



skin as feeling vessel

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For the camera shy Muzaffars.

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recall

We arrive home from school to be informed by Mumma that there are afternoon plans to be accommodated alongside homework. We have to leave the house around 3.30 pm to make it in time for a *majlis*¹ at the mosque *Shah-e-Marda*. We don't want to be late. Why is Papa not coming? Ask him that. Find some black clothes and a *dupatta*² to cover your head. All this information is never met with delight or excitement, so Mumma ensures that nothing about it is up for debate. My sister changes into the only decently drab *kurta*³ before I can.

We hail an auto-rickshaw from outside the campus gate and my mother negotiates with the driver to agree to a fare of Rs. 40. We arrive at the mosque within 20 minutes. What first meets the eye is a dusty patch of land, which in the evenings serves as a busy parking lot. We cross it on foot, and as if on cue, we become collectively solemn. We are late, so we rush to the back entrance of the main chamber of the mosque, familiar with the fact that that's where the women congregate. Stepping over a mass of shoes and slippers, we make it inside, recognizing the faces of distant relatives in the crowd despite their hooded heads. The seating is essentially a carpeted floor, which makes those who arrive first pick the spots that allow leaning against a wall, or a pillar. This leaves a bald patch in the center of the room, free for movement. But more women trickle in soon enough and claim it all. Greetings are exchanged,

quietly, before the *majlis* begins. The floor is covered in cotton bed sheets over the carpeting, some of which have prints. One of them has the audacity of a floral pattern. Clearly the rules of mourning do not apply to this functional piece of decor. Nobody in the room is wearing colors other than black, white, gray and shades of blue. And there is little jewelery worn except for rings and religious pendants. There are women who have replaced their nose-pins with a piece of string or a twig from a *neem* plant.

The *Zakir* (speaker) clears his throat to declare himself ready to start. The room falls silent. He is on the other side of a curtain that separates us women from the men in attendance. He introduces himself using a microphone, from the men's side of the chamber where we know he's seated in a high chair that is also cloaked in black fabric. He announces the name of the hosting family who have graciously invited us all this afternoon. *Naare-Salawat*⁴. *Allahumma salli 'ala Muhammadin wa Aali Muhammad*. And thus begins a narration. One that I do not follow.

I am uncomfortable. Most women shift back and forth between a sitting position where they can hug their knees and rest their heads down, or they sit cross-legged. The former works better as you can be incognito, or in my case pretend-awake. Actually, let's be honest here, I mean pretend-mourning. I try to settle in keeping the possibility

of being able to switch between the two positions, as holding one for too long can be numbing. Some young kids begin to fall asleep as the *fazail* (recital) progresses but I know that with my height I outgrew that luxury. I have a clear image of my mother's special frown for when I try to rest my head on her shoulder and suggest passing out.

Is falling asleep during a *majlis* considered disrespectful or is it that the sprawled, sleeping body looks kind of shameless?

The space has now run out of wiggle room and reached full capacity. I find myself having only retained enough space to hold the knee-hugging position. Trapped in that shrunken state, I try to be motionless even though I'd really like to erupt, burst, spill, leak, dissipate. The narrative of the *Battle of Karbala*⁵ builds up and turns morose in a matter of minutes. This triggers small sobs as a first reaction until one of the women from around us breaks down to cause a ripple effect. The crying becomes a wail, the wails become a song. I am not crying, just hiding. And I don't understand why everyone else is. At some point I look up and meet my sister's searching eyes. This marks the moment for escape.

The first month of the Islamic calendar, namely *Muharram*, is observed as a period of mourning in which Muslims remind themselves of the death of Imam Hussein and his family during the *Battle of Karbala*. A great deal of respect is reserved for the sacrifice of the martyrs who were the first followers and propagators of Islamic ideology. By praying in abundance and refraining from joyous events, symbols and actions they revisit the historical facts considered crucial to the flourish of Islam.

¹ Majlis is an Arabic term meaning "a place of sitting", used in the context of "council", to describe various types of special gatherings among common interest groups be it administrative, social or religious in countries with linguistic or cultural connections to Islam. It shares its root with the verb meaning 'to sit,' (cf. British English 'sitting room'). Among the Shia community the term majlis is used as a verb meaning to the gathering who came to remember Ahl al-Bayt and in particular Hussain ibn-e-Ali.

² A length of material worn as a scarf or head covering, typically with a salwar, by women from South Asia.

³ A *kurta* is a long uni-sex upper garment that is worn in conservative and culturally appropriated and traditional settings.

⁴ Salawat is a special Arabic phrase, which contains the salutation upon the prophet of Islam. This kind of phrase is usually expressed by Muslims in their five daily prayers (during the Tashahhud) and also when the name of Muhammad had been mentioned.

⁵ The Battle of Karbala took place on Muharram 10, in the year 61 AH of the Islamic calendar (October 10, 680 AD) in Karbala, in present-day Iraq. The battle took place between a small group of supporters and relatives of Muhammad's grandson, Husayn ibn Ali, and a larger military detachment from the forces of Yazid I, the Umayyad caliph.

abstract

This paper is the textual component for an ongoing visual arts MFA graduate thesis at Emily Carr University of Art and Design (Vancouver, BC). The document is structured to take up ideas around discomfort for the female body, through a phenomenological analysis of human skin as a *feeling vessel*. The media and installation work produced alongside this thesis is a cinematic visual inquiry to pose the question: *where is feeling found?*

Socio-cultural, linguistic and psychological spaces are activated in a manner of thinking such that skin gets read as a border, drape, peel, screen, collector and container for feelings of discomfort, or *dis-ease*. As the chosen medium for this inquiry is the moving image, the thesis hones in on the ability of transference that film-as-body is capable of triggering. To locate subjectively internalized manifestations of *dis-ease* via the experience of embodiment is the broad ambition of the work.

dis·ease

‘*dis-ease*’ or the lack of ease, in this recasting of the word, refers to any or all synonyms of bodily discomfort.

The uneasiness of pathological disease is described in oppositional terms - unhealthy,

unwell,

unsound;

dis-ease could be understood as a common denominator for each of these states.

Restlessness, anxiety, malaise, irritability, constriction, awkwardness, guilt, shame and humiliation are feelings or configurations of *dis-ease* that prolong bodily discomfort beyond physical pain among other medically diagnosable symptoms.

skin (as) border

9

*Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?*⁶

In the unfinished manuscript *The Visible and the Invisible*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty questions ways in which the body places itself in relation to the world. While asking what might be the limit between the two, he deems the world itself to be flesh. Is flesh then a limit or is it how the body extends itself to experience? David Abram explains Merleau-Ponty's concept of 'flesh' as "the mysterious tissue or matrix that underlies and gives rise to both the perceiver and the perceived as interdependent aspects of its spontaneous activity".⁷ Flesh could quite simply be gleaned here as an intermediary between the physicality of the world and the sensorial stimulation that it initiates for the immersed body.

Merleau-Ponty coined the term "primacy of perception"⁸ which refers to how we perceive the world through our bodies, as embodied subjects involved in existence. I am interested in further speculating the body to pursue my own interest, in *locating feeling*. The body comes to be understood through several symbolic interpretations, but I approach it as a *feeling vessel* with an internal and external reception of experience, fluctuating between 'ease' and 'dis-ease'. To develop a visual language for this inquiry, I have initiated a tactile dialogue with skin such that simple brushes against other skins

begin to visually suggest the gestural manners of the talking and listening body. Using fruit skins (see Fig. 1) for instance, has been one methodological approach of thinking about flesh and skin in the performance of feeling. With such material explorations I hope to navigate the invisibility of dis-ease within the bordered body.

While Merleau-Ponty's exploration of flesh pushes the body outwards in order for it to perceive the world, Joanna Robinson invests in a perspective of the bodily surface, as it erodes away in light of malignancy. In her essay *Skin Deep*⁹, she recounts the lived memory of her father's skin cancer treatment and grants skin an urgent, poetic agency. As her father fragments and withers before her eyes, she writes a piece of nonfiction from his bedside which reads skin as an encasement. She conjures unnerving images of an infirm body at the accepting end of a slow, glorious torture. While bearing witness to a regrowing body as new cells 'rise and mesh' together, Robinson tributes skin in its state of re-emergence (2). Early in the essay she takes up skin as a *territorial border* for the body:

Of all borders, none feels as fundamental as our skin. Defined by skin, we are defined territories, portable countries. The solid, soft and liquid of us are contained and identified; we do not spill, or leave parts of ourselves here and there, or mix up our own being with other substances in the world. Skin makes us separate and sovereign. (1)



Fig. 1: Using latex, polymer clay and plaster moulds to pick up the textural details of the skin of fruit was the first step towards thinking about the significations around skin in 2017. Adiba Muzaffar.

⁶Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, and Claude Lefort. *The Visible and the Invisible Followed by Working Notes*. W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library. 2011. pp.138.

⁷Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than Human World*. Pantheon Books, New York. 1996. pp. 66.

⁸Merleau Ponty, Maurice, and Colin Smith. *Phenomenology of Perception*. International Library of Philosophy and Scientific Method. 1962.

⁹Robinson, Joanna. 'Skin Deep'. *River Teeth: A Journal of Nonfiction Narrative* 9(1), 36-41. Ashland University. Project MUSE database. 2007. pp. 1-3

Skin is indeed what keeps the inner-self safely hidden as much as it makes each individual recognizable from the outside. For this dual function skin qualifies as a border. But I wouldn't confuse it for a boundary or an end limit. An atmospheric sense organ, skin grows with the person and absorbs information to enable the personal. The body is immersed in a thicket of stimulation with the flesh of the world aligning itself along the flesh of the body, sometimes even impelling to permeate it. A small cut tearing our epidermis bleeds and scabs at the point of injury, but when we're cut open, the pain quakes through the feeling vessel.

To be factually accurate, this is a play of nerve endings. But even vivid imagery positioned on skin is successful in triggering a wince of pain. Skin responds to shifts in the air around itself, reacting to even the most minimal sort of attack on personal space. It has an ability to sense, feel, absorb and contain feeling. Bordered by it, the body becomes an entrapment that is packed, pickled, smothered, drenched and fizzling with feeling.

Scars, burns and racial markers also draw along the same border, laying bare one's history or cultural identity in a language of marks and shades. Such signifiers when attached to skin make it a *differentiating border*. Identity hinges upon such differentiation. Ideas of belonging and

ownership through sociocultural or political engagements of the body can come to cause discomfort in the metaphysical assertions of the self. I've recognized skin as the locus above and beneath which this discomfort can be found lurking. This project is a culminated interest in capturing varied experiences of discomfort held as bodily memories on camera, by thinking about isolated attributes of skin through its material, visual language. A metaphorical reading of skin ensues (see Fig. 2) as the gathered personal accounts use skin as a witness, spokesperson, and performer of authentic experiences of dis-ease.

In summoning the conflicting binaries between which skin operates : two fold readings that range common knowledge, cultural language and phenomenology, I situate my thesis inquiry. The media installation film work peruses the feeling of discomfort using skin as a flattening basic to talk about the dis-eased state of the body. Skin allows a variety of associations to settle around itself that range from ordinary, to evocative and troubling. Is the bodily experience of comfort and discomfort universal? Are we in possession of skin, or possessed by it? What is skin if we're held prisoner under its expanse? And what are we, without it?



Fig. 2: Stills from *'Inside Information'* (2016). Adiba Muzaffar. Experiments with textures to think about the skin as the border, of the body as the site for dis-ease.

skin (as) drape

In the controversial book, *'Intercourse' (1987)*, by radical feminist and writer Andrea Dworkin skin is what assigns the “first clue to identity in a society”¹⁰. By wearing a “thin veil of matter”¹⁰ separating the outside from the inside” we are wrapped in a “human mask” (32). Despite the coverage that comes with skin, one calls this the 'bare body'. The raw honesty thus attributed to this bare body makes the 'human mask' not a mere facade, but a shelter to further protect. Civilization has taught this body a thing or two about vulnerability by conditioning it to escape the strains of visibility (see Fig. 3).

Dworkin writes about ‘first nakedness’ (33) and how the innocence and basic nature of it as a primary state is unrecoverable. Skin comes to learn its social functions as it gets covered in layers of “social self” assimilating “emotional pains, rituals and rules that are antithetical to any pure experience of being” (28). She also remarks on how re-draping the natural drape of skin, as suggested by social conformity and convention, causes a slow loss of the knowledge that the primal, naked body brought with itself. The factor of visibility enables a psychic or behavioral function for skin, inaugurating the “basis for corporeal privacy” (27). Beneath this drape is where the formation of the self is intended to begin. Judith Butler¹¹ in *'Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity' (1990)* talks about identity-differentiation to bring up a spatial

distinction between the “inner” and the “outer” being. So when I say that my experience of the body is female, it implies that the “internal fixity of the self” (Butler 134) has been determined and then embodied. Butler has famously challenged such an internalization- “If the inner world no longer designates a topos, then the internal fixity of the self and, indeed, the internal locale of gender identity, become similarly suspect”. She asks, “How does a body figure on its surface the very invisibility of its hidden depth?”. Which makes me ask- How does my body come to abide by codes of conduct that root for a performance called 'female'?

Reading skin as a drape is my manner of dealing with my body's dis-ease around visibility. That my skin is what others don't need to see and so must be covered up, was a key instruction that manifested and vexed me in my early understanding of being a female-bodied Muslim. In being covered, I was taught to avoid drawing attention to my body. My mother would quote forewarnings from the Holy Book of *Quran* about how on the Day of Judgement (*Qayamat*) “your ears and your eyes and your skin would testify against you if you have not been hiding yourselves (in the world)”¹². Besides learning to be harmless and invisible my body was also learning to become that of a woman. The expectation of the female body, as I gauged, was that it should know how to celebrate and decorate itself as much as it should



Fig. 3: On shoot still from the set of *'chapterzero:'* - the female body restricted by societal and beauty demands to both hide and reveal itself.

¹⁰ Dworkin, Andrea. *"Skinless," Intercourse'* 2007 ed. Basic Books. 1987. pp. 26-33

¹¹ Butler, Judith. *'Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity'*. Routledge. 1990. pp. 134

¹² “The disbeliever or the hypocrite will be called in front of the Lord and will be shown his own deeds, but he will deny them and say, ‘O Lord, by your glory, this angel has written about me something that I did not do.’ The angel will say to him, ‘Did you not do such and such on such and such a day in such and such a place’ He will say, ‘No, by your glory O Lord, I did not do it.’ When he does that, a seal will be placed over his mouth.”

http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2126

know how to hide. When you are constantly remarked upon and reminded to keep in check the restraints that apply to your body, you are being followed under the guise of being looked after. And so I found myself looking at a crudely cropped image of myself in the making with several owners of my body, of my physical, visible self¹³.

In my film '*chapterzero: (2017)*' I take up the idea of draping the body fetching from my female-bodied experience, in attempt to visualize shame. To not 'expose' the body or wear 'revealing' clothes are suggestions that many women in India encounter, such that shame is directly and indirectly projected at them creating a sense of difference within the operating cisgendered norms.

Using nylon pantyhose (sheer hosiery), an object of fetish more than function, I re-draped the skin of a female-bodied artist who works with limitations on the body. The captured moving image was essentially a set of hands fighting against the nylon, as if to dismiss it. There is no motivated action to the movement of the hands. The image blurs in and out of focus, with the nylon snapping back at the body despite being aggressively rejected. The text in the film tries to recall the disruption of my "young, unconscious" uninhibited self. Shame roots an individual to cultural or belonging-based expectations, and so can take shape in a variety

of ways-but that it has a physical and psychological impact on the body is what I wanted to explore. The use of nylon pantyhose also references the ridiculous norms and expectations of beauty and modesty projected on the body to shroud its spirit and character (see Fig. 4).

In '*The Cultural Politics of Emotion (2004)*' Sara Ahmed¹⁴ mentions that when one is shamed their body "seems to burn up with the negation that is perceived (self-negation); and shame [then] impresses upon the skin as an intense feeling of the subject *being against itself*" (103). Shame certainly involves an impulse to 'take cover' and to 'cover oneself'. But the desire to cover and to be covered presupposes the failure of cover. In shame, one desires to cover precisely because they have been exposed to others. Hence the word shame is associated as much with cover and concealment, as it is with exposure, vulnerability and wounding (Lynd 1958; Wurmser 1981). That the invisible nature of shame can provoke the body to feel such strong impulses to hide, points again to the permeability that skin as a border allows in a navigation of the self through the environment and the (disapproving) other.



Fig. 4: Film still from '*chapterzero: (2017)*'. Adiba Muzaffar.

¹³ This chapter may have raised an expectation for the hijab (or the veil) because of how the word drape is read in the cultural context I bring up. I'd like to make it clear though that I did not grow up covering my head outside of religious contexts (such as the described setting of a majlis).

¹⁴ Ahmed, Sara. '*The Cultural Politics of Emotion*'. Routledge, 2014. pp. 103

skin (as) peel

13

'Skins (2017)' was a work I produced as a part of *Widely Construed*, the MFA Interim Exhibition at Emily Carr University's *Abraham J. Rogatnick Media Gallery*. The work was an explication of bodily anxiety as I began to seek out acts of discomfort in everyday rituals. In wanting to unpack the aspect of control true to disordered eating, I came to recognize fruit as a metaphor for the body. I first invited people to my studio and requested them to cut fruit for me and my camera. Next, I used the clips I'd filmed and some others that I found online as references to make a rotoscoped¹⁵ animation film (see Fig. 5).

Playing up the uncanny, twitchy movements made the form of the fruit bodies retain their familiarity and their symbolic seduction, despite being stripped of the colors and the textural details. The image was essentially black outlines of the fruit and of the hands - or it can be said - just their skins. The fruit would get cut and peeled but there'd never be any eating as the film would leap from the last frame to the first, with an un-peeled fruit coming wholly back in sight again.

The restated action of undressing gradually began to insist upon a recursive implication of vulnerability. The hands ruled over the fruit as it kept giving away. The animated image also reduced the threshold of pressure and intensity realistically required to lacerate the fruit. The fruit body would forgo all claims of safety with

the skin accepting its permeability- a habitat failing to be protective in light of violence. The film was displayed as a two-sided projection, over a circular piece of vinyl affixed on a glass wall.

I continued to look for ways in which I can create a language about the human body through the body of fruit, post this experiment. I wanted to personify fruit and bring it to enact human tendencies. So, as a next step, I decided to peel a bulk of real oranges, an observation exercise meant to see ways in which body metaphors could be positioned around skin. To speed up the process of drying the peels, I was advised to free them of all the pith (or albedo) and just let them sit. This let me arrive at an unseen, fragmented state of the skins where the dimpled orange peel revealed a stippling-like smattering of little craters on its hidden underside. At first, these skins were limp and flat, just enjoying the warmth in the studio. But with a slow loss of moisture, each piece lifted itself up to bulge outwards, with the orange face caving in.

As I set out with no specific expectation, witnessing the drying peels not as discards or dead organs but as residue with life left in them felt valuable enough as an end outcome. It was like a chance encounter of a spirited celebration, a post-retirement ripening! I saw this as an oddly satisfying encounter with ease. To be at ease, as suggested before, is opposed to dis-ease



Fig. 5: Installation view of 'Skins (2017)'. Adiba Muzaffar.

¹⁵Rotoscoping is a method where tracing over video footage frame by frame permits an uncanny remake of the moving image.

and synonymous to freedom. And the freedom that I have chanced upon in my own personal experience has been the freedom in departure.

In *Two Concepts of Liberty*¹⁶, a famous essay first published in 1958, Isaiah Berlin brings up the negative concept of freedom or liberty in attempting to answer the question “What is the area within which a person or group of persons should be left to do, or be what he is able to be, without interference by other persons?”. On the contrary, the positive concept can be understood in attempting to answer the question “What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?” (1969, pp. 121-122). The difference between the two concepts can be gauged in terms of the difference between factors that are external and internal to the agent. In my feeble assertions of freedom, I’ve had to leave whatever grounds me - be it a city, a community or any form of loyalty - to feel free of religious and societal expectations. This could be why I found myself eager to honor the agency that the drying peels were claiming.

I decided to make silicone-molds to be able to pick up the shape and texture of the skin of oranges to cast the drying peels in clear resin, giving them translucent orange-shaped bodies. While this fossilized form was meant to privilege the dried peel as a thing of beauty, I realized that I was also holding it captive. The irony in this duality is

disturbing, but it again spoke to my own struggle with freedom- something I’ve been led to believe is given, not taken (see Fig. 6-8).

In the last chapter, I spoke about the covered body and the obstructed sense of self beneath it, so am I now suggesting the peeling off of such restraints as a solution? Human skin doesn't come off that easy, but there is indeed a metaphorical discourse on 'skinlessness'. Andrea Dworkin, among others, has written about the female body as skinless. She explains the ‘skinless woman’ as one without ‘internal life’, ‘human resonance’ or a need for ‘human interpretation’. She speaks of it as ‘a body without dimension’ given how it is “painted pink, photographed, embalmed and then killed” (Dworkin 9)¹⁷. For Dworkin, skinlessness is the lack of something to probe, making the female form depthless, inferior and therefore fictional. Claudia Benthien¹⁸, in her book *'Skin: The Cultural Border between the Self and the World' (2002)*, brings up her interpretation of skinless by comparing ‘the skinless man’ who “traditionally presents a positive image of liberation” to “the skinless woman” who “is taboo” (83-90).

An interesting instance of this gender-based anomaly within the notion of skinlessness, can be found in the film *'Silence of the Lambs (1991)'*¹⁹. The primary transsexual antagonist- Buffalo Bill- is found murdering and skinning women to make



Fig. 6

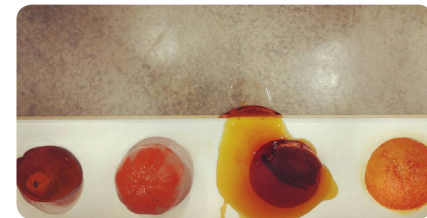


Fig. 7

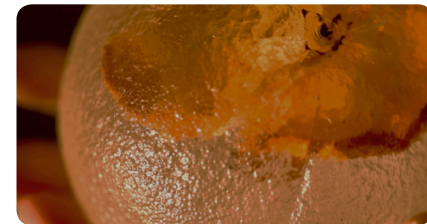


Fig. 8

Fig. 6 - Drying peels (collection), dried peel (portrait)

Fig. 7 - A plaster display holding half a drying peel, a resin orange in oil paint, a melting sugar glass orange and a ghost orange with oil paint picking up the texture of an orange skin (made as a mold/ display case)

Fig. 8 - A detail of the resin bodied orange, fossilizing a dried peel.

¹⁶ Berlin, Isaiah, 1969, *'Two Concepts of Liberty'*, in I. Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, London: Oxford University Press. New ed. in Berlin, 2002. pp. 121-122

¹⁷ Dworkin, Andrea. *'Repulsion', 'Intercourse'*. 2007 ed. Basic Books. 1987. pp. 9

¹⁸ Benthien Claudia. *'Skin: The Cultural Border Between the Self and the World'* Columbia Univ. Press, 2002. pp. 83-90.

¹⁹ *Silence of the Lambs*. Dir. Jonathan Demme. Orion Pictures. 1991

a woman suit for himself, as he has been denied a sex change operation. Benthien points out through this example how the “profane” purpose of wanting to possess skin, for its “essence of femaleness” is how Buffalo Bill too holds up the old attribution of the woman as a “beautiful smooth outer surface enclosing nothing but hollow space” (93).

It would be wrong to take up so many notions around the dis-eased body and not touch upon death. When I came across Zoe Leonard’s work titled *Strange Fruit (for David)* I was deeply moved by her use of fruit to reflect upon the loss of lives due to the AIDS epidemic. In this work Leonard does away with the meat of several kinds of fruits to restitch the disfigured forms of their rind. As the work was also made in reaction to Billie Holiday’s song *Strange Fruit* and the death of a close friend, Leonard chose it “as a way to sew her[self] back up”²⁰. Using zippers, buttons and wire she was able to contain the pain of coping with death, in the created void that was once a swell, live form. I thought it to be a rather arresting meditation on mourning. In this acknowledgment of the bodies as shrines in themselves, the skins were rewarded a personage (see Fig. 9 & 10).

Such a posthumous celebration of a body bearing trauma compels me to think about the manner in which my semi-religious upbringing has been

insistent upon the body becoming a site for grief, restraint and punishment. In the introductory chapter titled 'recall' I try to build a scene where many kinds of *disengagement* with my immediate context are at play, leading to a heightened engagement with the feeling of discomfort. Attending these religious events was clearly fruitless, if this discomfort is the key take away I report. Islam, in my liberal experience, as a religious institution regards sacrifice and mourning to a degree that leaves little room for notions of healing to strike a fair balance. As a child, and one who has witnessed the scene that I describe, I would find myself silenced by my discomfort, while those around me would successfully mourn as per the demand.

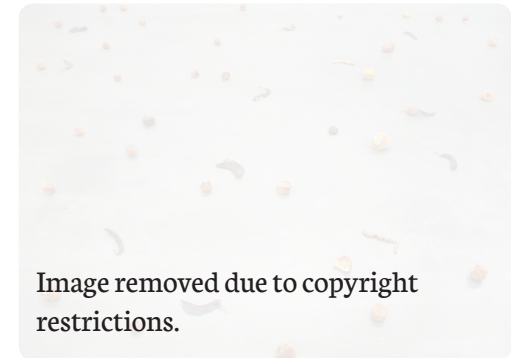


Fig. 9

Fig. 9: Zoe Leonard's '*Strange Fruit (for David)*'. 1992-97. Philadelphia Museum of Art, purchased with funds contributed by the Dietrich Foundation and with the partial gift of the artist and the Paula Cooper Gallery, 1998, 1998-2-1 <https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/92277.html>

²⁰ Zoe Leonard in an interview with the artist by Anna Blume, January 18, 1997, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

skin (as) screen

16

*As the edge between the body and the world, the skin functions always as both a covering and an uncovering because of its simultaneous proximity to the public world and to the secretive inner body. It covers the body's secrets by clothing us in a placid smoothness that hides the murky movements within.*²¹

In *The Tactile Eye*, Jennifer M. Barker assumes some poetic liberty while describing the skin of the body in relation to the skin of the film. She continues, though, to speak about this surface beneath which one hides to also be where their secrets get relayed such that “we are always naked in it” (Barker 28). Barker proposes that like the human body, the film has a skin, a viscera and a musculature. To explain the relationship that the film-body is able to initiate with human skin, she quotes Laura Marks²² who calls the contact initiated between film and viewer, a caress or an “erotic embrace” (Barker 35-36).

Marks recognizes this caress as a kind of ‘union’ which “does not obliterate the self so much as fray its boundaries” (24). The screen to screen contact initiated by the moving image is known to immerse and move the viewer. While the “basis of touching is reaching out, it also implies the reverse being touched in return. This reciprocal condition can be extended to a representational object as well. Indeed, it invests the very process of film reception” (Barker 33). This possibility of a tangible sensation without any touch being physically initiated is a challenge I want to work

with. Kaja Silverman²³ in *The Threshold of the Visible World* calls the ‘normative aspects’ of the screen to be “so deeply rooted within our psyches and so tightly imbricated with our desires and identifications, that they generally determine what we see at the first moment of looking at a particular object”. What she calls the ‘screen’ although is the “full range of representational coordinates available at a particular moment” that propose themselves with an inevitability that they are “given to be seen” (Silverman 221). She brings up the self-portraits of Cindy Sherman to describe nuanced ways in which the female body has learnt to frame itself in a two dimensional universe that is given to be seen and operates in an oversimplified kind of sensuality.

screen

: conceal, hide, veil

screen

: show, broadcast, transmit

The word ‘screen’ is tricky, though. Looking at it as only one of two things - a cover or a display - is problematic. In the worlds we create for the purposes of film, we build a notion of comfort for the film subject so that they are able to perform. This cover is later lifted. Such a play with screens is especially true for the female bodied performer as the games of hiding and revealing at play are as sensationalizing as they are reductive.

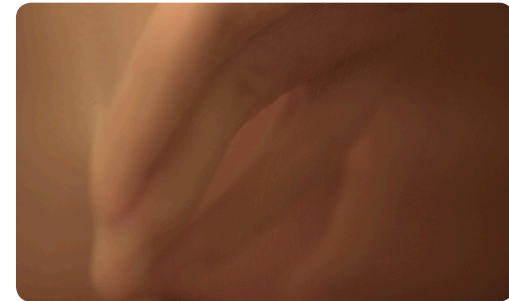


Fig. 10



Fig. 11

Fig. 10: Unedited stills from ‘chapterzero’ (2017)

Canon 5D Mark III, 100mm, pantyhose

Fig. 11: Unedited stills from ‘Pick a Side’ (2017)

Canon 5D Mark III, 100mm, latex, leather

²¹ Barker, Jennifer M. *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*. University of California Press, 2009. pp. 28-35

²² Marks, Laura U. ‘Video Haptics and Erotics’. *Screen* 39, no.4, 1998: 338 n. pp. 24.

²³ Silverman, Kaja. *The Threshold of the Visible World*. Routledge New York, 1996. pp. 221

Edna woke up one morning to realize that she was wearing. Wearing what? Simply wearing. When she lifted her arms from the pillow, they shed their color in clouds of powder on the stif linen. And instead of the daily imprint of the creases on her cheek, the fragile network of her veins was etched on the pillowcase. Her skin exchanged surfaces with the ease of gold foil. Yet, there was nothing horrifying about it, only a strangeness that can only be felt in wearing painlessly like she was.²⁴

In the imagery that Tewari conjures, skin frees itself and dissipates to leave the body unbound. Which of them is free though- the body or this evaporating skin? Factually speaking, the body cannot withstand such a state as, in just a matter of minutes, there would be enough blood lost and germs ingested for all life functions to cease. But let's leave reality behind again and claim this freedom in departure. I've been keen on building upon an absurd fiction; following the character arc of this fleeing, freeing skin.

Inquiries around the body such as '*Corps Étranger* (1994)' by Mona Hatoum, '*Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects* (1974)' by Lisa Steele and several '*Earth-Body Works* (1972-85)' by Ana Mendieta are prime examples of the recorded body in an in-between space, which is neither fiction nor nonfiction. I am beginning to recognize this as the space from where my own films are materializing. The flattened image created by the camera can make the screen of the body become the skin of the film. Such a blurring or fusion has been attempted

in several ways within the discipline of video-performance.

In Mendieta's work '*Glass on Body Imprints* (1972)',²⁵ Mendieta flattens her own body surface to create two-dimensional instances of female flesh and form. This, by the simple act of pressing herself against a piece of glass. With a disturbing allure in its call, each image brings her body intimately close to the camera, to the viewer and to itself. She disrupts the traditional representation of the female form, or what is considered 'normal' or 'healthy' (see Fig. 12).

This act of distorting the female form with a glass screen is extremely evocative for how it challenges the polite distance maintained by the eye and glass screen of the camera lens. Her work has a stark quality of being able to speak of boundaries and limitations using temporal gestures, space and materiality. This work has inspired a video performance for which I have been documenting my own body, as I take naps on a small glass-top table (I talk more about it in a later chapter). Ideas around what the body can do to discomfort the viewer in order to deny them their general expectation or comfort, or that of beauty has been strongly prompted in the body based performance works of Mendieta.

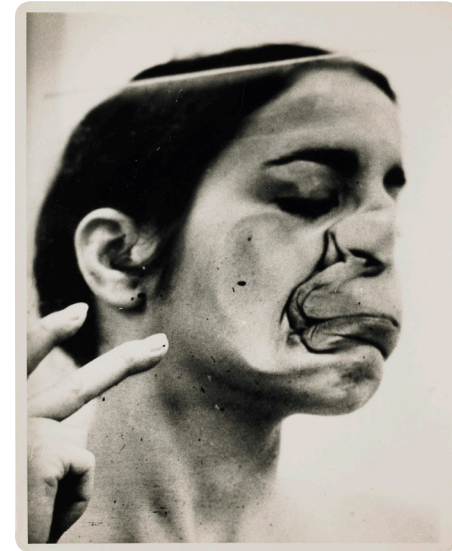


Fig. 12

Fig. 12: *Untitled, Glass on Body Imprints - Face* (1972). Ana Mendieta.

²⁴ Tewari Malvika. '*A Simple Pendulum*' (unpublished fragment). Email to Author, 2013

²⁵ Mendieta, Ana. *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints- Face)* 1972. Purchased usage rights from Art Resource, NY. ART#446539 Credit: Princeton University Art Museum / Art Resource, NY Description: *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints - Face)* 1972. Gelatin silver prints. Each: 25.4 x 20.3 cm. (10 x 8 in.). Museum purchase, Fowler McCormick, Class of 1921, Fund. 2007-41.1-13. Photo: Bruce M. White Artist: Mendieta, Ana (1948-1985) © Copyright Location Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, New Jersey, U.S.A. © Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, Courtesy Galerie LeLong

skin (as) collector

18

In Claudia Benthien's document on skin there is an insistence that skin is both a "projection surface and a bearer of signs" (12). I started this thesis document by looking at skin as a border and at the receiving end of the world at large. But it is also important to ask what it truly receives and enfolds or holds on to with its sense of memory.

Benthien²⁶ borrows, as examples, metaphors found in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's original German from 17th century literature, some of which are closely inspective of the body by way of imposing social expectations on it. "Das alles derb an eigner Haut erfahren" literally reads "[that] which they experience harshly on their skin". "Seine Haut selbst zu Market tragen" or taking one's own skin to the market meant "doing something at your own risk" (or through hard experience). Similarly "jemandem die Haut voll schlagen" translates to "giving someone a sound thrashing" and "ihm recht auf die Haut greifen" goes on to "really lay a lesson into the skin". Non mutilating corporal punishments too involved skin and hair ("mit Haut und Haar") where the scourging and cutting of hair was practiced to damage the surface of the body, stopping short at destroying its integrity and leaving basic functions untouched (Benthien 19). There are clear manifestations of a grounded, ideal self in the way that these troubling metaphors all punish the skin. Joanna Briscoe in her review of Benthien's arguments attempts to locate such literary

instances in contemporary writing, only to find the symbolic value of skin wane and just become an "expanse of dead cells and nerve endings". Briscoe finds that skin is no longer regarded as a "mood-mirror" (par. 4)²⁷. This shift in language illustrates a retraction in the concept of the self to one with a less embodied impression.

Merleau-Ponty²⁸ wrote, "I am always on the same side of my body" in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) which I interpret implies the beginning world at the end of our skin. While there is contact and intertwining with one's own body and with the bodies of others, there is never a collapse or dissolution of the outline that is skin. Touch and interaction with the outside world makes skin develop memory. While looking at skin as a receptor, or in more modern terms as an interface I came across Steven Connor's²⁹ *Thinking Through Skin* (2001) where he takes up skin as "a soft clock" (46) one that marks the body temporally.

The marks that we collect on the body serve as evidence or consequences of our experiences of embodiment. While some have a temporary effect, others have an effect that can become permanent to the sense of self. With piercings, body art, surgical interventions and tattoos the body gets marked in deliberated acts of acceptance of permanence- in, for and with the body.

²⁶Benthien, Claudia, and Thomas Dunlap. *'Skin: On the Cultural Border between Self and the World.'* Columbia Univ. Press, 2002. pp. 19

²⁷Briscoe, Joanna. 'Skin Deep': Joanna Briscoe explains the significance of our surfaces, as explored by Claudia Benthien. 2003. par. 5
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/jan/25/society>

²⁸Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *'The Primacy of Perception'*, Northwestern University Press, 1964, pp. 3.

²⁹Connor, Steven. *"Mortification," "Thinking Through the Skin"*, eds. Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (New York: Routledge, 2001, pp. 46

Heidi Kellet³⁰ in her thesis on skin critiques Lisa Steele's video-performance *'Birthday Suit - with Scars and Defects' (1974)*³¹ which is a collection of notes on skin's indelibility. In this 13 minute, black and white video-art piece by the Canadian artist we hear a narration of the events behind the many scars and marks on her 27 year old body. Kellet argues that "different types of epidermal marks are abundant in all of our epidermal lives" but "Steele's inability to address the ways her skin is marked continually on an almost imperceptible level illuminates the fact that collectively we are more concerned with the skin's ability to regenerate [or] to heal itself from unsightly marks, rather than its ability to generate [those] marks" (20).

Her argument resonates with an experience I had, not long ago, when the most concerning aspect of a surgery I was preparing towards were the marks that it would leave behind. Accepting the permanence of marks becomes somehow a matter of accepting being blemished or damaged. The unique function of skin as it "generates" an individualistic identity for the body is given little value. Trauma borne by the body at the skin level is a subjective, maybe even mundane experience that gives our bodies unique markings that code specific memories of pain. The experience of skin holding the physical trace as evidence of these events, the details of which fade in the mental trace of the same, is when it speaks to a human

With such hard evidence marking the body, one willingly or unwillingly re-accesses bodily pain or shock once endured, and like that fetches from past memories that are coded as embodied experiences. The skin makes room for these indentations as if to characterize its landscape and earn a validity through these landmarks and milestones of having moved experientially across space and time.



Fig. 13

Fig. 13: *'Birthday Suit - with Scars and Defects'*, 1974 video transferred to DVD; 13 min. Courtesy of Lisa Steele and Vtape Toronto.

³⁰ Kellet, Heidi, *'Skin Portraiture: Embodied Representations in Contemporary Art'*. Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository. 4567. 2017. pp. 20 <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/4567>

³¹ Steele, Lisa. *'Birthday Suit - with Scars and Defects'*. The CCCA Canadian Art Database. 1974. http://ccca.concordia.ca/artists/media_detail.html?language-Pref=en&mkey=53709&link_id=264

skin (as) container

20

From where does feeling surge and emerge? Where does it lodge, when it lasts? What becomes of it when it festers?

In Friedrich Schiller's *Wallenstein*³² trilogy there is an exemplary description of the self as skin; "That's why I sold the Emperor my hide / So I'd have no more worries and cares to abide" (16). This kind of giving over of skin is both an act of evincing honesty and affirming freedom. In a physical manner of speaking, this is suggestive of an extrication from a kind of containment. Such a containment within skin, with the way it closes the self in and creates a room where "the ego is decided"³³ (Serres 17) is then suggestive of a feeling-self demanding isolation.

In the work *'Pick a Side (2017)'*, I was working with guilt as a contained feeling. I incorporated text with a moving image of fingers, probing the corner of a wound-like patch, under a piece of still curing latex. The suggestion of guilt as something that alternates between a semi-dry and semi-wet state, given its gnawing nature, was what I was hoping to communicate. I wanted to reference the feeling of picking a drying scab, but by imagining it on the inside of the body, and on the underside of the skin. The film starts with the words *'there's room for slippage'* to suggest the manner in which a committed mistake hardens and liquefies at the beck and call of a guilty memory. With the refrain *'there's room'* the film concludes that this room is

only big enough for one "to hide" and "not to run".

Now guilt is heavy. And I will take the liberty here to assume that to be its form of occurrence, universally. Donald L. Carveth³⁴, a registered Psychotherapist and a professor at York University cites from Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Discontent* (1930) the "three options by which civilized order may be restored for sufferers of guilt" -namely repression, suppression and sublimation. Carveth explains how "most of us do not possess the strength of character for conscious suppression and self-mastery without self-deception" and "lack the talent for much sublimation". He adds that "the majority will be forced to fall back on repression, with the disguised return of the [original feeling of being] repressed that this inevitably entails" (Section I par. 1) . He brings up forms of self-punishment that the resulting "retroflected aggression" brings and how it can result in causing long-term damage to the ego.

Later in the same text, he puts it quite simply, that "part of our difficulty arises from an ambiguity contained in the single word 'guilt' which can refer both to the ontological state of being or being judged to be guilty and the psychological or experiential state of feeling guilty" (Carveth Section II par. 11). Feeling guilty is a deluge of discomfort as the body recognizes an internal and external pressure to address a misdeed.



Fig. 14

Fig. 14: Latex cured with a stained patchily to bring out a fleshy color that can depict the underside of the skin. In the film, the fingers try to slowly remove it from the piece of leather it is stuck to.

³² Schiller, Friedrich. *'Wallenstein: A Historical Drama in Three Parts'*. Trans. Charles E. Passage. New York: Ungar. 1958. pp. 16

³³ Serres, Michel. *'Les cinq sens: Philosophie des corps mêlés'*. Paris: Grasset. 1985. pp. 17

³⁴ Carveth, Donald L. *'The Unconscious Need for Punishment: Expression or Evasion of the Sense of Guilt?'*. York University. Section II. 2004. par. 1-11. www.yorku.ca/dcarveth/guilt.html

Guilt and shame are both emotions that consume the subject because of how the sense of self comes into question. Being bound up by a degree of self-recognition brings one to an unusual level of awareness and self-critique. But one also finds themselves wanting to resolve this by renewing their relationship with the self. Shame is therefore “not an isolating act that can be detached from the self” (Ahmed 105) as much as it may feel debilitating.

I am working on a video-performance piece that reflects upon the personal discomfort I experience when trying to submit to a state of rest. Being a self-critical over-thinker makes winding down and falling asleep for me a mammoth task. The solitude found in the dark stillness of the night, and in the horizontal orientation of the body, is often prickled by feelings of guilt and shame. In these moments I am always reminded of my worries around taking up more space than I should. Taller than my peers and ergonomically dis-included more often than not, I find myself contorting my body into forcefully compact positions. Like in the scenario of a family road-trip sitting in the trunk of the car was something I grew up volunteering to do because of my self-confirmed need for contortion. As a result, even when I lie in my own bed, my body performs a dance of discomfort. I toss and turn, tuck my arms under my torso, lie flat on my stomach with my head under the pillow. After that, I try to consciously

lie plank-like and straight to counter the aches from prior contortions. When I finally do fall asleep though, I involuntarily assume the fetal position. It's the position I find myself in, the many times I wake up during the night. It's the position that never lets my body feel rested. I've become interested in wanting to observe this bodily discomfort via a video document. The kind of dis-ease that this is, has nothing to do with being female-bodied or visible yet it proves that these are the dis-eases I have internalized.

I am my only audience as I try to visualize these from various angles every night. I originally imagined affixing a camera in a dark room with a high ceiling, capturing a wide-angled top shot of my body trying to sleep. But I went with the effect created by Ana Mendieta in ‘*Glass on Body Imprints*’. The flattened flesh on a glass-top table (see Fig. 23 & 24) is how my skin comes to feature in this work. As this is also my manner of coming out of hiding- subjecting myself to my own camera by placing it under the glass-top table to it watches me try to sleep is an added strain of discomfort that makes this a performance.

The traces of contained dis-ease in my body have been best accessed by the impact of strongly posed moving images. I'm forever challenged to teach myself through close observations and experimentation how to deliver a similarly tangible impact.

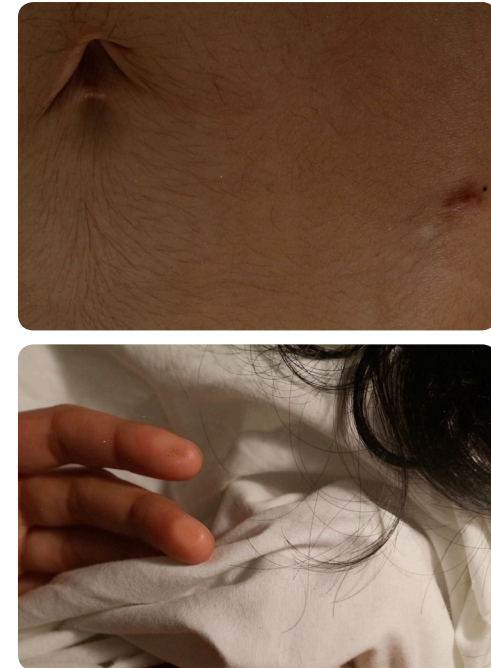


Fig. 15

Fig. 15: Stills from an in-progress performance on sleep and discomfort.

skin (as) visual language

22

orange peels, resin, nylon, latex, glue, fuller's earth, crepe bandage and snow.

The material imitations of skin used on-set are more than mere properties in my absurdist short fiction films. By working with them, a visual language that can speak to the phenomenological attributes of skin has emerged. Skin has held up fort for the body as a representative of the self, spirit, soul and home and so, I try to regard skin's own way of speaking while interpreting and representing it.

Think of a bodily memory that has been borne by your skin.

The subjects in my films have all been women. They have granted me access to their personal space through experiences of discomfort. I've come to think of them as collaborators. In looking at existing visual language cues, from within the discipline of video-based performance, I found the female body being framed from an intimate distance³⁵ similar to what I was being trusted with by these women. As such a proximity suggests an autobiographical and confessional voice, the active blurring of bodily boundaries between the subject and the camera was important for me to justify. Each subject therefore finds their narrative to be operating on an equal playing field as we mould a vocabulary for the body of work together. The metaphors and materials in the films are posed to evoke a textural resonance

with aspects of skin. Each subject has been given the chance to think about the material that can be use as their metaphor, or like that the narrator of their dis-ease. I ensure that we are on the same page about how that material will get read, as we find a diagnosis that can visualize an invisible feeling fetched from memory.

The gesture in each film is either uncomfortable, restless or both as it is an act of locating feeling. I capture this restlessness rather restlessly, as the depth of field for the 100mm lens uncovers information in slivers. I mostly shoot indoors and with low lighting, asking each subject to interact with the material and the theme they chose. There is an aspect of performance given how a premeditated action emerges and gets repeated several times till we arrive at an acceptable abstraction of the chosen dis-ease. As these gestures and actions are not end-goal oriented, I only know what I'm doing in the act of looking through the lens.

The image-making can be called investigative, as I am indeed trying to envision bodily memories as dis-eases. I have been invested, in this way, in looking at skin as the receptor and container of feeling. To heighten the idea of discomfort, the restless moving image also calls out to the voyeur in the viewer as they fleetingly access an act of intimacy with the body of a stranger. The lens captures an image that the naked eye cannot

³⁵Extreme close-ups may render the body indecipherable, but the viewer's position is constantly challenged by the filmmaker's voice. Kate Craig (in *Delicate Issue*) blurs the fascination that might come out of illegible images and turns the act of looking into an analytical, political and critical act, a commitment on the part of the observer... *Delicate Issue* ponders and works around the distance that we keep to see things, the duration necessary to see; the relation between the recorded body and the body which looks, the dislocation between what is seen and treated as a fragment or detail and the whole. The viewer is literally enjoined to exist. see Craig, *Skin* . pp 25.

see by itself and with searching gestures in the image that are rather odd to observe. I envision the becoming film composition to operate as a chaptered visual essay where each chapter can be read or encountered separately but also in conjunction with other chapters, in the gallery space. Laying a non-linear narrative of these separate experiences of skin through multiple bodies and quasi narratives, is the intention.

While I hope for the image to evoke affect³⁶ with its tactility, I try to add unlikely sound effects that disturb and disrupt the everyday experience of skin. In the next few films I bring in various parts of the body framed in ambiguous ways, to let skin become a surface for the visual inquiry and an extension of the bodies of viewers as the tactility, temperature or perceived pain gets extended to the experience of viewing.

I plan to re-purpose the RBC Media Gallery in the Michael O'Brian Commons at Emily Carr's Great Northern Way Campus, by building an intimate one-person viewing booth made by hanging blackout curtains from a semi-elliptical false ceiling. This will come to look like a booth that one needs to slip inside to watch the films. I've come to believe that media installation work can be pushed to shape the experience of the viewer by way not stopping short at making strong images but by also making choices around their spatial dispersion. The scope for initiating

an immersive or embodied experience using media within this darkened booth will be such that the stillness inside the booth will engage the viewers still body to the moving body of the film. Another aspect of the booth will be a parabolic speaker, the sound from which will suggest the viewing distance for the viewer. The feeling of other bodies, also in the same space, is a physicality that I wish to do away with.

As the engagement of the senses is crucial I'd really like the experience to be one of transference. While the enclosure is a curtain, the media in the enclosure is also surrounding the viewer by packing the sound and image inside this body-like structure, in agreement with the found privacy. The discomforting kind of solitude that this encounter with the bodies in the films and the body of the film insists upon is hopefully going to make the viewing experience one of vulnerability and immersion. When I showed the first two films on commodores as opposed to on flat screens, the materials in the films were able to find an outer body to enunciate their references to the human body. Additionally, not using rectangular frames for my films is a way to re-privilege the image with neither the horizontal and nor the vertical given an imposition in space, and letting the viewing eye imagine what lies beyond the frame.

³⁶ Affect is a visceral, raw pre-feeling. Feelings are socially constructed distortions of affect. Affect is the manifestation of the body's internalization of an intensity. It cannot be rendered by language or any other kind of transmittable information. Affect is perpetually undulating and reforming. It is more bodily than cognitive. The body is integral to the understanding of affect. Massumi describes the "walls" of the body as sensory receptors which allow for the intensity of an experience to be transmitted and internalized. The transmission of affect is not the exchange of affect from thing to body or body to body, it is the in folding and unfolding of intensities between the two bodies, which can be virtual or flesh. These intensities resonate apart from intended meaning of context. see Massumi, Brian. "Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgements." In Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987.

skin (as) dis·ease

Clementine asks Joel to hide her.

As the technicians from Lacuna Ltd.³⁷ actively erase all traces of her from his brain she says to him, "Hide me somewhere deeper, somewhere really buried".

"Where?" he asks.

"Hide me in your humiliation."³⁸

In the sequence that this exchange from *'Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004)'* is sourced, screenplay writer Charlie Kaufman doesn't stop short at recognizing humiliation as a festering abscess in the body (or in the body of memory, to be contextually precise). He also deems it to be a safe place to hide.

'Skins' was where I drew upon a similar manifestation of the human tendency to hide, as a form of self-protection with the skin serving as the hide³⁹. Being peeled or exposed - and with that - freed (from a state of hiding), sound to me like terrifying possibilities to explore in parallel. The irony for me though, is that while hiding is my dis-ease it is also in hiding that I currently claim being free. And similarly, dishonesty - one affliction of my dis-ease- is a manner of negotiating power. So, the discomfort in hiding, like spoken of before, has come to make dishonesty comfortable.

What is it to be free?

Is one fleeing from feeling or feeling free?

It's difficult to pin down a point in time or a first offense before which I can claim an uninterrupted state of comfort (or freedom), the way Sheila Kelley⁴⁰ could in her TEDx talk where describes her body's first encounter with shame. I've come to accept the discomfort in hiding as a permanent bodily condition that has in fact activated for me an inadvertent state of consciousness. Stage fright, camera shyness and performance anxiety have made me recognize 'discomfited' as an operational state, and an important factor in the conscious making of my visible self. To empower myself by embracing this discomfort has been the underlying principle of this thesis.

I hope to continue drawing from the intangibility of such long-term feelings that collide within our subjective realities. The original intention to use skin as a visual landscape was to express discomfort stemming from the personal, but a closer inspection of skin has brought with it dis-eases that fetch from gender, body politics, race and even intimacy. By continuing to find more participants with diverse memories of discomfort, I will continue to discomfort the viewer with these bodies in agreement with me to make peace with their dis-ease.

³⁷ *Lacuna Ltd.* is a fictional organization in the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* that helps clients erase memories of persons that they want to deliberately forget.

³⁸ *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Dir. Michel Gondry, Story and Screenplay Charlie Kaufman. Focus Features. 2004. DVD.

³⁹ The word "hide" is related to the German word "Haut" which means skin. Common commercial hides include leather from cattle and other livestock animals, buckskin, alligator skin and snake skin.

⁴⁰ Kelley, Sheila. 'Let's Get Naked' TEDxAmericanRiviera. 2012. "So my first offense happened when I was seven ...I was hanging out with my best friends, Brian and Donald Doyle, they were 7 and 8 respectively, we were hanging out in the backyard, it was summer, it was really hot, we were playing, we decided to take a break and we went to cool down, so we all took our tops off and we laid back in the grass, arms over the head, it was an awesome day, the air was cooling my chest, it was a beautiful, innocent day. And all of a sudden the upstairs window of their house was flying open and Mrs Doyle stuck her head out and she screamed in the most piercing voice, "Sheila Kelley! You naughty little girl! You put your top on immediately, you ought to be ashamed of yourself and go home."

skin (as) feeling vessel

The fact that I defended the dis-eases of several bodies, including my own colored female vessel, in a space carefully populated by media based bodies, was how I chose to make a gendered and racial statement instead of deliberating and carefully addressing aspects of race and gender as imprints on skin. I have touched upon these subjects too briskly in previous chapters, which is a direct result of my deliberation and hesitation in entering the political space where the body finds itself drained in color, with that color called skin. Skin as a feeling vessel comes colored like the body as a habitat comes labeled. I am a woman of color with a physical body and boundary that is marked as Muslim. This was something I was hoping to address in my defense, but it was not taken up in the discussion. I was also excited to disclose my feminist leanings (and not groundings) as I have begun to think about the space I take up as a Muslim woman rather differently owing to this project.

In my defense what got touched upon were the ideas around embodiment through media composed bodies of sound and image. I was asked some generative questions and like that allowed to unpack the details about the processes of making and installing the work. I showed two video-works, namely, 'Trial Room (2017-18)' and 'Dance (2018)'. They were separately

installed within the same room with suggested conjunctions despite individual conjectures.

For 'Trial Room' a figurative room was constructed within the RBC Media Gallery. Using a wooden false ceiling, I was able to drop four oxford blue black-out curtains, each measuring 11' in length, from along the perimeter of the ceiling to form a semi-circular screening space. The wall-mounted short throw projector allowed the viewing level to be defined at the height of 7'. A key aspect of this room within a room was the DIY parabolic speaker that housed the sound inside a hollow wooden bowl before releasing it into the space. These were manners of giving the forms of media more physical bodies. The images were textural and the sound was air pressure (see Fig. 16).

To invite viewers inside this *Trial Room* was to bring them into a physical confrontation with the dis-eased bodies of the women in the projected media. Something about the lack of a narrative allowed the qualities of the image to take precedence. The sound design gave the moving images a bodily dimension- grainy, cold, slippery, gooey, membranous, dry, dust like. Laying a landscape of attributes that relate to the body through skin. While Merleau-Ponty has argued that "we are not able to see without being seen, or touch without being touched"⁴¹, manners of seeing & touching can be challenged.



Fig. 16

Fig. 16: Installation view of the work 'Trial Room (2018)' at the RBC Media Gallery- the constructed booth, the short throw projection and the wooden parabolic speaker. Adiba Muzaffar.

⁴¹Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Visible and the Invisible' (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp 147

The "mimetic relationship"⁴² between technology and the body, as Laura U. Marks has referred to in *The Skin of the Film*, is what drives the impulse of making the second piece shown at the defense exhibition, titled 'Dance'. As mentioned before, this dance is a dance of discomfort that I perform in order to fall asleep. By sleeping on top of a glass table with a Canon 80D and a 24-70 mm wide angle lens shooting from underneath me, the body is made conscious about its performance of camera-like movements, as the camera is deliberately kept out of reach to be a silent viewer in parallel. The self-conscious mind's eye becomes confessional.

So it is not a sleeping body at all. It writhes in a (somewhat humorous) kind of restlessness and agony. The manner in which it is edited and projected too brings forth ideas of constriction with the cropping and stacking of multiple shots in a single frame, that form conversations between the different parts of the body as if laid over a moving scanner that is trying to recognize the concentrations of dis-ease. Shown in the corner of the media gallery, but visible when framed by the glass door, it is meant to give the impression that someone has decided to hide in the nook, for a quick nap. One needs to go all the way inside and discover the blue frame framing the media projection and the headset inviting to be worn. As one wears

the headset, the hum of the room suddenly gets magnified as another room of similar construct comes alive and a body within it, my body, attempts to or seeks to sleep. This is also the reasoning provided for the sound design for this work- the breathing of the room and its architecture being relayed rather than the breathing of the body as it is what the body is meditating upon instead of upon itself.

In these few ways the bodies of the technology come into a collaboration that is in a near equal level of consciousness, or in a gestural kind of performance with the performer. The booth, the parabolic speaker, the nook painted blue: these are all in hope to activate more for the viewer as they come and try to decode a *moving* image. It is not simply a stirring image but one exposing its motivations. For me, these nonverbal cues and hints are the non-fictional, human-like nature of the film. And like that my practice has only been steered to explore its own tendencies by being mimetic. Both of these films are not just about non-fictional film subjects but also about their counterparts; the relational objects that make seeing, hearing, touching and really experience the film subject, a possibility.

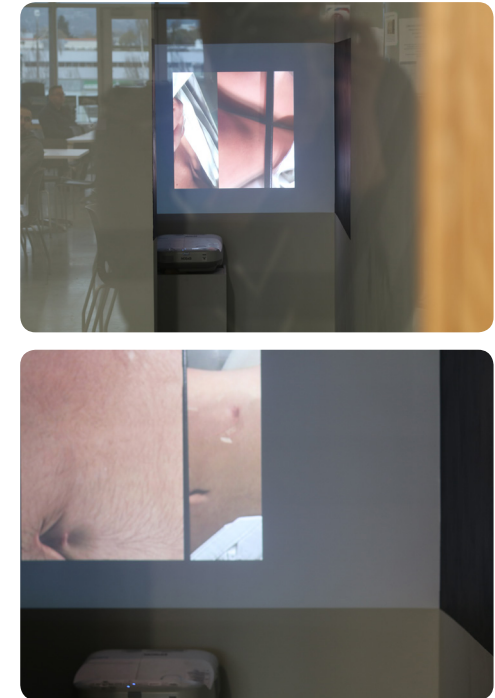


Fig. 17

Fig. 17: Installation view of the work 'Dance (2018)' at the RBC Media Gallery. The reflections and shadows in the space adding more lines to the stacked image as the wall and door of the gallery crop and un-crop it into becoming visible.

⁴² Marks, Laura U. 'The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses,' *The Memory of the Senses*. Duke Univ. Press, 2007 pp 251

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