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Artist Statement

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Skin Deep

Introduction

“By a process of projection and introjection of the image, the body comes to have the abstract “form”, the abstract totality by which we know it...We continually project the body into the world in order that its image might return to us...”¹

As an immigrant South Asian woman in the U.S., I am subject to various attributions of difference or similarity and empathy or rejection. Since most of these attributions are based on constructs of gender, race and/or longstanding historical and philosophical biases, I have tried to examine the interaction of these forces in the development of consciousness and the materialization of self. As an artist, I have chosen to explore the complex process of identity formation through the creation of self-portraits of my skin and body. By rendering images of my body or creating objects that act as extensions of self, I explore interiority, embodiment, and the relationship between self and other.

Socio-cultural Skins

Our skin is not just a passive covering. It is a changing personal tapestry that tells the world about who we are or who we want to be. Our skin imbues us with humanity and individuality and forms the vocabulary of personhood. Humans expose it, cover it, paint it, tattoo it, scar it, and pierce

¹ Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 125.

it. In a figure of speech or writing, the word 'skin' often represents the whole body or the wholeness of self as in "I nearly jumped out of my skin." While the socio-cultural and economic status of a man or woman can be intimately linked with qualities of their skin, like color and complexion, we also caution people saying "Beauty is only skin deep." or that "Handsome is as handsome does." These sayings associate skin with the essence of our being, but also reveal the judgments and values associated with skin. Globally, the construction/perception of the role and value of the human body and mind varies. In most religions and religious philosophy, the relationship between body and mind is codified and expressed through the conduct and care of the body through prayer, exercise, dietary laws, funerary rites etc. On a personal level, studying in a Catholic school in India, within a predominantly Hindu, patriarchal order, I imbibed ideas of the (female) body as the site of contradictory forces like purity and pollution. Combined together these different philosophies and forces have created a culture of *my* body that contains an inherent tension and ambivalence.

In Western philosophy, Descartes was the first to formulate the mind-body schism in the form in which it exists today by identifying the mind with intellect, consciousness/ self-awareness, and the immaterial and the body with imagination, sensation and the material. Feminist, anthropological and postcolonial literature has subsequently challenged the assumptions of this philosophical inheritance, with its privileging of the mind for its association with reason and masculinity, and the co-relation of skin/body with brute matter, superficiality and femininity.² By studying the mediation of interfaces between bodies and their worlds through social practices and material culture, scholars like Daniel Miller argue that the Western bias towards a 'depth' ontology has led to an interpretation of the body as shallowness and is expressed through "...the denigration of surfaces...the denigration of clothing and, by extension...women, or blacks or any other group

² See introduction to Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey ed., *Thinking Through The Skin*, and Daniel Miller on 'Style as Ontology' in Jonathan Friedman ed., *Consumption and Identity* (Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994), 71.

that thereby come to be regarded as more superficial and less deep.”³ Such dualistic thinking whether expressed through the surface/depth, mind/body, or theory/practice split engenders a deep cultural and personal ambivalence about the role of the human body in our lives. This is the paradox of the “...body as both mode and object of knowing, and of the self constituted outside its physical being by its image.”⁴ I attempt to deal with the tension of such cognitive dissonance by creating artworks that use the image of my body to both challenge prevailing norms and also explore themes of transcendence and immanence. A creative process that started as a literal documentation of my immigrant story has, through the production of self-portraits, been transformed into a more open-ended narrative. Together, the artworks evoke the image of my body/skin as the site of this dialog.

From historic to contemporary times, the condition and display of the human body remains a fundamental marker of identity with a specific type of represented body (male and white as in most colonized areas of the world) as the norm against which all other bodies are read and (in)validated.⁵ British travelers to India in the nineteenth century were impressed by the “nakedness” of most Indians, although they eventually adjusted, “owing to the dark color of the skin, which as it is unusual to European eyes has the effect of a dress.”⁶ Historically, such encounters with the ‘other’ exposed the prevailing Western ambivalence about the human body and its connection with nakedness, clothing, and morality. For example, missionary history across the colonial world shows a tension between the hope that clothing will change people and the danger that people once clad will invest their clothing with too great a significance.⁷ This ambivalence has been transformed into

³ Susanne Kuchler and Daniel Miller ed., *Clothing as Material Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 3. Miller describes the depth ontology where the real person is believed to be deep inside while the surface is transient, less real and less important. He contrasts this with the example of Trinidadians who regard the real self as being on the surface and with clothing as the best route to finding the real person.

⁴ Stewart, *On Longing*, 131.

⁵ See Barbara Thomspon ed., *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

⁶ Adeline Masquelier ed., *Dirt, Undress, and Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 3.

⁷ Daniel Miller, *Materiality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 191.

a globalizing force within contemporary developing societies where people are 'individuated' through their conformity to a style and appearance.

The awareness that our skin and clothing is read by others in order to draw conclusions about the 'self' contained within is especially relevant to the formation of my consciousness as a woman. Susan Stewart invokes the issue of the gendered 'gaze' and the vulnerability of a woman's body to representation by others, by saying that the woman's body is "...particularly subject to an existence constrained by the nexus of external images...by the articulation of another's reading."⁸ Through the repetition and presentation of my body in different media or poses, I attempt to re-possess my image while playing with the distance between subjectification and objectification, intimacy and distance, and nudity and nakedness. Through the nature of my self-portraits, I hope to stimulate discussion on the role of skin in the formation of identity and render visible the ideologies and values associated with the body, clothing, sexuality, and nakedness.

Material Skins

Skin is important in contemporary society, not just because of the ubiquity of displayed skin, but also the multiplication of skin-surfaces and selves through products, advertising, etc.⁹ This view of material culture implies that much of what we are exists "...not through our consciousness or body, but as an exterior environment that habituates and prompts us."¹⁰ The boundary between materials and self is a blurred one; objects created *by* us can remain peripheral to our vision and yet determine our behavior and identity.¹¹ In this osmotic relationship between humans and objects,

⁸ Stewart, *On Longing*, 125.

⁹ Ahmed and Stacy ed., *Thinking Through the Skin*, 38.

¹⁰ Miller, *Materiality*, 3.

¹¹ For how humans use objects to create a distributed or extended selfhood and how objects act as persons, see Alfred Gell, *Art And Agency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 9.

some objects and people may seem more material than others. According to ‘relative materiality’,¹² some people are seen as weighty with gravitas due to their power, and so are the objects associated or emanating from them. Conversely, one can perhaps substantiate oneself by accumulating objects that derive their importance from their very commonness. Within a contemporary context, I reclaim and re-contextualize various mundane mass-manufactured objects¹³ like adhesive bandages, cardboard boxes, bubble wrap, clothes pegs, etc. to create a self- representative environment.

In the context of skin, an especially significant object is clothing – often referred to as our ‘second skin’. Cloth mediates the body’s contact with the world and is one of the most intimate objects that materializes the connection between the body and the outer world. Skin and fabric (clothing, bedding, towels, upholstery etc.) act as a conduit or a boundary between our interior and exterior worlds. In several artworks, I use craft techniques like sewing, embroidery and crocheting that are associated with domesticity and, sometimes, passivity and re-contextualize them. The use of clay to represent the human body draws upon a longstanding tradition of the material as a figurative medium. It also evokes connotations of the ‘body as vessel’, interior and exterior spaces and values of containment, corporeality, tactility and fragility.¹⁴ Since I use hand-building techniques to create my clay pieces, the idea of touch relates to both the material as well as conceptual aspects of the work. The primacy of touch is also connected to the idea of skin as a psychological and physical boundary where one experiences both pleasure and pain through the same organ.

The general idea of ritual as a daily habit or custom is implied within the larger theme of dress and undress, garments and the naked/nude self-portraits. In other works, I regard the

¹² Miller, *Materiality*, 16.

¹³ For an overview of contemporary artists working with recycled objects see the catalogs for *Second Lives: Remixing the Ordinary*, Museum of Arts and Design, New York, and *Manuf@ctured*, Museum of Contemporary Craft, Portland.

¹⁴ See Jane Waller’s, *The Human Form in Clay*, (Wiltshire: Crowood Press, 2001).

investment of time, energy and skill needed to make art, as the ritual and evoke the idea of worship in a non-theistic sense as the shaping or 'crafting of worth'. By using the properties of clay and combining media, I create figurative works that represent my body as a site of both pain as well as transcendence of pain. In another example, I take an everyday object like clothes pins (with associations of clothing and physical pressure) and by photographing the pegging of my facial skin, I restore ritual value through an act that symbolically mediates between physical and psychological realms.

I had previously mentioned that skin acts as a metaphor for the 'self'; similarly touch acts as a metaphor for contact with oneself or others.¹⁵ My self-portraits use sculptural and other formal devices to emphasize a female subjectivity that has agency and/or psychological gravity. The use of the human scale and body language is designed to encourage mimesis and empathy with the self-representation. The use of verticality, whether sitting or standing, is drawn partly from iconic representations of deities in Hindu and Buddhist art. It is also based upon feminist criticism and the use of the Western figurative tradition where verticality was equated with a subjectivity that was assumed to be male.¹⁶ The added use of pedestals, suspension, and placement of artworks on body-forms influences the spatial relationship with the viewer either placing the artwork within the viewer's space or separating it to create a feeling of ascendance. I combine these formal and spatial devices with the use of cardboard boxes for pedestals, bubble wrap for drapery, and iron 'chair' armature, creating a tension and slippage between the real and the symbolic, fictive, or illusionary.

¹⁵ The word touch can be used in sentences like 'Are you in touch with?' or 'Get in touch with yourself.' For example, the phrase 'Keep in touch.' is the opposite of 'Out of touch.' which has its roots in the 18th c. military drills requiring a soldier to be within touching distance of men on either side.

¹⁶ See David Getsy's essay 'Fallen Women: The Gender of Horizontality' in Alexandra Gerstein ed., *Display and Displacement: Sculpture and the Pedestal from Renaissance to Post-Modern* (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2007), 114-127.

Conclusion

Along with issues of gender, race, and historicity, my self-portraits act as metaphors for the fundamental incongruity of artistic existence. Artists have to be able to create worlds, travel between worlds and also be flexible and responsive to those worlds. The artist needs to have "...the capability to get back to the roots of one's own being, to get to know the eve of one's perception and the conditions of the 'I' and to be able to translate them into aesthetic forms...on the other hand the art market's demands for robustness...it is expected of the artist that he/she shed their skin with detachment."¹⁷ In this body of work, I combine more universal metaphors like the artist's creative capacity to transform and adapt with the specificity of my struggle with representation and connection with my environment. I have also become more aware of the dialog between change and continuity and the importance of contingency and slippage. Literally and metaphorically, I have attempted to go in one direction but have often ended up elsewhere; I have exerted agency but have also been influenced by my environment.

I started this paper with the concept of 'skin as surface' to investigate the relationship between identity, embodiment, and materiality thereby using art to explore representation and reality. I use re-invention as a strategic tool to negotiate and navigate life; and compare the process to the accumulation, transformation, and shedding of material and immaterial 'skins'. The goal of much of this effort seems to be a constant relocation in order to create new perspectives and knowledge. This process continues perhaps not so much with new questions but with the perpetuation of older ones. What does it mean to be human? How do gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class factor? How can I transform and transcend, and how can I use art and culture in this dialog?

¹⁷ See Alba D'Urbano's work in eds. Judith Fox and Amy Schlegel, *Pattern Language: Clothing as Communicator* (Boston: Tufts University Art Gallery, 2005) 34.

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