

SKIN BOUNDARIES

Selina Woulfe

Skin is my fascination and energises my jewellery practice. Artistically, I strive to create work that evokes a dialogue between the body and the mind in order to activate a physical and psychological awareness for both the wearer and viewer. For my research, I focus on social, cultural and religious rituals surrounding the body and the objects used to conduct them. In the true sense of fetish, these are inanimate objects revered for their significance or spiritual power. By treating skin as a material to be manipulated with these objects, I am able to explore physical dynamics and push sensual limits. I often use my own skin and body to experience and test my jewellery, in the process pushing my own boundaries and drawing inspiration from my Catholic upbringing and mixed European and Polynesian heritage – English, Irish, Samoan, Tokelauan, Wallis Islander. It is through the body and its adornments that I feel most connected to my ancestry.

Skin is ephemeral, constantly changing, healing, stretching, replenishing and ageing. Its colour is the perfect blend of one's genetic heritage and current environment. Under the sun, my mother's skin becomes a darker shade of brown, while my father's freckles and spots multiply to create a unique lattice across his arms and back. Other natural skin adornments such as warts, moles or beauty spots can increase in size, colour and number over time. Being transfixed by these gems of flesh has led to my current work, *Untitled (flesh)*, consisting of mysterious brown and beige growths on sterling silver or threaded on silk. The pieces are draped or affixed by means of piercing of the body or garment, referencing the sometimes malicious, but usually benign spots of beauty, and the changing gradient of skin tone. The epidermis is visually removed from one body and placed on another, forcing a bond and comparison of shades of skin. As tactile objects, the *Untitled (flesh)* pieces create an experience akin to fingering rosary beads, allowing one to become lost in repetition and pattern.

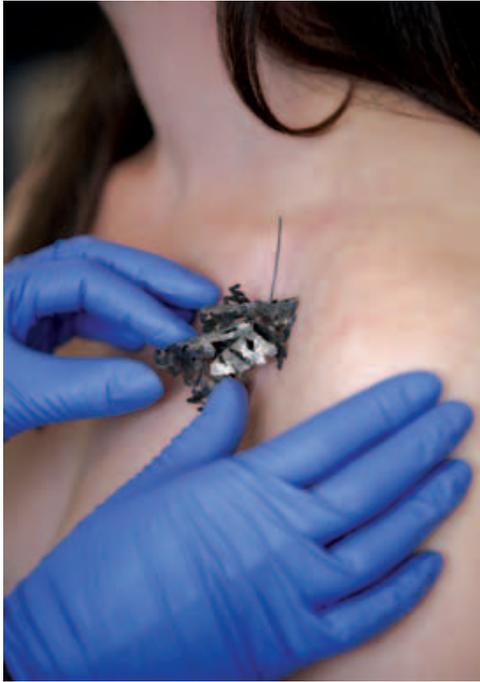
Personal comfort can be sought in religious and cultural ritual, which allows for self-reflection in a meditative, spiritual state; the process is often methodical, representative of growth, and can offer a link to an historical or cultural narrative. The Samoan *tātau* is a tattooing ceremony that traditionally takes place as part of the initiation of a *matai* (chief). The *tufuga ta tātau* (tattoo master) etches the dark ink into the subject's skin; it is a long and intricate process that usually takes several days to complete. The master also has one or more helpers to stretch the skin, clean the tools and wipe away blood during the *tātau*. The *pe'a* (male tattoo) covers the whole body from the lower torso down to the mid thighs, and consists of an intricate pattern of geometric lines and solid blocks of ink. It is incredibly painful to receive, and requires the subject to prepare himself physically and, most importantly, psychologically. The subject, lying on mats, is held down by the assistants and often supported by family members attending the event. Singing is common practice and acts as a distraction from the pain. Ultimately, the sensations experienced during *tātau* evolve into a constant state of awareness between body and mind. It is necessary for the mind to prevail over the body in order to complete this rite of passage.

The process of *tātau* as well as the end result is important, but it is the memory of the spiritual and physical experience undergone that is most valued. It serves as an unbreakable link between the subjects and their ancestors.

Although incomparable to the severe pain endured by those undergoing the *tātau* process, my jewellery ritual of 'graftification' shares some similar elements; wearers must also prepare themselves psychologically for physical discomfort and place their trust in the hands of a master of sorts, who also uses tools and must wipe away blood.



Figure 1. Selina Woulfe, *Silvergraft (male torso ritual II)* (2010), sterling silver; surgical steel pin. Photograph by G Badger.



Figures 2 and 3. Selina Woulfe, *Silvergraft (female ritual I)* (2010), sterling silver; surgical steel pin. Photographs by G Badger.

During my own experience I chose to have supporters with me while I underwent the procedure. The jewellery pieces, called 'silvergrafts,' are a series of protective adornments that actively cause pain when worn, being attached to the body with a surgical steel pin by a piercing artist. These abstract jewellery versions of skin grafts are a fine filigree of raw, undulating silver mesh.



Figure 4. Selina Woulfe, *Untitled (flesh)* (2012), polymer clay, silk thread. Photograph by A McCormack.

An additional layer of history is created and becomes a part of the jewellery object's story each time the ritual is performed, cementing its place in our present whilst bringing it closer to someone else's future. The experience is recorded with film and photography. Part of the work is to display large-scale photographs that depict the intimacy of pieces worn on a male and female body, creating a spectator experience, enabling the viewer to wear the jewellery psychologically. With a tattoo, the marking of the skin is evidence of the experience and transports the viewer or wearer back to it. However, the intention of the graftification process is not to create permanent scars (they can heal within a few weeks). Rather, the photograph is used to transport the subject back to the event; it becomes a second skin, bearing the evidence.

Everyone has skin and can relate to it in some way. The epidermis is the first and possibly most crucial layer of our bodies and, while it is a protective envelope, it is also a penetrable membrane, vulnerable to different levels of manipulation. Physically and conceptually, I use it to challenge my own identity and connect with others – crossing skin boundaries.

Selina Woulfe is a contemporary jeweller. She graduated with a Bachelor of Design from Unitec Mt Albert where she studied 2005-09. After being selected for Objectspace Gallery's Best in Show award in 2009, Selina has gone on to exhibit in New Zealand and Australia, and has work in the Wallace Arts Trust Collection. Most recently, she was included in the book *On Jewellery: A Compendium of International Contemporary Art Jewellery*, by Dutch art historian Liesbeth den Besten (Arnoldsche Art Publishers, Germany, 2011).



Figure 5. Selina Woulfe, *Untitled (flesh)* (2012), sterling silver; polymer clay, surgical steel pin. Photograph by A McCormack.