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Complexion: skin, surface and depth in contemporary art practice

Watson, Amy Kathryn

2010-11-22
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/8891

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I explore the skin as material, medium and metaphor in contemporary art. In recognising the skin as Zeitgeist, I locate its significance 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 the psyche. I look to associated, and deeply relational, concepts of surface and depth (the abject); opticality and tactility (the haptic); intimacy and distance (scale). This opens 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. 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 my body of work submitted for this degree.