsewhere, which points to the possibility of other incarnations. Significant here, is the suggestion of a second skin, albeit metaphorically. These two concurrent desires of escape and creation have animated my own body of work, even if they have emerged largely intuitively through my process.

[23]These two competing desires of escaping the skin and forging a new skin, on some level, can be likened to the base mode of "fight or flight", which is a physiological nervous system response to a threat to survival.
[24]This title is on loan from the film *I'm Not There* (2007), which explores the musician, Bob Dylan's life, in which six characters embody various aspects of Dylan's life and career. In borrowing this title I point to the various identities the skin affords the body.

While my paintings have explored the possibilities and limits of creating a new or second skin, I believe that this has been driven by an anxiety about the limits of my own existing skin. I believe that the desire at play in the creation of a new skin is one of sanctuary and protection. I engage the desire to 'escape' the skin primarily through my photographic works. Here I consider the possibilities of being unhinged, free from the prescribed identities of gender, race and genetic make up, all of which prefigure and configure me. Of course, inherent within the desire to shed the skin, is the possibility of inhabiting or taking up a new skin and, as such, these two desires are always in a recursive relationship or dialogue.

Creating a new Skin: Painting

My paintings explore paint as 'materially embodied surface'. In other words, I allow the materiality of paint to take on an embodied depth by manifesting a tactile surface that 'operates' as a skin. These works come to parallel skin's materiality and structure, and I subject them to many of the same conditions. The works are not intended simply to represent skin, but are themselves actual embodied surfaces.

The creation of a second skin suggests, as I've mentioned above, protection and shield, but most significantly for me there is the suggestion of a new unfettered surface on which to inscribe new signification. Anxieties of identity are often associated with skin, its frailty, and the possibility that it might be unable to contain and protect the body. The paintings operate on a visual level, 'depicting' an image, and they also operate to evoke the touch sense, necessarily requiring the viewer to look and touch, or, as I've suggested earlier, they call for a haptical looking. By evoking the sense of touch I attempt to reinsert embodiment back into the visual depictions or representations of it.

The process of creating these works serves to articulate the layering and signification of skin, while also exposing the constructedness of the works, e.g. the drip of paint reminds that the work is a painting and thus has a maker. By drawing attention to this process I also draw attention to the role my own body has played in their construction. Painting itself, as practice and object, is, like the skin, subject to inscription and re-inscription. And these inscriptions - brush stroke impressions or paint drips - bear the trace of a lived body, that of the artist. My own body is always present in my paintings partly by accident (in the necessary process of making a painting) and party intentionally, through the more deliberate and premeditated markings and

decisions made in the act of creating a painting. I further ‘insert’ myself into my works by creating stretcher frames that are proportionally based on my own body scale.

By exploring paint as materially embodied surface I allow the painting to live the life of a skin, working with the materiality of the surface itself. I explore how paint makes and collapses its own surface and take it to the limits of this constraint and collapse. I subject the painted surface to inscription by its own materiality and temporality. Just as the painting process is one of ‘hiding’ and ‘revealing’ things, so too the skin is in a constant process of becoming, concealing and revealing. The painting is subject to a constant process of erasure and exposure - in this way the works are positioned between visibility and invisibility, between representation and the experiential material.

This body of paintings has emerged as a process of coming to terms with and contesting my own skin, to expose the skin in its capacity and limitations, to show the information that it reveals and conceals (regardless of my consent), its constructedness, its potential to signify and to signify wrongly. As the paintings become more sculptural, and thus less traditionally situated, I challenge the very discipline of painting. The simultaneous materiality and fluidity, both in the process of creating the works and the fluid volatile nature of the paint material itself, transcend and resist the static two-dimensional, the singular, allowing the multiple, exploded, ruptured and unstable body to signify on the skin surface.

The two materials I work with are enamel paint and vinyl. While each of these materials shares qualities with the skin, I am aware that they are synthetic materials, like skin in some respects, but ultimately unlike real skin. Thus I work with these materials not as imitations of skin, but rather as ‘skins’ in and of themselves, and it is through these skins that I explore the various possibilities of human skin. I apply enamel paint in thick layers, which allows for the paint to congeal and dry on the surface, remaining viscous and moist beneath. In this process, the paint wrinkles and puckers, taking on the appearance of lived, aging skin. Enamel paint has a particular elasticity that allows it to accommodate fluid and viscous paint within. This viscous paint under the surface shifts and sags in response to gravity, and I take advantage of this quality, constantly reorienting the painting over the weeks that it may take to form a dry and hardened surface layer. And in covering the entire surface area of the vinyl 'canvas' with enamel paint I deliberately induce an all encompassing, seamless surface, much like the surface of the skin.

The paintings I produced for my Masters exhibition grew out of my fourth year undergraduate painting final exhibition, (Fig. 33) in which I explored the limitations and possibilities of the materiality of paint itself. Skin and paint echo each other in that paint can be layered, that oil based paints themselves dry on a superficial level creating a 'skin' under which a wet liquid paint lies, which takes much longer to harden and dry properly. So my paintings not only resemble skin, but emphasise the formal and conceptual qualities of the media itself.

A significant shift in my paintings occurred when I was encouraged to work on a larger scale, which subsequently influenced my choice of media, decisions about the surface onto which I painted and the way in which I applied the paint. I replaced the small tubes of oil paint, which would no longer suffice on this new found scale, with large tins of enamel paint; this prompted me to use large industrial paint brushes, and then even these I abandoned altogether, choosing rather to pour, pool and variously thin the paint. In using enamel paint I also found that canvas was no longer a suitable substrate upon which to work; the fluid enamel paint seeped through the material, which couldn't cope with the weight of paint I was now pouring onto it. So I chose vinyl over canvas, simply to contain the weight and fluidity of the enamel paint. Vinyl serves as a synthetic under-skin. It has a generic manufactured impression repeated evenly and regularly across its surface, which can be read as a stand in for skin or leather. The plastic outer covering of vinyl allowed for the paint to remain on the surface and the elastic meshed backing offered the surface a measure of elasticity which held the weight of the paint in a body-like manner. I came to connect this process of experimenting with the materiality of paint and vinyl with a more theoretical interest in the surface of the body. I came to consciously think about the paint as a skin, drawing an analogy between the surface matter of my paintings and my own embodied surface. This led me to explore and test the limits of a number of other materials that have skin-like qualities, in a deliberate attempt to create an embodied surface, a new skin. I subsequently worked with the vinyl as a skin itself, no longer seeing it as the 'blank canvas', on which the painted surface came to figure. The generic manufactured impression repeated on its surface contrasted with the organic figurings of the painted skin, highlighting the different materiality and the shortcomings of each medium.

The surface of my paintings are created in the interplay between the chance pooling, wrinkling or breaking of the enamel paint and the more considered application and manipulation of the paint. I manipulate enamel paint in both its liquid and congealed states by tilting the canvas,

allowing separate pools of paint to join while keeping others distinct. In applying the enamel paint thickly I consciously build up areas of the painting. I contrast these densely worked areas with areas in which I use turpentine to thin the paint to a transparent glaze. In doing this I push the limits of the properties of paint as material, impressing objects into its surface, peeling the painted 'skin' off the vinyl base, stretching it and pooling it, allowing it to congeal much like blood. By working with and between liquid and dry states of paint, the paintings seem to take on a life of their own, their unfixed, even volatile nature meaning that that they resist closure and fixity.

This process, of both layering paint and thinning it, is a deliberate attempt to emphasise the potential of the paint to operate as a skin – an opaque skin that possesses layers and a 'depth', as well as a translucent, frail skin. Thus the process of painting mimics the construction of the lived skin and is subject to similar conditions that the embodied skin is subject to. The thickness of the paint and the protrusions of wet paint contained in pouches of dried paint push the surface of the painting beyond the two-dimensional. Occasionally the weight of the wet paint beneath the dried surface cannot be accommodated, and subsequently ruptures and bursts under the force of gravity. It is in these moments that the wet paint inside flows out, enacting a kind of wounding. This simulates the ruptured skin of the lived body, demonstrating both the limits of skin and the limits of this painted surface, but also its ability to maintain its integrity under extreme duress and its capacity to 'heal' itself upon rupturing. This is part of a process of testing the durability and responsiveness of my painted skin.

The work of time is also important to this process. Just as human skin changes, ages and is subject to entropy and the laws of nature, my paintings are also vulnerable to gravity and 'aging', responding to these processes in a similar fashion to human skin. The viscous paint beneath collects at the bottom of the works, creating a tumor like growth or pouch. The paintings also take time in order for each layer of their 'skins' to be created. By drawing attention to this process of painting, I allow the paintings themselves to record and encapsulate the time taken for their construction. This reflects the way in which skin can be seen as a memory device that records time, albeit subjectively.

The paintings are never complete, they are part of an ongoing process, and are always at some stage in progress. I continually rework my paintings, revisiting older works, applying more 'coats' of enamel paint, building the skin up, and as such I never have a preconception about their form.

I primarily work in various registers of pink, a colour evocative of raw and vulnerable flesh, almost as 'unseen' skin. This echoes the way that pinkness comes to figure in the work of Siopis. Similarly to Siopis I create fields of colour in which there is a close figure / ground relationship, while Siopis's works retain a sense of the object or subject, i.e. Pinky Pinky, my work tends towards abstraction. Pink is a colour that is associated with femininity, and with bodily abjection. If the female body is read in registers of surface and the corporeal, then pinkness here is not only the raw flesh that we all share, but rather a more ominous association with the feminine: "pinkness, softness, malleability and disorder are the signs of the feminine body within the symbolic order (…) femininity here is not the *unrepresented* of our culture, but what is all too present on its surface as fetishised object" (Betterton 1998: 96). Here, pinkness comes to mock femininity. In putting on a show or a veneer of the feminine, it therefore serves to undercut this notion. In covering the entire surface area with enamel paint I create an all encompassing, seamless surface much like the skin surface. The deliberate excess of pink enamel paint, whereby every surface is indiscriminately covered with paint, exposes the threat of what Betterton refers to as "corporeal engulfment" (1998:96). On the one hand the pink surfaces are alluring and seductive, on the other they are repellent in their excess, evoking simultaneously an anxiety of lack of containment - dislocation - and of containment - claustrophobia. This excess of the surface is obsessively repeated in the installation of the works. Each painting is a part of the whole, tightly juxtaposed with several others of various scales and dimensions, creating an overwhelming expansive environment of a flawed and fragmented skin or landscape.

It is not only the material itself, but also the specific registers of colour and the ways in which I manipulate enamel paint in the process of creating the painted surface, that lends the material to organic figurings evocative of an embodied skin. In the pouring and pooling of paint, images and surfaces emerge, much like images appear to emerge and dissipate in clouds. When a figure begins to emerge I draw out the suggested image. And even when I am not overtly creating an image of a body, the body and its surface is always suggested.

Lucien Freud is one of a number of artists who have explored the idea that paint could operate not just to represent skin but could possess a skin in its own right: "As far as I am concerned the paint is the person [...] I want it to work for me just as flesh does" (Freud, quoted in L. Gowing 1982:190-91). At stake here is an attempt to engage the materiality and tactility of surface. While

looking requires a distance, and implies a separation between body and work, touching, or the desire to touch, requires an intimacy. The haptic, as I have discussed in the second chapter, is an important concept in this regard, as it allows for a kind of looking that invokes the sense of touch. In appealing to the viewer's senses of both sight and touch, my painted works encourage a looking that is both close up and far away. The scale of the works allows them to operate at an 'intimate distance'. Up close the work appears a tactile skin and from afar reads as a topography or landscape. Here the viewer is invited to simultaneously engage the body and the skin surface close up, as well as from a distance, taking in the entire work.

While the viewer is drawn to the surface of these works, there is something distinctly alien and artificial about the materiality of glossy enamel paint. The painted enamel forms a reflective surface and has no specific focal point, therefore resisting a prolonged penetrative gaze that may give access to some deeper knowledge. It operates more as field and less as image. As a result, the eye cannot settle, but is caused to moved across the surface, reading the topography of the surface. In this way the surface figures as a map, but one that resists location or reference point or comprehensive reading. While it suggests a landscape or map when perceived from a distance, the viewer is always brought back to the surface. Without key or reference point, only the proportions of the work made in the scale of my own body allow the viewer access to the work. By negating a traditional figurative or perspectival reading, the viewer is made aware of their own skin. The images that do form are never entirely conclusive or fully revealed - they sit between abstraction and figuration, suggestive of a body but never conclusive. The paintings therefore resist a singular resolution, they are never satisfying, never allowing for a comprehensive viewing, and so deny a 'knowing' or 'owning' of the implied body, at least through the faculty of sight alone. They also operate in relation to each other, each one as part of an interconnected but fragmented surface, which invites a tactile and embodied form of knowledge. The significance of my work can be found between the imagery that I draw upon and reference, and the materiality of the media I employ. Both the images and the material originate in the realm of the bodily: its wet interior and its dry, ailing surface. I see my painted works as operating through metaphors of skin and flesh, viscera and bodily fluids. As such, they operate as - possibly futile - attempts to construct new skins.

Escaping the Skin: Photographic Works

The broader objective of my photographic works, as I now understand these images, is to 'escape' skin. The photograph can only represent that which has passed and thus signals an absence; it cannot, because of its own material and temporal limitations, depict the present. It is a marker of what came *before*. The photograph's very ethereality, its fleeting and tenuous connection to 'reality', connects with the skin's temporality - as liminal and passing - in contrast with the often labour-intensive and timely process of painting. So while the photograph is a statement of presence, 'I was here', inherent within that statement is an absence, as the imaged presence has passed and the photograph that remains is only a trace, an index, of that presence. The medium of photography speaks to the possibility of escaping the skin, for the negative is a vulnerable surface, is nothing but surface disconnected from its referent thus pure signifier and, most significantly for me, is a membrane, much as the skin is, upon which other things come to be inscribed.

My photographic work began with the *Park Series* (2003 - 2007), in which I constructed a narrative of a death in a park, possibly my own death (Fig. 34). I dressed as a man (and later as a woman) and met with a friend at the park with a camera, film and tomato sauce. I instructed my friend, who had never before operated a single lens reflex camera, both how to image me and how to operate the camera. A narrative revealed itself in the process of reflecting on the contact sheet. I began to piece together a possible narrative for the images, beginning with a classic cinema premise of a body in a park. A cogent example is, Michelangelo Antoniono's film, 'Blow-Up' (1966) which centres on an image that a fashion photographer takes in a London park during a fashion shoot and in which there appears to be a dead body in the background. Through the process of enlarging or 'blowing up' the photograph, the image becomes less clear and what was, or was thought to be the body, dissolves into the abstraction of the film grain.

This first shoot was an early marker for my interest in the limits of my own skin. The desire to 'escape' the skin implies a shedding of all that the skin ascribes to the body, such as integrity, containment, protection, identity, gender, race, and genealogy. The project represented my desire to literally 'escape' my own skin, specifically the gender it assigned me and the coherence and containment of the life it had come to summarise. The desire to escape the earthly, literal skin often figures in religious iconography and mythology, where shedding the skin allowed the self, free from the constraints and desires of the flesh, to arrive at a transcendental truth. This was always closely associated with death and the afterlife. It was precisely in staging my own

'death', in the ambiguity of a figure captured between sleep and death, that the potential for transcending this skin seemed possible. In employing the camera to create this deception I point to the photograph's unreliability as objective document or record, and as complicit, under my direction, in the creation of artifice. The photograph takes on a subversive role.

I returned to the park on many occasions afterwards, enacting various characters, and exploring different registers of death and life in the context of the park as a subversive and liminal space. By this I mean a space one traverses in order to reach a destination, or to 'escape' the routine of everyday life, always passing through. Part of what makes city parks liminal and fluid spaces is that they have no fixed purpose apart from offering an 'escape' from the city, and opportunities for chance encounters (Jacobs 1993). Delta Park cuts across the city grid of Johannesburg, following the organic flow of a river as it forks and splits across the low-veld, breaking up the regularity of the city. The park in my photographic work serves as a *mise-en-scène,* and has come to represent a space of potential, a transitional space that bears the trace and evidence of bodies traversing it. Some of these 'bodies' stay for a significant period of time, whilst others move swiftly through. The park remains a space that is moved through. Necessarily less controlled, the people who use and traverse the space operate within different rhythms and temporalities.

While the park operates as a space to explore, to get lost in, to run wild, unsurveilled, it is also a space of anxiety, of potential danger, where one isn't always entirely sure what will be found. The idea of a dead body in a park is a very real possibility and is compelling because the body is dislocated from its context, and thus the cliché premise of cinematic mystery. The significance of enacting a death in this space was about playing on and experiencing these fears, engaging the idea of death, making the unknown known. This process of enacting a death proved to be cathartic for me, moreover the process of making visible the invisible or the impossible, proved empowering.

While Delta Park is an enormous park, the images have all been taken at a specific site in the park: an avenue of old trees, which form an arcade with a pathway between them. This particular site is grand and cinematic, holding much potency. It also evades specific location - the images I've taken in this part of the park could almost have been taken in any city. Nothing anchors these images to Johannesburg or South Africa. It is this precise dislocation that interests me. I chose to work with a medium-format camera as it provided a square image, a

different register from the more cinematic 35mm film. The large format negatives capture a great amount of detail and allowed me to print these images on a large scale. The choice of working in black and white film was a deliberate one, for black and white film has a number of associations: firstly, it is associated with a tradition of documentary and reportage photography; secondly, black and white photography is evocative of early *film noir* cinema[25] and speaks of longing and nostalgia. Moreover, black and white images, in their 'other worldly' quality, are at once a reduction - the loss of colour as a visual register - and an opening up - foregrounding dark and light, line, texture and, most significantly for my project, surface.

On my many visits to the park I was struck by the residue of things discarded and left behind - and their potential significance as clues in resolving a mystery or opening one up. I became interested in the shifts that occurred in the park that rendered the landscape impermanent. In my continued shooting and re-shooting of the park the seasons changed, pathways were forged, creating main arteries across the park, well worn footpaths that became the paths of least resistance. This continual change and the markers of time passing led me to explore the park as a repository for events that play out on it – in this way the park can be likened to skin. The park, like the skin, is witness to so many instances, narratives and events, which are both reflected and absorbed on its surface. On reflection, I understand that the park figured as a skin and the skin as a park, that these two sites for me were in many ways interchangeable - both the landscape and the skin operate as surfaces that retain and 'cast off ' experience.

Whilst doing the shoot I became aware of the feeling of being watched and began to wonder how this scene may look to others watching from the safe vantage point of their homes. So I began to investigate looking, and the 'truth' associated with looking.

The aerial photograph series grew out of the park series. I imaged myself in the same park, in colour, at varying degrees from above. Shifting the vantage point allowed one to discern new or varied 'truths'. I imagined the various framings that located me: the location of the park; the city of Johannesburg; the province of Gauteng, and so on. In this process I imagined, as I often do, how I may look from afar. Looking down on New York City from the top of the World Trade Centre Michel De Certeau reflects upon the separation between the viewer and the otherwise familiar cityscape:

[25] Film noir is a term used in cinema to describe Hollywood crime drama. The classic period is regarded as taking place between the early 1940s and the late 1950s. Film noir of this time is associated with a low-key black-and-white visual style that takes its roots from German Expressionist cinematography. Many of the prototypical stories and much of the attitude of classic noir derives from the school of crime fiction that emerged in the United States during the Depression.

> What is the source of this pleasure of 'seeing the whole', of looking down on, totalizing the most immoderate of human texts […] When one goes up there, he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators. […]The panorama city is a 'theoretical' (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture whose condition of possibility is oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices. (De Certeau 1988:92-93)

So the desire to see from above requires a necessary distance, creating an abstract view that separates the viewer from what he perceives to be a more authentic bodily engagement with the environment. The desire for a birds-eye view is a desire for a controlling and totalising gaze. This surveying looking implies a privileged access to knowledge, yet in reality this knowledge is disconnected from bodily experience.

This desire to see the whole has its opposite in the microscope, which articulates the desire to see up close, to see more closely. Silverthorne used the microscope to question the privileging of the visual, the power inherent in shifting scale and the fragmentation and compartmentalisation of the body. For Silverthorne the microscope represents attempts to control and reign in the visceral body and yet in her sculptural low relief the organic body appears to exceed the limitations in the same moment as it is articulated by these framings. The microscope has also served as a means of destabilising and exposing the authority afforded visuality in my own body of work. While Silverthorne removes personal registers from her sculptural low reliefs, I re-embody these abstracting views with the intimacy and specificity of my own tissue. In the *Electron Microscope Series* I imaged my own body matter, my blood, hair and most significantly my skin, through the electron microscope. I was concerned with how far inwards, beyond my skin, my edge, I could look at myself and how far away I could consider myself and how both of these views come to be read largely as abstract images. Both views appear simultaneously cellular and topographical and offer entry into a new 'world'. In subjecting myself to this looking, I challenge the abstracting distance of such a totalising gaze. For, by inserting my own body into the image I re-subjectivise this form of looking, and challenge notions of objective truth. Silverthorne by contrast considers textbook electron microscope images of the random unidentified specimen, in doing so I suggest a negation of the lived body despite her tactile embodiments of these essentially disembodying views.

Substrate: Masters Exhibition

The work comprising my Master's degree exhibition, *Substrate* (2007), included a series of photographic works and paintings. Through the process of selecting and editing, framing and installing works, I was able to reflect more closely upon the relationship between my photographic and painted works. This was the first occasion I was able to consider the works in orchestrated conversation with each other. In what follows, I discuss the body of work as a whole, the curatorial decisions made, and the relationship to the theoretical discussion outlined in chapters one and two. I show how ideas of surface and depth, intimacy and distance, and visuality and tactility are important points of departure and exploration throughout my work.

The term substrate originates from the Latin word *substratum*, which is an underlying support or foundation and can mean the material of which something is made, and from which it derives its distinctive qualities[26]. In material science, a substrate is an underlying layer, a base material upon which other processes are enacted. I felt this term was an apt description for the exhibition, which for me so clearly engaged the skin as the screen or mirror, the overlooked material onto which other things come to figure, or are marked by their absence. On reflection I have come to understand this body of work as seeking out a point of origin, connecting the surface to a submerged depth.

Park Images

The series begins with a view of a woman walking down an avenue of trees wearing a long dress *Woman in Park (Long Dress) #1 and # 2* (Figs. 35 and 36) In both images the figure is depicted cropped at the waist, thus limiting the information offered to the viewer. In these two images there is the suggestion of the formation of a sequence, though this potential narrative never extends beyond these two frames, at least not coherently. Following this I included five large medium format images of a woman with an umbrella and a travel bag, and later the same woman with a prosthesis, (Figs. 37-41). I chose these props because of their inherent suggestion of movement and travel, which points not only to the transience of visitors to the park but to a 'flight of fancy', to the imaginary space which both the depicted character and the space occupy. I included the umbrella for its potential to operate as a mobile shield or shelter from the sun and rain, moreover, the umbrella signaled, for me, the possibility of being swept 'up and

[26] The Concise Oxford English Dictionary, Revised Eleventh Edition, 2006

away' by winds, much like the character Mary Poppins who served as the agent of change in the film of the same name (*Mary Poppins, 1*964). Here the umbrella indicates the possibility of flying and 'escape', as the saying 'have umbrella, will travel' suggests, and is further suggestive of the utopian, fantasy world Mary Poppins occupies. The umbrella operates as a necessarily tensile structure, which takes form and is effective only when the thin membrane is placed in tension, which alludes to skin as a tensile structure.

The five images that make up the series *Woman in Park (Umbrella and Bag)* and *Woman in Park (Field)*, (Fig. 41) also depict a portion of a narrative. In the first image a woman appears to chase after an umbrella in the park, (Fig. 37). The following image, (Fig 38) sees the woman catching the umbrella, though having left her bag behind, perhaps suggesting that she may have been swept away by the wind in her umbrella. The next image, (Fig. 39) sees the same character on the ground face up, with the umbrella upturned in the background. It is difficult to be sure whether the woman is sleeping or dead, and this uncertainty is precisely the space of potential 'escape'. The umbrella out of the woman's reach speaks to the possibility of the slipped skin. The next image, (Fig. 40) sees the woman, only partially visible behind a tree, with a prosthetic leg and her head tilted, exposing her neck. This positioning of her neck is rather uncanny as its exaggerated arc appears unnatural and uncomfortable, which leads the viewer to question whether the figure depicted is alive. On closer inspection it appears that the prosthesis leg is placed next to the woman's own leg, for the tip of her toes on her right leg are just visible behind it. The inclusion of the prosthesis in this context suggests the need for a measured looking. It also speaks to extensions of the body and skin and the inner structure, or machine, of the body, foregrounding the prosthesis' insufficiency in its incapacity to feel as well as its mechanised design, which sees the body simplified and reduced to its essential shapes and functions.

The series is punctuated by, *Women in Park (Field),* (Fig. 41), where the body appears to be lost in the landscape, which is suggestive of the edge of the body dissolving into the field as the view of this body becomes less clear and distinct. Here the image is clouded with grasses that interrupt the viewing and comprehension of the body. This idea of the filtered view of the body and the suggestion that it is disintegrating into the landscape is interesting in terms of my engagement with the skin. More than the self 'escaping' the skin in death, the skin as fragmentary and dissolute appears unable to contain the body. As much as these works suggest the skin is partial and unstable, they also point to the inadequacy and limits of looking.

Women in Park (Field sequence), (Fig. 42), reads as a film-strip containing the small, simple action of a woman lying in a field shifting her arm. This vignette sees the figure shade her eyes and the prosthesis is moved from being beside her, to lying across her waist. In tracing an action, these works speak to narrative and cinema. In terms of my larger body of work these images speak of the body in the landscape and more broadly refer to my interest in looking and relooking. In many ways these images were 'outtakes' - individually they were not particularly interesting for me, though collectively they became more significant. In placing these images together, in sequence, a narrative is played out which gives insight into my process, where I 'shoot' and 'reshoot' figures in the park. I decided to print these images on a small scale to reference the negative or film-strip, the source of and referent for these works. These 'outtakes', once printed sequentially, seemed to articulate the very thing that I was interested in - narrative and processes of looking and knowing. Having similar images in close proximity to each other not only reminds of the moving image, but beckons the viewer to identify similarities and disjunctures between the images. As what may be missed initially can potentially be grasped on relooking, these works encourage the viewer to look more closely, to inspect the images. In so doing these works highlight the very process of looking. Moreover, the movement encapsulated in the sequence suggests that the figure in the image, in her stifled movement, is much like a marionette, with her arm controlled by an unseen puppeteer. This is significant in exposing myself as the director in these images.

Aerial images

The *Aerial Photograph* series, (Figs. 44 - 47), consists of four medium-format images of myself in Delta Park taken from a helicopter. What resulted was a view that was both distant and extremely sharp. Some of these images were very abstract with nothing but a dot or a cell to represent or locate me. I thought of these works as 'impossible portraits'. I became increasingly interested in the scales at which intimacy and distance occur, and in particular how the visual disembodies one's engagement with the world. It is through the aerial images that the body and the landscape appear to merge. They merge at the point of surface - the surfaces become a single continuity of fragments. In this way these works speak to the idea of 'escape', and of the possibility of release from the containment of the skin. Here, the landscape appears as itself a skin.

In installing these works I decided to place the four images above each other so as to form a larger image constituted by the smaller parts. In doing this I hoped to point to the relationship between these views of the park from above and the painted works, which also operate together as a single work.

Electron Microscope Images

Although my photographic works have been primarily concerned with the desire and possibility of 'escape' from the skin, I have also used photography as a tool for presenting and testing the limits of the body's surface. Implicit in the desire to 'escape' the skin is an anxiety about the limits and possible decay of the body's own surface. This is partly an exploration of the medium itself, given that the development of technologies of looking have been so implicated in the 'construction' of the body's surface, as discussed in chapter two.

The aerial photograph series coincided with a series of work in which I imaged my own body fluids and skin tissue cells under the electron microscope. In doing this I hoped to get closer to some kind of 'truth', some essence or point of origin. In this process fragments of the body are literally de-contextualised, removed from the body and dehydrated - living tissue becomes 'disconnected' dead matter. Moist body samples undergo a process called critical point drying, where samples are dehydrated with various concentrations of alcohol, before being mounted onto slides. This process allows for the sample to be discernable under the microscope.

The two images, *Epithelial Cell* and *Dead Tissue,* (Figs. 48 and 49) as the titles suggest, are of my skin tissue - dead tissue, removed from the heel of my foot, and living tissue, an epithelial cell taken from the inner lining of my cheek. The image of my dead tissue fills the entire frame and reads as tree bark. The epithelial cell, by contrast, appears soft and folded in on itself, fixed in a fluid water-like space. Without the body as a stable reference point, images of the surface at micro and macro scale appear almost alike - familiar spaces appear as dislocated and alien landscapes. Here the skin under the microscope appears to be a landscape. At both extremes, electron microscope and aerial images become unknown, alien landscapes - a corrective to the idea that looking is truth. I use lens-based media to critique this looking itself. For this looking, from both afar and up close, illustrates the necessity of a scale referent that the body offers.

Skin Elasticity Test

Skin Elasticity Test, 2007, (Fig. 50) is based on a scientific skin test and inspired by an image of Robert Douglas Lockhart's (which I came across in the book, *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis,* by James Elkins), in which two hands, belonging to different individuals, are seen in isolation, separate from the body and its immediate environment. I chose to test my own skin elasticity in relation to my mother's, who is approximately twenty years my senior. This work is the document of that process. The format, black and white 35mm film, and the formal arrangement of the images, allow the images to read as a scientific experiment illustrating the skin's return, at different speeds and times, to its usual tension across the subject's hand. The age and the degree of hydration of the individual determines how quickly the skin returns to its usual tension once it has been released.

The repetition of a similar image with little changes in it encourages the viewer to consider the images again and in relation to each other in order to 'spot the difference'. Choosing to image my mother and myself as the subjects of this enquiry allows for a more rigorous comparison, not only between the speed at which our skin tissue returns to its usual position, but of the similarities and differences between our hands, enabling the viewer to seek out the small details that give information away. For example: the rings on my mother's fingers; our cropped, practical fingernails; our curved middle fingers; the similar network of pronounced veins beneath our skin. My mother's hands are an image of what I can anticipate my own hands to look like in twenty years time. The work acts as a portrait of my mother and I and speaks of our mutual skins. In this way the work is part of my broader project of seeking my 'point of origin', which can also be seen in the earlier electron microscope series.

In placing this image next to the electron microscope images I hoped to foreground the referent of this work as the medical and scientific document. While scientific images abstract, disembody and objectify, in both of these works I have inserted the subjective through using my own tissues in the microscope images and mine and my mother's hands in the elasticity test. So, rather than a direct critique of visuality and the lens, these images become more of a revision of the history of these objects and modes of knowledge, attempting to re-subjectivise and re-embody what were claimed to be rational scientific processes. In the process I reinsert and foreground the embodiedness of my own skin.

Self Portrait

Self Portrait, (Fig . 51) is a singular image, much like *Deer*, and *Single Cell*, which also operate as intimate portraits. I have imaged myself in a mirror wearing an animal's neck collar, not dissimilar to the cone-shaped Elizabethan collars of the 16th century. The animal collar is intended to prevent domesticated animals from licking their wounds, and animals suffering from boredom and behavioral problems from obsessively licking their fur/skin surface, thereby creating wounds. This image is taken in a mirror, the image bisected by a wooden beam, presenting two slightly different reflected views of myself. There is something about the imprisonment of the collar that I found seductive - it allowed me to see out of it and others to see through it, but this looking was mediated looking, not only restricted by the collar, but by the chosen photographic frame which edits out my nudity. I felt compelled to include this image in the final exhibition, for the collar signaled the possibility of wound healing and wound making for me. Moreover, the image provided cinematic escape and included two potent symbols for me, not only the restrictive collar, but the mirror, which I connect to ideas of skin and surface.

I placed this work in close proximity to the small portrait of the deer, (*Deer*), (Fig. 48), in doing so I had hoped to emphasise the image of the deer as a portrait, which already read as a Dutch painting in its muted tones. There is a vulnerability that both of the images captured - whereas I had an invisible restriction that prevented me from knowing my own skin intimately, the deer was thoroughly disembodied and dislocated, and would forever remain in that pose. As such, these two images share for me an uncanniness and a sense of melancholy or nostalgia.

Taxidermy Series

This was the final photographic series in the exhibition, a series that I arrived at consciously - I was seeking out an image of something made entirely of skin. Within the showroom of a taxidermist in Roodepoort, among the neglected displays of animals, I was particularly struck by a deer mounted before a blue velvet backdrop. Only the deer's upper body and head are mounted, leaving a hole where a body or torso had once existed. *Deer,* (Fig. 52) is a considered, constructed portrait, it seemed a necessary inclusion in the series, however nostalgic, as it contrasts with the taxidermy workshop images. This work articulates the veneer of the showroom, while the workshop images point to the supporting armature or structure beneath this veneer.I was interested in how uncannily 'alive' these taxidermied creatures appeared. The

process whereby models of the dead creatures are made recalls the flayed body - the animal's skin, or hide, is carefully removed and treated and then, while still wet, stitched on to a foam model of the body, (Fig. 53). The real body, vulnerable to aging and rot, is discarded. The workshop space situated behind the veneer of the showroom, contains a variety of 'unclaimed' creatures. The workshop thus functioned as a surreal space with a bizarre combination of de-contexualised body parts: a fish out of water, an ostrich's legs without a body, and a skinless leopard, (Fig. 55).

These taxidermied animals speak of a human desire to control life through preventing change, or the desire for trophies to announce victory over another's life. These images are significant to my project not in reiterating the significance of the skin, which here stands in for the absent and decayed body even in death. And yet the dead skin has only an uncanny resemblance to the living body, thus the skin here is an empty signifier. The skin has been 'escaped' - and yet it is the skin that suggests life in the animals despite their death. So while these animals 'escape' their skins, it has been at the cost of their lives. The taxidermied animal's 'escape' of the skin isn't a willing escape for the creature, so these images also suggest the empty promise of such escape, which holds no apparent possibility of re-assumption or resurrection.

Painted Work

In *Wallpaper and Plaster,* (2007), (Fig. 56), I foreground the repetitive impression of skin imprinted on vinyl, so that it operates as a decorative motif. I poured and painted fluid, thinned, translucent paint over the vinyl surface. The repetitive impressions on the vinyl lead the paint to run in very similar progressions over the entire surface. This work operates in a very different mode from my previous paintings, as instead of pouring thick paint over the surface, allowing for images to form and figure, here the diluted paint creates a thin, vulnerable, 'teary' skin. Here the vinyl, the substrate onto which I apply the paint, determines the image, and not the viscosity of the paint itself. This work could be understood as a kind of formalist[27] exercise, as part of my process in exploring the possibilities of my media. The minimalism of this work contrasts with the excess of paint contained within the circular works, *Cell 1-3,* (Figs. 57 and 58). The title allows for the vinyl to be read as a wallpaper surface, with sunken skin impressions, and the paint to operate as plaster, both wall plaster which conceals bricks and mortar and sticky plasters which

[27] Formalism values artworks by their form, i.e. the way it is made. Artwork is assessed based purely on visual aspects, and its medium. Emphasis is placed on the work's formal compositional elements such as; color, line, shape and texture rather than realism, context, and content.

disguise and are thought to heal wounds on the skin's surface. This plaster conjoins two of the works in the triptych, and the idea that the paint could visually 'bind' these two works suggests the skin's function in containing the body, as well as its healing, regenerative powers.

Single Cell, (Fig. 59), is a work constituted entirely of paint; it comprises the residue of paint at the bottom of a paint can, which developed as the paint separated, and congealed through exposure to air. As such, it could be considered a 'found object' of sorts. I kept this object throughout my project, not entirely sure of its purpose, but equally compelled by it. The work, or object, was created in the breaking down of my media, in its division, in its very liminality. This hardened residual paint led me to contemplate the potency of the circle, and later prompted me to create the *Cell* series. The circle has been understood by Carl Jung, amongst others, as the archetype of wholeness and integration. On the other hand the circle also suggests the lack of a definitive edge, or corner and could be understood to articulate a claustrophobic containment, within which the eye has no reprieve or avenue of retreat. The cell, in the sense in which I use it, is the smallest unit of life. In choosing to title these works as 'Cell' I enjoy the term's multiple meanings, which include the cell as the small confining room in a prison, the smallest particle of life in biology, a part forming a whole. The term *cell* takes its root in the Latin *cella*, meaning a small room[28]. This concept of pocketed space interests me, particularly in relation to the skin, which houses the body. Indeed, some idiomatic expressions conceive of the skin as a limiting parameter or prison cell while others use the body-house metaphor.

It is in these painted works that there is an explicit relation between my painting and my photographic series, for the single cell in the painting (or found, re-appropriated object), has echoes of the photographic image of my live epithelial cell under the electron microscope. It is also here that my interest in looking and scale is reiterated; the cell, the smallest unit of life, is enlarged, decontextualised and imaged under the microscope in a dark plane, while *Single Cell* is perceptible to the naked eye, inviting touch and intimacy in its tactile figuring. These works articulate a search for origin, a beginning point.

The concept of part and whole, as articulated above, figures in my 2007 *Untitled* installation which comes out of an installation I made in 2004, (Fig. 34). In the 2004 installation I juxtaposed paintings of various depths, allowing the works to create a single, fractured skin. The 2007 installation is on a larger scale, (Fig. 60) - the works are more expansive and the stretcher

[28]http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=cell, accessed 12 February 2010

frames form a consistent field of equal depth. Contained within a rectangle, the works 'fit' together as though they were once a whole that has been intentionally broken and subsequently restored. These parts that constitute the installation can be rearranged to fit together differently. Thus I see the installation as engaging skin's partial, fractured nature, creating a skin that is responsible for containing the body but also offering 'escape' or breakdown, which is ultimately accompanied by a potential for renewal or refiguring. This installation operates as a map or 'field' of a skin, in that they have an all over quality and resist a focal point. This skin is also partial and subject to change. These two installations could be seen as an attempt to reinsert tactility into views that appear flat and disembodied - uncannily similar to the views of the body under a microscope. So these works create a field of skin, which has a visceral, tangible presence, reasserting the physical, material body. And, much like the electron microscope, these installations draw fragments together for examination in order to create a larger whole.

I understand these painted works as verging on legibility, articulating a tension between the materiality of the paint deployed and the potential scene depicted. In allowing areas of the work to dribble, drip and slump I intend to disrupt the potential depiction of something clearly legible, allowing the works to sit between figuration and abstraction. Through this process, I hope to further allow my painted works to operate as skin - liminal, shifting, resisting closure. In drawing attention to the materiality of the painting I intend to appeal not only to the viewer's touch sense, but to highlight the qualities embodied in the process of painting, exposing the physical process of their construction.

Although my two concurrent bodies of work are, for the most part, visually disparate, they are conceptually connected. The materials, process and the final artwork and installation, as discussed, attempt to capture two desires inherent in the embodied skin: that of escaping the skin and that of forging a new skin. My painted works speak to skin and the embodied experience. I have attempted to map out my own embodied experiences as both manifest and hidden on the 'landscape' of my skin. In doing this, I have explored the limits of the materiality of paint in order to forge a new skin. The paintings themselves, in scale, texture and colour, are located between figuration and abstraction. While the painted works could be seen to depict an image - of an aerial, topographical or a cellular view or skin - they also assert a materiality that bears meaning and significance beyond the limits of depiction, and thus beyond looking alone. The surfaces are simultaneously like human skin and uncannily alien. Like human skin, the paint ruptures and bleeds, a process of abjection through which the viscous insides of the paint's

‘flesh’ pushes the limits of the paint’s ability to contain its surface integrity. These works challenge traditional notions of painting as two-dimensional, their surfaces evoking within the viewer a desire to touch. By encouraging haptical looking, I hope to foreground the sensory body, in which the senses operate in relation to each other. I use the circle as a dynamic format as well as working within conventional rectangular formats, although these never operate independently but rather work with each other to create a whole image that can be read from afar and up-close. By working in both minimalist and excessive modes and highlighting both looking and touching, I point to ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ painting traditions and challenge the discipline of painting, allowing the works to take on a more sculptural life. In the painted works, I liken the act of painting to the process whereby the skin is inscribed and imbued with meaning, where information is concealed and revealed and where a vulnerable inside is both protected and ruptured.

The photographic works attempt to capture the desire for ‘escape’ from the skin. Similarly to my painted works, my performative photographic works map out a surface landscape: not my own skin surface but a park in Johannesburg’s suburbs. These photographs trace the imagined and projected happenings within the park, the residue of past visitors, the effect of seasonal changes, and, as a result of these, the impression left on the land itself. In this process I capture the changes and contingencies that befall my own and others’ bodies, both through actual lived experience and artificial, contrived happenings. All of this is seen from a distance, as if being watched by an outsider.

In all of these works I raise similar concerns around the person watching, pertaining to looking and ‘truth’. In particular, these works challenge the perceived objectivity of abstracted looking as exemplified in the penetrative gaze of the electron microscope and the totalising, authorial gaze of aerial images. The works can thus be partly understood as using the photographic lens to critique the historical and scientific authority afforded to lenses. I highlight in particular the disembodying and abstracting effect of shifting scales, suggesting that at the extremes of scale, both microscopic and macroscopic, the landscape and the skin appear as the same fragmented surface.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this research I have explored skin as material, medium and metaphor. As a material, skin is a porous, semi-permeable membrane, receding by several layers. While serving as a tensile and tactile surface, simultaneously giving form and offering containment to the body, skin also operates as a medium of passage and interchange between the inner body and the external environment. Skin offers the body the sense of touch and is the interface upon which all the body's senses are imbedded, allowing the body to navigate and respond to its immediate environment. The skin communicates, operating as the site of contact, exposure and connection. As metaphor, skin stands in for the varying thresholds of self and identity, a signifying surface, manifesting as a map of the individual's experience, however imperfectly. Moreover the skin offers a sense of containment and protection for the psyche.

I have illustrated how these qualities of the skin (as material, medium and metaphor) exist in a dynamic relationship where, for example, metaphorical associations of skin are recursively connected to skin's material qualities and functions. I demonstrated how conceptions of the skin have shifted through history, largely in response to developments in medicine and science, and parallel developments in art practice; for example the écorché and the flayed body in Enlightenment. In particular, I considered the shifting and unresolved relationship between the skin and the body during the various epochs (Medieval, Enlightenment and late-industrial society). In the Medieval era, humoral theory understood the skin as integral and intrinsically connected to the body. The skin operated as a medium that manifested symptoms of illness and disease within the body on its surface. Humoral theory instigated a dynamic and integrated relationship between body, skin, and world. Advancements in anatomical dissection in the Enlightenment era reduced the skin to a cover to be removed in order to access the body's hidden interior workings. This coincided with the development of lenses and technologies that aided looking, which served to render the body as individuated and compartmentalised. In separating the skin from the body physically in the practice of dissection, medical science effectively separated the two conceptually. Skin as covering was rendered separate and discrete from the body inducing a disconnection between the sensory body (surface), and the psyche of the individual (depth). I illustrated how these conceptions of the skin have currency and influence in not only how skin is thought of, but also inhabited, in the contemporary 'global' era. The dominant modes of knowledge that emerged out of the medical, scientific and artistic preoccupations of the Medieval, Enlightenment and Modern eras respectively, continue to

animate understandings of the skin in contemporary global culture. In particular, I suggested that since the Enlightenment the skin has largely been framed within dominant scientific and cultural discourses of penetration and abstraction. This has curtailed embodied engagements with, and of the skin. The individual has been disassociated from her/his tactile surface, separated from the world and other bodies, prefiguring the isolated and alienated 'post-modern subject'.

What has emerged quite strikingly within my research is the vulnerability of the skin; its inability to contain the body, and its susceptibility to partial and fallible signification. Skin is a liminal space, the site of potential abjection in that it is vulnerable to rupture from within and assault from without. Moreover, in its organic life the skin is constantly in a process of decay and regeneration, sloughing off dead skin cells and expelling fluids and toxins from the body. As a site of inscription the skin records our individual biographies, materialising time through the marks on the skin and the skin's own gradual decay. However, this recording is only ever partial and open to numerous interpretations (Prosser 2001). I have taken this vulnerability and fallibility of the skin as the starting point for thinking about the contemporary obsession with the skin; in obsessive rituals of protecting the skin and in practices of violating the skin. This contemporary fetishisation of skin is connected to the vulnerable psyche that is metaphorically both constituted through and protected by the fallible skin. Acute uncertainty about the future, social and cultural pathologies of disease and epidemics, a deteriorating environment unable to sustain a growing and consumptive population, and disembodying new media and technologies are all played out on the skin. I believe that the increasing attention that skin is receiving is due to an underlying desire on the part of the autonomous, self determining 'post-modern subject' to alter the self, through altering the visible surface of identity. The desire to alter the skin suggests a failure to connect with our own and other bodies, in a material and tactile way. Extreme practices of protecting or violating the surface suggest a broader cultural desire to reaffirm the possibility of touch and connection that skin offers, and a sense of psychic containment and protection.

The skin as the site of these cultural and personal anxieties suggests the need for a new kind of knowledge of the skin, one that considers surface and depth engaging the incorporated senses, allowing for an embodied knowledge. However the current faculties available to engage the skin have proved insufficient and partial; the primacy of the visual and its accompanying tools of looking, and practices of medical dissection have constituted an epistemic regime which disembodies and abstracts the skin. Thus, the contradiction of the skin in the current era is its apparent '(in)visibility'; the simultaneous neglect of and obsession with the skin. The skin

operates as the 'mirror' or 'screen' on which other things come to figure (beauty, identity, insecurity, anxiety); we see these images or reflections, but we do not see the 'screen' itself. This is the ultimate paradox of the skin: ironically the body's most visible surface has only been given superficial attention.

However, in the contemporary moment the skin is coming into visibility, not only through excessive exposure in media, but also through a range of feminist, cultural, theoretical and artistic discourses which have re-engaged the skin as an embodied and tactile surface, opening new spaces for thinking about our relationship with skin. This has been explored in a number of recent exhibitions: *Under the skin: Biological Transformations in Contemporary Art* (2001), Stiftung Wilhelm Lehmbruck Museum, Duisburg; *Skin Surface, Substance and Design* (2002), Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, New York; *Second Skin* (2006), Entry 2006 Expo, Essen; *Skin of/in contemporary Art* (2007), National Museum of Art, Osaka; *Sk-interfaces*, (2008) FACT, Liverpool; *Skin-to-Skin: Challenging Textile Art* (2008), Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg and most recently *Skin* (2010) at the Wellcome Collection, London. The tensions between surface and depth, opticality and tactility and intimacy and distance figure on the skin as the current zeitgeist. More than this, skin is productive and provocative and thus poignant for artists. It evades clear definition, resisting closure and singular interpretation.

I discuss the work of Jeanne Silverthorne and Penny Siopis, both of whom engage skin as material, medium and metaphor in their work. Siopis creates the conditions for paint as material, to operate as itself a skin that contains a fluid inside distinct from the dry hardened exterior that is subject to age, wrinkle and crack - much like lived skin. Here paint operates as skin that constitutes her depicted figures, a tactile rendering that evokes the viewers touch sense and encourages a haptic visuality. The materiality of the paint also operates as a medium. Siopis' works, and the process her works undergo, operate as resistance to invisibility. In making visible both the 'anonymous' corpse in *Glory* and *Pinky Pinky*, through the wounds that shape and constitute this mythical character, Siopis' painted skin operates as a medium that comes to signify and bare witness. Here the skin operates as a site of shame, trauma, wounding, and serves as resistance to collective amnesia of South Africa's past (and present).

Silverthorne's chosen material of rubber latex shares qualities with the materiality of skin in its elasticity, tactility, malleability, and its protective and insulating qualities. It also shares metaphorical qualities with the skin in its erotic and tactile associations. In employing rubber

latex Silverthorne points to the skin as a protective substance yet with potential to operate as a stifling, deadening material, where the skin is depicted as overbearing even stagnating, not only in its materiality but in its continual, even obsessive use. Silverthorne's very process speaks to the skin; in casting models made of clay, Silverthorne's medium - rubber latex - holds the impression of the mould it is cast from. Thus her works in being created as casts operate as second skins, even false skins. In Silverthorne's work the bodily is always suggested in the visceral and excessive fragments Silverthorne presents. However, the body as such remains absent, the distorted and abstracted fragments merely suggestive of a (fragmented) whole. Further to this Silverthorne's mediated, hidden process, despite its labour intensiveness, belies an uncanny disjuncture; in depicting this very bodily tactile matter, skin, Silverthorne appears to have negated, or erased, her own body from her process and her work. The only signs of her labour are evident in the merest trace of the occasional fingerprint impression. This ghostly presence of the artist herself, and the lack of a visible recognisable body in her work speaks to abstracting, disembodying visual technologies that serve to frame the body but are always exceeded by the skin. Silverthorne uses microscopic images of the body and fragments from her own sculptural process to shift the scale of the body and foreground the powers of scale, destabilising the primacy of the 'objective' male gaze. In rendering microscopic views tangible and tactile Silverthorne attempts to embody abstract views that otherwise serve to fragment and compartmentalise the body, elevating touch as a mode of knowledge.

The motivations and concerns of my own art practice have been informed by these engagements with the skin. The body of work I have produced largely reflects an attempt to come to terms with skin: both my own skin but also the acknowledgement that the skin is that which connects me to and separates me from the world and others. My project has been an attempt to engage the skin, both to understand how it has been framed and controlled through the discourses of science, medicine and art itself; and also to begin to think about the skin in new ways. This is not to say that I advocate dispensing with tools of visuality and privileging touch; rather, I have attempted to explore how the skin has been made, as material, medium and metaphor. It is through exploring the limits and potentials of my chosen media (the viscous materiality of paint, and the powers of scale and narration of the microscope and photograph), I was also exploring the limits and possibilities of my own skin. In my works the skin figures as a fragile thread that connects, always threatening to dissipate. My skin is how I know the world, and myself yet it remains the part of me of which I am most mistrustful. In frustration, but also in fascination, I have pulled my skin, pushed it, cast it off and attempted to get as close up to it as

possible. This process has been partly an attempt to control and reign in my own skin, to escape all it assigns me and explore the possibility that I can make skin signify something different about myself. Yet I have always seemed to return to the very point of departure, to my own skin, an uncanny surface that is at once both foreign and familiar.

Merleau-Ponty has suggested that in touching, one is always necessarily touching one's own body. It is through the skin that we touch the world, and that the world touches the body. This suggests that any kind of 'critical distance' or objectivity on the subject of the skin is impossible, since the skin is necessarily implicated in the coherence of the body. The skin occupies a liminal space, both part of and between the body and the world outside the body. The possibility of a distanced reflection on the skin may seem theoretically possible, but in reality the separation it implies, the dislocation of the body and its surface, could only result in a very painful death. This is partly the fascination with the flayed body in the Enlightenment: truth lies where the self transcends the body. The skin is always part of us, and knowledge of the skin is necessarily tied up with the self and identity. I have attempted in this thesis to think with and through the skin: to show how it has been made through the modes of knowledge that have controlled and contorted it; to reconsider the relationship between looking and touching as they coalesce in the skin; and to suggest an embodied knowledge of the skin.

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