

Thesis Proposal: Collection/Dissection, A Cutaneous  
Autobiography  
Maria Vonn (Rigden)

## Table of Contents

1 Media

2 Questions of Interest

3 Methodology

4 Areas of Research

5 Archives Consulted

6 Influences

7 Impact

8 Exhibition

1

I work with cutaneous media, meaning found materials that relate to skin and the body. I employ human hair, as well as horse hair, fake enamel teeth, and I use handmade paper as a substitute for “skin” surface. More recently have turned to digital media as a way of creating a “skin” like film through a print transfer process. This digital process is a progression of photographic transfer processes that date back to the invention of the Polaroid- when artists would print a Polaroid image and then release the ink onto another sheet of paper using a chemical release. My work is created by printing an ink jet transparency and using a combination of Isoprophyl alcohol and DASS Supersauce to release the ink from this transparency and onto my matrix, in the case of my thesis this matrix is a collection of microscope slides. To resolve this with my desire for a beautiful aesthetic and discomfort I have used the digital method to create “skin slides” which are then suspended above panels using nails. The transparency of the “skin slides” allows for a play of light that is visually pleasing, and the poses reference traditional art nudes, allowing for the desired aesthetic with the desired “creep factor” of the skin appearance. As an artist who has Trichotillomania and Dermatillomania Obsessive Compulsive disorders I realized that in order to convey the uncomfortable sensations that I experience with hair and skin, I concluded that I would have to make the viewing of my artwork an uncomfortable experience.

2

I tend to question myself during the art making process to define my interests and determine how well they are coming through in my work . Why hair? Because it is the actual cause of my

mental illness. Why paper? Because I need a substrate to symbolize skin. Why will my audience relate to this very specific topic? Perhaps because obsessive compulsive disorder is an illness that touches all of us in a manner, I believe obsession with appearance is a facet of life a large audience can relate to. There is a common discomfort around hair because it can symbolize a variety of things. As hair falls out it can mean illness or aging; graying can be a reflection of the later or stress, both are things that most humans eventually deal with and find a variety of methods to cope and compensate for their loss. Society values hair differently: hair on the scalp is valuable to both men and women, but in much of western culture, armpit and pubic hair are considered “dirty” in women but acceptable in men. How can I translate my specific anxieties into this larger perception of the object? I find that the very material of human hair in my work assists in conveying these greater anxieties. Skin, on the same note as the hair, comes with its own pack of anxieties. Blemishes, sun spots, scar tissue, these are all things that our society has produced a wide range of products to hide. Our surface value is literally on our surface appearance, and as my disorder revolves around being obsessed with these tiny “blemishes”, I find myself breaking down my surface appearance into manageable sections. This dissection of my body distracts from the larger picture, preventing from appreciating the entire surface because of smaller “imperfections”. The technical aspect of my work is what pulls a viewer in and then personally witnessing a moment of aversion as the viewer realizes that what they see is human hair or possibly skin. Being confronted with a cutaneous material separate from the body creates an inherent unease with the viewer that I find essential to my work in asking my audience why we treat such material in an abhorrent manner.

When I approach my work I have to think very carefully about where my materials come from and how they pertain to the body. When I began this program I was using strictly horse hair for convenience, bought from a farm in Ohio. The hair came cleaned and bundled, however, is also probably from horses on their way out of life, creating some tense scenarios during critique where the source of my materials was questioned. Then came the questions of why horse hair? How does that relate to a human? More often than not, a viewer could not tell the difference between horse and human hair. Horse hair was much sturdier than human hair and proved to be a more stable option for my beginning sculpture materials. However, the problems I am looking to resolve in my work are human, and so eventually I had to come to terms with using a human material. Through very kind donations of friends, and through cutting my own hair, I found a reasonable source of human hair. In addition to this I began documenting my own skin, using macro photography to take images of bruises, scars, hairs-blemishes. In addition to the “blemishes” I photograph areas of reclamation of my own skin, sections of my body where I have tattooed bright colors, patterns, creatures over the scars left by the Obsessive Compulsive Disorders. This imagery I look to treat like a color field painting, focusing on the relationships of colors, wrinkles, hair growth and how this imagery translates into abstract compositions. I paired these collected and precious “color field” skin abstracts with larger full figure pieces, this way the viewers eye can move from the full picture to the macro, so to speak.

4

I have been researching the theories behind the abject art movement, and other artists of the abject art movement, because I find that is what my work is most inspired by. Consequently I find a lot of the areas that interest me dabble into the area of psychoanalysis. A book I have begun studying over the summer is Julia Kristeva's Head Cases, about the concept of

decapitation and the female body throughout art and psychoanalysis. Kristeva delves further into the concept of “spiritual inoculation”, a way of vaccinating your audience emotionally through the connection to the art. Kristeva describes how artists insert their own experiences with depression and malaise as a way of sharing their experience and preventing others from having to feel this as well. I take from this the ability to share with people the effects of Trichotillomania and Dermatillomania, sharing my own experience living in my skin and with my disorders. This is me trying to share my experiences and scars with my audience in the hopes that they will be able to acknowledge their own brutal examinations and obsessions of their bodies. Another area of knowledge I find heavily researched is my own experiences in both psychiatry and talk/behavioral therapy for my Obsessive Compulsive Disorders. I have spent years previously trying to discover what it is that causes such anxieties and compulsions but through art making have found a cathartic release that allows me to step outside of these therapies to try to examine my compulsions from a visual direction. Forcing me to see how I can present the cause and effect relationship of Trichotillomania and Dermatillomania without being kitsch or creating “shock” art.

5

I see myself continuing to consult the writings of Julia Kristeva and of Susan Sontag, seeking writing on how we experience trauma and pain through imagery. Sontag's book Regarding the Pain of Others has helped me to understand the use of imagery of warfare and pain throughout the history of photography. Photographers have shared imagery of pain and suffering in the hopes that the emotions that these images trigger will prevent further suffering. Sontag is optimistic that while the media will control the imagery presented to the masses, the imagery of warfare and brutality will inspire the masses to prevent more. Taking

notes from these abject and theories of pain I hope to share my experience with my audience so that they may reflect on their own experiences. I also find works of auto-fiction or memoir pieces to be particularly insightful in seeing the vocabulary used to describe others experiences with anxieties/compulsions, such as Monkey Mind A Memoir of Anxiety by Daniel Smith. I find reaching out to memoirs of anxiety such as Smith's helps to keep my work from becoming pigeon holed by my own limited experiences. After such research I can find a more inclusive language in my art making.

6

I find much of the sensibilities within my work are from very geometric abstract paintings from post-modern art. While I find that can be seen as a dated, and very male, visual culture, I see time and time again small moments in my work that reflect my personal fascination with artwork from that time. For example, I find my attraction to Malevich and Suprematism has shown up in my tendency to put my work into basic geometric shapes. The connection is not overt, as my materials drastically differ, however knowing my own affections towards art history I can see a clear relationship. This relationship is also why I still think of my hair work and paper making as painting and drawing, at the core of my creative process is the structure of form, shape, and line that I learned through painting and painting history. I also enjoy looking at abject contemporary artists such as Wenda Gu, who's use of materials I both enjoy and see a connection to in my work, however he has a very different goal and subject for his art than my own. I find seeing the difference in subject matter helps to not influence my own approach too much, but find instead a connection between the use of materials in creating a sense of space and mass. The grid is an apparent structure in all of my work, serving as a way of showing the imperfection of my hands in trying to replicate and reform the perfect grid from the microscope slides. Try as I might to perfect the craft of the grid my hand is still

apparent and it never is perfect.

7

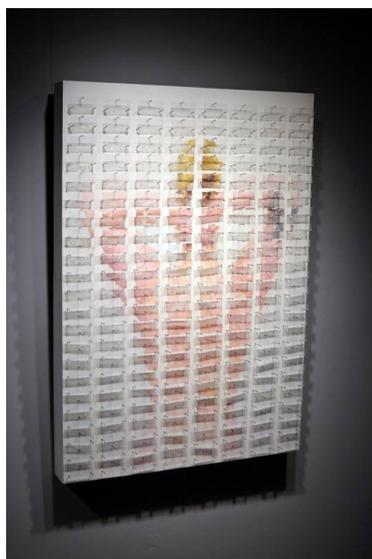
I find it extremely important to know and understand the history that has come before myself in the art world. Without that I don't believe I would feel as clear in what it is I am researching and what it is that drives me to solve the questions my work is asking. I work to avoid a level of redundancy and find that an understanding of the work that has come before me in a variety of fields helps me to hone in my own quest within art making. It is research that will drive me forward as I continue to develop this slide series, exploring further the role of installation and the projection of light through the glass. I look to my contemporary peers to see their own interpretations of skin and our relationship to the body- inspired by the fact that these varieties of

8

I seek to exhibit my work in a variety of environments, starting with but not limited to the gallery. While I have struggled with a burgeoning institutional critique I find that I want to be able to exhibit my work in either solo or collaborative shows to reach out to a wider audience. I also seek strong involvement in the art community in which I live; applying to local residencies, to teach community classes, and to exhibit work at local festivals -for example I sought to apply to the O+ Festival in Kingston. Even without work being accepted I see myself volunteering during the festival so as to remain an active member of the community. I see the body of my thesis work being submitted to a variety of regional shows, as well as printmaking convention grants as my painting work overlaps in that technical community.

The specific thesis body of work that I produced was displayed in the northern gallery of the

Samuel Dorsky museum. The final body of work resulted in two singular pieces, and one piece which was actually a collection of twenty panels. All of my work is hand printed digital monotypes- made through pigment print transfers- onto microscope slides that are then installed using nails or glass beads onto their respective panels to recreate the original photograph.



*Dissection in 184 Parts, Pigment Print Transfer, Glass Slides, Nails. Maria Vonn, MFA Thesis Exhibition*



*Dissection in 279 Parts, Pigment Print Transfer, Glass Slides, Nails. Detail of Maria Vonn MFA Thesis Exhibition*



*Dissection in 279 Parts, Pigment Print Transfer, Glass Slides, Nails. Detail of Maria Vonn MFA Thesis Exhibition*

# Bibliography

Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

Miller, Elaine P. *Head Cases: Julia Kristeva on Philosophy and Art in Depressed times*. Print.

Smith, Daniel B. *Monkey Mind: A Memoir of Anxiety*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012.

Print.