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Rochester Institute of Technology

Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

School of American Craft

In Candidacy for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Metals and Jewelry Design

Parts: One Through Three

by

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Abstract

Through the use of wearable objects, the topic of human skin is explored in its various states to give audiences a different outlook on beauty in society and the ways skin can map the human experience. Various materials and techniques were used to create jewelry and wearable sculptures to facilitate this discussion. Metal, silicone rubber, plastics, and fibers were used to explore this topic of our perceptions of ourselves and what our appearances project onto the world. Three different approaches were used to talk about skin and scarring. First, silicone rubber and copper and silver wire frames were utilized to create body sculptures that were celebrating the beauty of skin in different states other than the state most often associated with human beauty (young, clean, unscarred skin). The second approach used plastics and fibers to create personal narrative pieces about individual's stories of their scars and birthmarks. Visual cues from their stories and the shapes of their marks were used for visual inspiration. Finally, a more general approach to the variations of textures human skin can take on through daily life were explored in precious metals, such as silver and gold.

When trying to decide the topic I would focus my thesis on, I started to question why I make jewelry and what role jewelry plays in our current society. Jewelry exists on a different level of fashion than clothing. With clothing, there is still a certain amount of utilitarian use to it and while it is still used for projecting an image out into the world, it is also deemed necessary by most societies. Jewelry goes beyond that, as it could be argued to be unnecessary. I feel it allows the wearer to achieve a deeper level of expressing how they view their inner selves and who they might want to be. Jewelry is the first evidence of humans becoming aware of their personal identity. National Geographic reported on finding the first evidence of handmade beads that they believe to be dated back to possibly as far as 75,000 years ago “Beads are considered to definitive evidence of symbolic thinking” 1 (Mayell 2004) The way we decorate our bodies to send out a visual message to the world (often invisible and intangible emotions) is unlike any art form. It is an expression of a personal human experience. To me it is the most personal art-form because it is so closely related to the human body, the place an individual inhabits and must take care of and love. While it doesn't seem important to everyone and can even be considered a bad or shallow thing, what we put on our bodies is very significant because it is our first cue to the rest of the world how we feel within our bodies. Thinking so much about the human body and first impressions

lead me to start to think about how we are judged first on our appearances. It also made me think about our skin, as the skin is the first thing that we present to the world. It is our first line of defense against our environment and the first indicator that starts to tell a story about our inner lives. I view it as a map that is impressed upon us by our environment and our personal experiences to create visible stories of our lives. Scars and marks left on our bodies convey a message of where we have been and what we have accumulated along the way. Much of the time, societies view scarring or changes to the skin as imperfections or negatives. An article done by American Academy of Dermatology discusses the issue of negative affects scars can have "Physical appearance plays a major role in how people relate to others, so scarring that alters physical appearance — even if some would characterize it as minor — can have a negative impact on patients' quality of life." (News-medical.net 2016)¹ However, I view imperfections in skin as stories that should be celebrated. Having lived and come out worse for wear is better than to have come out unscathed and unchanged, and scars can be the physical manifestation of this. It is through our trials in life that we become who we are. Our skin is a document to be read by others. With my body of work, I aimed to study and to emphasize the value and beauty in the messages that our skin gives to others about our

¹ (News-medical.net 2016)

intangible inner lives. I approached my thesis from three different ways to interpret my ideas of the human epidermis and how it fits in our lives and society. The first view was from an overall standpoint of the biological reactions that all humans experience through their skin. I wanted to take into consideration everything from acne to blushing, and from sunburns to aging. It was important for me to personally view these normal functions of skin as a source of inspiration for my art. I started to look at images of bruising, stretch marks, wrinkles, peeling sunburns, dry skin, people with jaundice, goose bumps, burns, scabbing, and birthmarks. All these marks on our skins, temporary or permanent, have a story behind them with various degrees of elaborateness. Someone with very dry skin could have been throwing pots all day on a wheel or someone with stretch marks could have just given birth to their first child. There is a beauty and stories in the marks that are left behind. I wanted to recreate these human skin effects and make them in to wearable body art that beautifies such effects on our skin.

Abstract body sculptures resulted from studying these universal changes with human skin. Copper wire frame structures were created to mimic, in an abstract way, body lines and bones. I then used silicone rubber and made molds and played with pigmentation to depict different aspects of the skin. The particular rubber that I found through research is made by a company called Smooth on, that movie makeup artist

uses to recreate skin. The company describes the rubber as being “like a membrane, or soft enough to be used as a solid prosthetic appliance”. (smooth-on n.d.)² This product was very helpful for creating a very realistic feel to my work. When considering pigmentation, the topic of race came up, and I decided to leave that discussion aside. It seemed to be a different conversation that would become too personal and I wanted to focus on universal ideas about skin. The silicone rubber has a translucent quality to it, so I could alter it visually, but the skin of the wearer could still be seen through the work. I thought this was also a great opportunity to suggest that the wearers were in a way experiencing the “bruise” or the “goose bumps”.



I took artistic license when creating these pieces because I wanted to elevate the skin to a different level and have it be viewed in a new and, possibly to some, shocking

² (smooth-on n.d.)

way. We have all seen a bruise or a sunburn before, but we have not all viewed it within a beautiful light. I used alternative materials to give a suggestion of skin. While this made things look less than realistic, I feel it was beneficial in the beautifying process. For example, for my piece “Sunburn 1”, I used gold leafing to suggest the flaking off of dead skin someone experiences after a day at the beach.



I pushed color and textures with the silicone rubber skin and recreated and stretched them across, sometimes bonelike, wire frame structures. I then used a thin 32-gauge metal thread to sew the skin onto the frames. I thought it was the most appropriate way to attach my fake skin because of the use of stitches to hold together

real human skin. The silicone rubber acts very much like real skin in the way it feels and moves, and I wanted to embrace this opportunity. When the silicon rubber would rip while I was working with it, I would repair it with “stitches” instead of just remaking it perfectly. It seemed fitting because you cannot return a humans' skin to its original form. No matter how much you try you will always leave some mark or impression on it, even after it has healed.

The second approach I took to skin was with personal narrative jewelry pieces. These pieces focus on the stories behind the individuals' scars and birthmarks. Through this process I interviewed people about their scars or birthmarks, and I asked them how they felt about the marks on their bodies. I asked them how they felt it changed them and how the marks reminded them of past experiences. In most cases the individual ended up stating that they now like the mark on the body and that they are glad it is there. Ty is the first piece I did and it inspired the format for the rest of this body of work. Ty has a birthmark on his chest that he always felt self-conscious about. He stated that, “I used to be embarrassed about it, until I started calling it my little cloud. Then it became more special and a part of me. It’s funny because it was always part of me.” (Coyle 2016)³ The interesting part to Ty's story about his birthmark, for me, was that it

³ (Coyle 2016)

grew larger as he was going through puberty and figuring out his sexuality. Ty had struggled with coming out to his family and friends until after he had started college. As he grew to accept himself as he always really was, he also grew to accept, and even like, a mark on his body that was always there. I had him send me an image of his birthmark and then I traced that actual image to create outlines in a 3-D modeling program. I included his formerly mentioned quote on the medal and used a fabric swatch to reference his personal view of the mark looking like clouds.

After hearing his story and feelings about his birthmarks, I started to think of the marks on our bodies as “medals of honor”. The marks on our bodies signify something we went through and survived in life. I have taken inspiration from actual medals of honor that a soldier would receive. According to the Congressional Medal of Honor Society, On December 9, 1861 Iowa Senator James W. Grimes introduced S. No. 82 in the United States Senate, a bill designed to "promote the efficiency of the Navy" by authorizing the production and distribution of "medals of honor". (Congressional Medal of Honor Society 2017)⁴ With this simple and rather obscure act Congress created a unique award that would achieve prominence in American history like few others. These awards were used for inspiration of the visual aspects expressed in my works. I then

⁴ (Congressional Medal of Honor Society 2017)

took visual cues from the story to create the narrative medals personalized to an individual's marks and stories. Often times, I've found that these marks happen or are associated with a growing point in our lives.

For the second piece, I used a scar on my leg that happened the second day I moved to Rochester, NY to start graduate school. I had moved to a city where I knew no one and was living in a house with people I had never met before to start pursuing a career that I wasn't sure was going to work out. It is easy to say that I was feeling insecure about myself and wasn't ever quite sure about my next move. I also remember being very afraid of making mistakes and having seen the importance of failure in my life and what it had to teach me. My second night I woke up to a burning sensation on my leg. I remember thinking it felt like someone had spilled hot oil on me. After going to a clinic, I found out I had been bitten by a spider. It took all of my first semester at graduate school for it to really heal. I remember during the summer time I thought it made a part of my body ugly. It made me feel self-conscious until I started talking about how I got the scar. I was proud that I went through that difficult new experience even though I was afraid. Now the scar on my leg is something I am happy with and glad it's on my body. The visual cues I took for this piece were a spider, the scar itself, and the image of veins, to suggest poison running through my body and dissolving the skin.



Amelia's medal of honor comes from an experience she had with an old lover. She was living in Florida as a photographer and met a man with whom she fell in love. They quickly moved in with each other to a trailer park. However, drugs and alcohol became involved in the situation and he became verbally abusive to her. She already had previous issues with self-harm and would brand herself when going through emotional turmoil. She had decided she was going to leave the situation and move back home with her family up north. Before she did though she decided to brand herself with a heart on her upper thigh. She took a wire coat hanger and bent it into the shape of a heart and then branded herself. Before she left her lover in Florida, she took red paint and wrote

on his door a large heart around the words “miss me”. The brand healed as she made the 20 plus hour trip alone by car. After telling me the story she said “I was glad it happened, even if it was painful” (Adler 2016)⁵ For her medal, I used the image of the heart, dripping paint, and the coat hanger. The word “miss me” appears on her piece along with the year it occurred. For the fabric on her piece I chose the images of the trailers to show where she was living. The best tool for this process, that I found for me, was the use of computer aided design(CAD). I wanted to get the military look associated with medals of honor. Using this military style was significant for me to use in my work because I wanted the viewer to recognize these formal elements in my pieces to bring a sense of an award being given for the scarring. Military awards are iconic images that most viewers will associate with honor being bestowed. CAD allowed me to quickly and effectively create all the symbols I wanted to use to tell these individuals' stories and assemble them in a way that was inspired by military medals. After the models were made on the computer, I then 3-D printed them in a lightweight plastic and then electro-formed copper over the surfaces. This was more cost effective and helped with the overall weight of the pieces, making them more wearable. After the copper was electro-formed, I was able to use other patinas or silver plate the copper to create the

⁵ (Adler 2016)

desired look of metal. While researching others who might have taken on a similar topic of celebrating our human experience and/or the scars accumulated while going through this, I found two artists that I thought particularly relevant

Sara Enberg is a jewelry artist from Sweden who created a series of badges that celebrate some of the more difficult parts of the human experience. I have found that they are similar to my ideas about medals of honor for scarring, in that they are worn like an award. She speaks about the symbolism in her work being “About death, which follows us through life just like a small birthmark”. (Malette 2011)⁶

Helen Gugenheim makes work about vulnerability and healing. In an article done by Creators she speaks about the human body “If bodies tell stories, scars are their words. Reading my own [scars] I see a 2.5 inch-long gash healed above my right shoulder blade that tells the story of a regrettable tattoo, now removed, gotten in Amsterdam with a boyfriend past. A circular white dot on my right forearm tells the story of a drunken 16-year-old me idly pressing a lit cigarette into my arm. We live in one skin our whole live; we cannot take it off or trade it for another. Scars are the marks of the life in-process”. (Lourie 2016)⁷ Her work involves adorning scars with gold leaf and then photographing her subjects.

⁶ (Malette 2011)

⁷ (Lourie 2016)

The third body of work for my thesis was focused on creating a contemporary line of work. Having started out thinking about adornment and wearable objects for the body and why we wear them, it was only natural for me to end my journey back where I had started and to create work that was wearable as street fashion. I believe ending my process this way brought things full circle from my original thought process. I took the general inspiration of the tiny lines and bumps and scrapes that our skin can take on as well as using my two previous thesis parts as inspiration and made a line of jewelry. I worked with silver and gold for this portion of my thesis. I felt it was necessary to go back to traditional materials because it was the best way for me to make pieces that were functional to wear and practical enough for daily use. I did not include stones in this work because I felt like it would have been distracting from the concept that I originally took inspiration from. While stones have value in contemporary jewelry I do not believe that they had a lot to offer on this particular topic. Having a minimalistic approach to this line seemed to be the best course. Another reason for not going over the top with highly decorated jewelry pieces was because I felt like classic fashion does not overwhelm the wearer, but compliments their style in a simplistic way.

I have found the process of reticulation to be very useful when trying to convey variations in our skin. The process involves pouring silver ingots with a slightly higher

copper content and then heating the surface of the metal to create skin-like patterns. I also implemented the use of gold leaf to carry over the sunburn idea as well as using electro-forming to get more textures that resemble scabbing or scarring. For this stage of my process I focused heavily on texture and less so on coloration. I took a lot of inspiration from my first stage, but I wanted to bring the visuals back down to something more realistic in terms of fitting in with day to day use. I used the idea of framing from the silicone rubber stage as well, to help tie things together.



After the completion of the artifacts for my thesis work, I have found a new meaning for wearable objects and jewelry, when looking outward to the work of others, as well as looking within myself to create work. This thesis was a way for me to deeply explore why we adorn ourselves and question what beauty is. I have found that a great

deal of beauty in life comes from the human experience. The human experience is a collective of shared and personal stories about our consciousness and existence. While we are all sharing this life, we are also having an experience that is unique to ourselves, that no one else can fully comprehend. I feel that having those moments being marked onto our bodies or by purposefully decorating our bodies can give an individual a great deal of power over their personal identity. This visual way of self-expression can say things that cannot be easily expressed verbally. It is one thing to tell others you feel confident about yourself, but it is completely different to wear it proudly on your body for all to see. You are offering evidence that is tangible and cannot be easily denied.

Looking forward to future bodies of work and continuing this idea of finding beauty in unexpected places, I feel my thesis has given me a good foundation for creating art jewelry as well as unexpected commercial jewelry. I have come to better understand why I would create art jewelry and what it would mean to for me to have a person adorn their body with something I have created. I would want my wearer to recognize a piece of themselves in my work and gladly put it onto their body to better show the world how they feel internally. In terms of making unexpected commercial jewelry, I feel that I have found a better understanding on how to take elements from my artwork and make it into practical wearable pieces. Deriving visual elements from more artistic works,

makes for commercial style jewelry that is original and often unexpected. I also feel that another goal I set myself when creating my thesis was to explore as many new techniques and technologies as possible in my jewelry craft practice. The amount of new materials and techniques discovered while creating this body of work was very satisfying. I have a better appreciation for handmade objects and the dedication that goes into them. The level of skill and time that goes into a ones craft is something that I believe can be appreciated separately from concept. Understanding a material and how to best utilize it, has become very valuable to me because it allows me to better control how to realize ideas in a visual form. Moving forward in my practice, I feel that my ability to express concepts through my work to the best of my ability is directly related to how well I can work with a material and control it.

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