



Julie Rrap *Fleshpool* (still) 2004 DVD duration: 60 seconds continuous loop © the artist Courtesy of Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery and ARC One Gallery



Boo Chapple, *Blow Me*, (still), 2005. DVD 3 minutes continuous loop © the artist



Jo Pursey, *Cheya II - psoriasis* (detail), 2004. Inkjet on vinyl © the artist



Liam Benson, *Untitled Nude 4*, 2003. Photographic etching © the artist



Kirsten Hudson, *FALTER*, 2004. Film still © the artist

bones of the skin the denaturalisation of the body

The concept of 'nature' presents difficult terrain. The 'natural' body perhaps exists only as we imagine it – it seems human beings have always manipulated their physical appearance, looking to the surface of the body to express cultural or individual identity. As the body *in life* is subject to manipulation, so too is the body *in art*, and in both cases, it seems that the greater the extremes of this manipulation the greater the insight we are allowed into the cultural and personal motivations of this bodily inscription.

The body is pivotal in art and life as the primary site through which to investigate and project a sense of identity and to interrogate the prevailing social, political, religious and sexual orthodoxies of its time. The manipulated, fragmented and adorned body in contemporary art can reveal a fascinating insight to the artist's corporeal and psychological experience as well as providing a kind of cultural map, describing current anxieties, hopes and imaginings.

In recent years, the body has become a point of focus for contemporary artists, being represented more prolifically than at any other time since the beginning of the 20th century. The new millennium has witnessed an increase in moral and cultural anxieties triggered by the media's saturation of contemporary life, the impact of HIV/AIDS and the exciting and frightening possibilities opened up by new advances in science and technology. In the light of these developments, it seems the representation of the body in contemporary art has found a new relevancy.

The title of this exhibition *bones of the skin* evolved out of my desire to explore the internal realities of lived experience – and the ways that the surface of the body can be used to reveal this *world inside*. Under close examination, the structure of the skin is revealed, almost as a scaffold. By looking closely, both physically and metaphorically, we are expanding, dissecting, pulling apart: our true nature is revealed.

Many artists are now investigating the possible physical, ethical and psychological impact of new technologies on the contemporary and future body. It is fitting that the use of 'new media' is at the forefront of these investigations. **Boo Chapple's** images of the body move between the real and the virtual, flesh and data. Her current work comments on the way in which new imaging technologies have the potential to surveil us on a more intimate level than ever before – contributing to the way we see and understand our bodies.

Blow Me is a rich textural composition of footage from three sources. Biomedical imaging of the interior body is combined with footage taken from the body's exterior using wireless cameras and a 3D scanner. Chapple's video work reveals

a new understanding of 'self' – one that is contaminated and informed by new interfaces between body and technology. Journeying over and into flesh and skin, *Blow Me* presents a body traversed by technology and viewer alike.

Chapple reveals as much of the body as she takes away. While she provides multiple views of the body from new and intimate sources, there is almost an overloading of information here, as data converges and mutates, forcing us to question and re-evaluate what we are seeing. Chapple describes the body presented here as "continually converging into a comprehensible form and fracturing into fragments of digital surface"¹ The results are at times confronting and confusing, highlighting the sometimes claustrophobic relationship between our bodies and the constructed world.

With advances in science, medicine and biotechnology, the tools for manipulating our bodies have the potential to disrupt the 'natural order' at a deeper level than ever before. This has provided a rich feeding ground for artists to ponder the implications of such technologies. In her video work, *Fleshpool*, **Julie Rrap** critically reflects on these developments by, in her own words, attempting "to use technology as a mirror on itself, to push beyond the rational and explore the sinister and the visionary in the human desire to challenge nature"²

Fleshpool portrays a naked woman's slide into her own shadow. This shadow transforms into a reflected body, an image which becomes sexually charged as it is revealed that the body reflected is not her own. Repeated over and over, this woman's slow movement into herself – and her other – seems to convey a sense that the more we attempt to define the borders of our selves, the more any contained sense of identity alludes us.

Conjuring the legend of Narcissus, the work reflects the folly of our visually saturated culture, obsessed by perfection; and reveals the vulnerability of human identity in the face of recent cultural developments that have made physical transformation almost routine. Whilst critiquing these cultural shifts, Rrap says she embraces "all these changes and desires for change which seem part of the human quest or evolution"³. Hence, the work maintains a sense of optimism, as the figure resists being consumed but rather enacts a kind of cyclical dance that is mesmerising to watch.

As witnessed by the work of Rrap, Australian contemporary photography has been energized in the last decade by developing technologies as digital processes offer artists unlimited potential for manipulating images. Although pursuing a different conceptual motivation to that of Rrap, **Jo Pursey** similarly approaches this medium sensitively and critically as she explores the intangible aspects of human experience.

Pursey's work involves the layering of domestic surfaces and skin diseases. Scanned images of skin conditions such as eczema and psoriasis are digitally manipulated and 'folded', creating a wallpaper-like patterning. These skin patterns are then

meshed with scans of wallpaper and other domestic coverings to create images that are at once sinister and exquisitely decorative.

Seeming to shift between surface and object, these large-scale prints exert a physical presence – the scale of the works reflect the average surface area of the (female) body, being between seventeen and twenty-one square feet. Whilst we can not identify the subjects here as individuals, there is a sense that these works are deeply personal, a reading which is supported by the artist's use of her subjects' names in the titles of the work, followed by the skin disorder from which they suffer.

These works allude to our containment – both in the physical body and the home. The blistered and inflamed skin reminds us that often below our seemingly calm exterior, psychological trauma can threaten to bubble over: as Pursey says, "the body speaks through the parchment of the flesh, revealing hidden pain, desire, disease"⁴. The merger of skin and wall covering projects the notion that a home can hold the memory of those who have walked its halls – just as we hold the memories of the people we have known and loved. In a sense life is etched on to us, affecting both our body and psyche.

The photographic image has long been the primary site for determining feminine 'ideals' and many artists are now turning this medium back on itself, challenging gender representation and traditional modes of viewing. **Liam Benson** throws a new spin on this approach as he appropriates feminine stereotypes to challenge and redefine notions of gender, sexuality and identity.

In his *Untitled Nude* series, the artist is portrayed in various feminine guises. Benson's photographic etchings reflect the malleable nature of gender and how it is on show for others to see. Alluding to the ritzy style of nude portraiture favored in the early 1900's, Benson plays with the intimate and erotic nature of this medium.

Rather than presenting an exaggerated interpretation of femininity, Benson's approach is one of restraint, presenting a subject that we can identify with as a 'real' person, rather than a caricature. His portraits ask that we engage with the subject depicted and contemplate the motivation of this enactment. As Benson says, his works use "a romantic tone to suggest the melancholy angst, caused by the pressure of social expectations"⁵.

Kirsten Hudson also acknowledges the weight and history of the representation of gender, albeit from an entirely different trajectory. Hudson says she "seeks to 'act like a woman', creating performances of perverse female spectacle"⁶. She uses this strategy to make explicit the historical and contemporary ideologies of femininity inherent in our culture.

For this exhibition, Hudson has reworked images from her *FALTER* series which



Michelle Siciliano *a shadow of my former self* (detail) 2005 Installation: mixed media © the artist. Image: Nadya Whitehead

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has previously been realised as performance, digital prints and stop motion animation. In this series, a female body (that of Hudson herself) is depicted becoming sugar coated, positioned in front of a decorative, domestic backdrop. Here, Hudson uses sugar as a medium to 'disrupt'. This intervention can be seen as both physical and metaphorical as she disrupts both the female body depicted and our understandings of it.

The works presented in this exhibition range in scale and presentation, making us aware of our own gaze as we consider these formats. Hudson employs elements of voyeurism in her presentation of small images whilst *Lump – a self portrait* is a pink sugar cube weighing 64.7Kg – the exact weight of the artist. By pairing sugar with the female body, Hudson exposes traditional conceptions of femininity. These definitions may appear ludicrous and antiquated on examination, yet assumptions of how women 'should' look, be and act continue to persist today. *Sugar and spice and everything nice . . .*

Providing a dialogue with Hudson's pink sugar cube, **Michelle Siciliano's** installation titled *a shadow of my former self* consists of rounded wire forms covered in slippery pink fabric. Resting somewhere between the organic and the synthetic, these objects are sensual and playful whilst containing a darker undercurrent in exploring aspects of the psychological realm of human nature.

Installed with small vibrating components, these fragmented body forms emit a faint hum of white noise. This element combines with their apparent weightlessness to articulate a sense of anxiety and psychological vulnerability. As Siciliano describes "They are lightweight and seemingly fragile. Vulnerable to outside forces, the movement of air may topple them over. They stand as a metaphor for the human condition . . . the forces we are subject to through out the cycle of life from birth to death."⁷

These subtly animate creatures, verging on the *uncanny*, are intentionally ambiguous and open to interpretation. Whilst almost obscenely pink, they nonetheless demand that we respond to them as another 'being' as they communicate a sense of the corporeal by asserting a physical presence and relating in scale and form to the human body.

The contemporary Australian artists in *bones of the skin* allow a revealing insight into the *body's* status in contemporary culture. Employing techniques that actively engage with us as viewers, they manipulate, modify and adorn the body with intriguing and provoking effect . . . along the way, giving us an insight into their personal perspective of what it means to be inside their own skin.

Lia McKnight, June 2005
Exhibition Curator

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- 1 Boo Chapple, 2005 *Artist Statement* for "Blow Me"
- 2 Julie Rrap, 2004 *Artist Statement* for "Fleshpool"
- 3 Julie Rrap, 2005, in correspondence with the Curator.
- 4 Jo Pursey, 2004 *Artist Statement*.
- 5 Liam Benson, 2003 *Artist Statement*
- 6 Kirsten Hudson, 2004 *Artist Statement*
- 7 Michelle Siciliano, 2005 *Artist Statement* for "a shadow of my former self"

Liam Benson is a photo-media and performance artist based in Sydney. As an emerging artist, Benson has exhibited prolifically in the short period he has been practicing. He has performed and exhibited in exhibitions and festivals in New South Wales and Queensland, including a number of solo performances.

Melbourne artist **Boo Chapple** has worked across a number of mediums, including sound, film and installation. She has exhibited throughout Australia and most recently in Beijing, with previous worked having featured in an exhibition of Australian Sound Art at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Chapple has had writing selected for publication in an upcoming book on art and biotechnology and has presented her work at several conferences and artist seminars. She is currently teaching Media and studying for a Masters of Design at RMIT University.

Kirsten Hudson is a Perth artist who works with performance, animation and multi-media. She has exhibited widely in Western Australia and has been involved in curating a number of events. Hudson is an Arts Editor and writer for CURVE magazine and has given papers at conferences in Australia and New Zealand. She is currently a PhD Fine Arts candidate at Curtin University of Technology.

Jo Pursey is a Sydney-based digital photographic artist. Pursey has exhibited throughout New South Wales with a number of solo shows and touring exhibitions. She has won several awards including the Pat Corrigan Grant and has work in collections including Artbank and the James Hardie Collection. She currently teaches photography and digital imaging at Nepean TAFE.

Julie Rrap is an award winning Sydney artist whose works are held in every major public collection in Australia as well as many corporate and private collections in Australia and overseas. Her work has been shown in solo exhibitions in Australia and overseas, and in major international exhibitions including the Biennale of Sydney, 1986, 1988, 1992; and Body, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997. *Fleshpool* has recently been shown in 2004: Mapping contemporary Australian art and new media, National Gallery of Victoria and Australian Centre for the Moving Image.

Michelle Siciliano is a Perth based installation artist who has exhibited extensively in Western Australia and has held a number of solo shows. She has also exhibited in NSW, Tasmania and the ACT and has been involved in community and hybrid arts projects as well as co-coordinating and curating a number of exhibitions. Siciliano is the newly appointed manager of spEctrUm project space.

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