

Second Skins

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Abstract

Leather may be making a conspicuous comeback in fashion, but for a growing group of artists it is skin in its uncured, pre-tanned state that is receiving increased attention. Rather than a return of body conscious garments that expose the wearer's own skin, these artists are suggesting that garments be fashioned directly from skin. The trend gives a new, and frankly unsettling, interpretation to the idea of the textile garment as a "second skin" by confronting us with its most literal interpretation. What provokes these artists to make flesh the new garment and accessory? Does this work simply testify to a desire that is at the heart of bodily adornment: our skin and the possibility, however gruesome, of its decoration? Is our increased comfort with skin and its manipulation a result of the increasingly common role cosmetic surgery plays in notions of beauty and health today? Or is this precisely where the discomfort lies?

Introduction

In this paper I will discuss the use of skin by artists working in three disciplines: photographs by the Turkish artist Pinar Yolacan, "invention" and installation by the Perth, Australia based think tank Tissue Culture and Art and finally the use of skin bleaching creams as depicted in the fiction of the late Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera. In each of the examples our wearable futures suggest that attention will, and in many cases already has, turned away from the textile and towards skin. Our clothing is often loosely referred to as a second skin. Here I want to propose that the inverse is equally true: skin can, and is, often treated as a textile.

The similarities between cloth and skin, predominately for the purpose of analysing cloth in relation to skin, have been noted by many scholars and cultural critics. "Clothing is in fact a second skin," notes Baert (2001), "a membrane that separates and joins, that surrounds and divides. Like skin, clothing is a border." Similarly, Hamlyn (2000) writes, "The textile is always, it seems, a surrogate skin, a body at one remove, placed at a comfortable distance, even a given without a corpse." Wilson (1985) also remarks, "A part of the strangeness of dress is that it links the biological body to the social being, and public to private." A close resemblance of cloth to skin has been observed by many, but this paper proposes that the opposite is equally true, the resemblance of skin to cloth. Anthropologists Eicher and Sumberg (1995) offer an inclusive definition of dress that can be understood to include:

[M]odifications of the body and/or supplements to the body includ[ing] obvious items placed on the body (the supplements) such as garments, jewellery and accessories, and also changes in colour, texture, smell, and shape made to the body directly.

If the textile is a second or surrogate skin, then Eicher and Sumberg's definition allows for skin to be read as a form of dress; the first and original textile to cover the body.

Pinar Yolacan

Based in Brooklyn, New York, Turkish photographer Pinar Yolacan's recent series of portraits depict a group of unconventional beauties. Models are young and old, blemished and serene, each wearing what looks to be a stained and yellowing blouse. These garments are in truth sewn out of skin: chicken skin handily passes for a sear sucker fabric, fish scales as silk, entrails as stocks and elaborate collars. But the exchange is not immediately obvious. Filtered through the lens of photography a further "skin" – the membrane of the photograph – keeps the physical reality of Yolacan's creations at arms length. Writing for the "New York Times" (2004), Horyn determines that Yolacan's photography is more than "simply documenting a point about fashion." Working with similar materials British designer Julia Lohmann explains of "Flock", her ceiling on fifty sheep stomachs that, "It reminds people that we are surrounded and sustained by animal products. My aim is to initiate a more differentiated discussion about the way we regard and treat animal products through objects made of 'obsolete' animal materials." While Yolacan's photographs can, as Lohmann articulates, be read as an accusatory commentary about both the leather industry and the ability of fashion to treat women's bodies as meat, both conclusions seem to only offer the most obvious of readings.



"Untitled", Pinar Yolacan



"Untitled", Pinar Yolacan

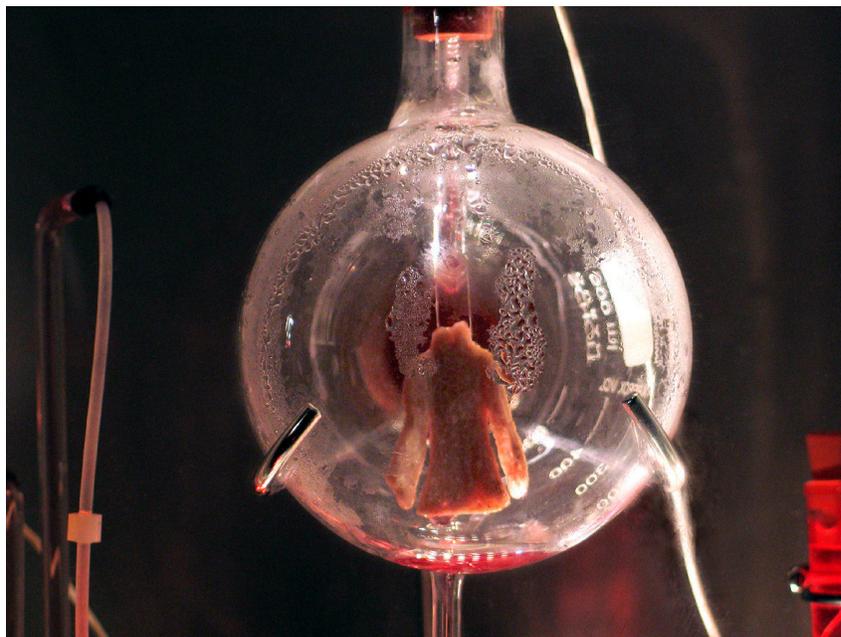
Yolacan's images of flesh on flesh manage to strike an uncanny balance between intrigue and disgust. Her garments do not hover or drape, they envelope the wearer. This is not a science experiment or a conceptual suggestion, but the very real image of skin enveloping skin. Yolacan takes this even one step further when she stitches pleats, sews buttons and fits these garments to her models. Perhaps one of the elements most disturbing in this work is the knowledge of the artist's willingness to touch her material in the same way that one would relish the hand of silk or cashmere. Visually, these garments offer a flaying of sorts. They are outer garments that reveal the lumps and bulges of our bodies, which the majority of us use clothing to conceal. Are these images a tongue-in-cheek send up of the recent advertising campaign by Dove to use "real" models? In replacing decorative fabric

with uncured skin, Yolacan suggests an uncomfortable vision of our interior selves as well as mocking the scrutiny under which we subject our own skin to blemish removal, wrinkle limitation and the like. But she also seems to be pointing to a taboo. We may be more open than ever to the idea of cosmetic surgery, but that does not mean we want to see the procedure itself.

Tissue Culture and Art

“Slip, slap, slop” is the fantastically popular motto the Australian government pitched to its sun drenched nation in an effort to raise public awareness about the perils of skin cancer. While the government set its sights on protecting the skin of its residents, the Perth based collective Tissue Culture and Art took things a step further by culturing tissue into provocative sculptural installations. The hazards of sun damage may not be at the forefront of TC and A’s interests, but skin is. Culturing “semi-living” organisms in the science laboratory, the team uses basic tissue technology to grow “skins” which are sculpted into humorous and provocative forms. These objects question the disciplinary boundaries between science and applied art and challenge both designers and consumers to consider more fully the implications and origins of the objects that fill our busy lives.

Headed by Ionat Zurr and Oron Catts, a team of biological artists develop sculptures that are a hybrid of living tissue and synthetic armatures. Much like Yolacan’s photography, the results either amaze or revolt. Regardless of which, the very existence of these objects question the ethics of contemporary consumption and challenge the disciplinary boundaries between science and applied art. For example, the group have responded to the euphemism “if pigs could fly” with the development of wings for otherwise terrestrial pigs. Artificial pigs’ wings may not be for sale at the local butcher or for rent as fancy dress, but films such as Stephen Frears’ “Dirty Pretty Things” (2002) expose a more sinister side to the organ trade. Whether artificial or harvested, lifesaving or decorative, organs and limbs are now understood by many individuals to be mere commodities, and in TC and A’s projection of the future, even accessories.



“Victimless Leather” by Tissue Culture and Art

TC and A's "Victimless Leather" proposes the development of a very literal second skin for each of us to wear. The project suggests that the future of the garment industry could lie in the cultivation of bespoke tissue tailoring, grown to measure for the discerning dresser. This living layer of tissue (possibly even harvested from our own cells) would be cultivated to a perfect fit and would, theoretically, exist as a living leather garment. Curiously, while single step production for garments may be our future, a garment without seams, stitches or cloth would herald the end of crafts such as weaving and tailoring. Eventually, such developments would be responsible for the extinction of another species currently high on the endangered list: the craftsman.

Finally Zurr and Catts' propose, in their short story (2002) entitled "A story of an upper class girl, 2028", another version of future adornment. The short story describes the long awaited 16th birthday present of the future, a "legal implant." At the Implants Farm a pair of "decorative wings" are selected, specially designed to "go with the current fashion of backless dresses" by the lucky birthday girl. Viewing the implant factory, the recipient is able to see "where pigs with different body parts seamlessly attached to them lay in pools of clear liquids" until the decorative parts are ready to be implanted; yet another squeamish, but far from unfounded, glimpse at the place of skin in our wearable future.

Yvonne Vera's Ambi Generation

It was 1977, freedom was skin deep but joyous and tantalising [. . .] Freedom left one with black-skinned ears. A mask. A carnival. Reality had found a double, turbulent and final. (Without a Name 26)

The late Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera's Without a Name (1994) and Butterfly Burning (1998) both discuss the use of skin bleaching creams. The "Ambi generation", as Without a Name coins it, refers to the licensed trademark for a commercial brand of skin care that contains chemicals, which remove the skin's natural pigmentation. A contemporary Internet advertisement for the product promises posted on www.texasbeautysupplies.com reads:

AMBI believes that when you look better, you will feel better. With a full range of skin care products for your various needs, you too will discover 'Skin Care That's More Than Skin Deep' with AMBI Products.

As a prefix, *ambi-* is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as meaning "both, on both sides." It appears in words such as ambiguous which is defined as, "Of persons: Wavering or uncertain as to course or conduct; hesitating, doubtful" and "Of things: Wavering or uncertain in direction or tendency; of doubtful or uncertain issue". Ambivalence is defined as "the coexistence in one person of contradictory emotions or attitudes (as love or hatred) towards a person or thing." Hence, "ambi" refers to a sense of doubling or multiplicity both on a physical and a psychological level.

The communities depicted in Butterfly Burning reflect a nation divided by race, both in the book's 1940s setting and, sadly, still today. It is a space where one can find, "NO BLACKS signs, WHITES ONLY signs and CLOSED signs which say OPEN on the flip side and dangle CLOSED from ornate door handles" (BB 6). Much like Vera's fiction, cultural theorist Fanon relates the experience of racism to a mordant, a substance used to fix a dye permanently to cloth during the dye process. He writes, "But just as I reached the other side, I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye" (109). To circumvent this fixity Vera's "Ambi generation" purchases change. The act is tinged with the face of reality for "[n]ewspaper headings covered the dark alley, promised no freedom to agitated people. But there were ample signs of the freedom the people had already claimed for themselves –

empty shells of Ambi, green and red. The world promised a lighter skin, greater freedom" (WN 26).

Fanon writes on the subject of a serum for "degentrification" with a similar sense of irony to that of Vera's fiction:

For several years certain laboratories have been trying to produce a serum for "degentrification"; with all the earnestness in the world, laboratories have sterilized their test tubes, checked their scales, and embarked on researches that might make it possible for the miserable Negro to whiten himself and thus to throw off the burden of that corporeal malediction. (111)

The thirty years that pass between the setting of Butterfly Burning and Without a Name do little to change the values of the "Ambi generation" or their "corporeal malediction". The narrator explains, "freedom was skin deep but joyous and tantalising" (WN 26). In the absence of genuine freedoms, concrete opportunities and tangible advancements, "[f]reedom squeezed out of a tube was better than nothing, freedom was, after all, purchasable" (WN 26).

Like cloth, the structure of skin is irrevocably weakened through bleaching. Despite Yolacan's and TC and A's creations, it is not designed in a manner that easily adapts to alterations of its original structure and substance. The side effects of Ambi, and products of a similar nature, produce a variety of results other than the desired lightening of skin. "Permanent damage to the skin including infected cysts, dark blotches and stubborn acne" has been reported (Shota, 1999). The BBC notes that "bleaching can cause skin cancer and the poorest people are most at risk, because the cheaper the product, the more dangerous it is" (Baxter, 2000). The increased risk of skin cancer is one of the more perverse results of skin bleaching as the disease is otherwise nonexistent in heavily pigmented skin precisely because the purpose of pigmentation is to act as a natural protection against sun damage. Arogundade notes, "In 1980 excessive usage [of skin lightening creams] led to an outbreak of poisoning by Hydroquinone, the cream's bleaching ingredient that works by inhibiting the production of melanin (the natural substance that determines skin-tone and protects against ultra-violet rays and cancer)" (104).

While creams that contain more than two percent hydroquinone have been outlawed, a black market still exists with products manufactured in the UK, Taiwan, India and many other countries today. The *Sunday Times* of Zimbabwe (1999) reports, "British companies sell their creams to agents in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Angola, Zaire, Botswana and Kenya. The agents employ syndicates to smuggle them into South Africa – hidden between goods on trucks, on the top of buses, in car boots and in suitcases" (Shota). Ambi is correct when it advertises itself as "Skin Care That's More Than Skin Deep". If, as Wilson (1985) notes, "[f]ashion, then, is essential to the world of modernity, the world of spectacle and mass-communication. It is a kind of connective tissue of our cultural organism" (12), then the fashion of skin bleaching is evidence of a diseased connective tissue in the cultural organism. Treating one's skin as a garment to be exchanged or altered in order to make the world see you through different eyes is a troubling notion. Vera's somewhat ironic handling of the subject suggests the futile disorientation that occurs when her characters attempt to rework their racial identity.

Conclusion

The use of skin bleaching creams – in spite of severe health hazards – is testament to the use of skin is a disposable accessory, to be shed, altered and bought anew as fashion dictates. Are artists such as Pinar Yolacan and the collective Tissue Culture and Art also suggesting that skin is an accessory? Are these works testament to a shifting definition of beauty, one that is more ready to accept the science laboratory

or abattoir as replacement for the textile mill? Alongside the dramatic changes that technology will offer our wearable futures, each of these artists suggests that at least one of the materials at our disposal is an ever present one: the ongoing manipulation of our own skin.

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