

cosmetic Tiffany Parbs

Surgical augmentation of the body presupposes a plastic surface conducive to design: the skin as subject to the cut and suture of composition. But this 'clinical' approach to cosmetic surgery would belie the severity of the intervention. There remains in contemporary culture a gap, a time-lag between the constitution of identity and the choice of the scalpel.

Tiffany Parbs' *cosmetic* explores just such a gap utilising the medium of jewellery. This new body of work problematises the surgical processes that would purport to erase dermatological traces of time and history. Parbs uses her own body to stretch the boundaries of what we know and understand as jewellery as well as skin. In the title piece *cosmetic*, a series of small stainless steel pins line the periphery of the eye and the mouth, recalling the preparatory cutting lines of the surgeon. These sombre signposts map the face as an aggregation of 'flaws' ripe for excision. 'Jewellery' in this scenario draws dangerously close to an unravelling of the skin – not because there is an antagonism inherent in these tiny implements but because figure and ground, before and after are here undecidable. Are these markings a precursor to an incision that will follow or are they already the result of a cosmetic embellishment? Fixed under the seal of photography, *cosmetic* suggests a topology of the skin akin to the endless, enfolded surface of the Möbius band¹. The skin and its adornment become inter-implicated, challenging the 'before/after' chronology of invasive surgery.



This understanding of the skin as a complex enfolding of time and space is further reiterated in *bake*, where the word "RAW" has been burnt into the delicate region of the décolletage.² *bake* appropriates the body as if it were a flat surface, using the skin as a photographic membrane and deliberately exposing it to the stain of the sun. Here adornment figures as a crafting of the self; 'jewellery' fashioned from the biological matter of the very skin which is its ground. Again it is the secondary mediation of the photograph (itself a type of 'skin'³), which so effectively re-marks the seamlessness of cosmetic processes. With *bake* we are forced to reconsider the permanency of surgery, the cultural impulse to nullify the complexity of time.

Rendered photographically, the work developed as part of *cosmetic* imbricates the conventions of jewellery with photography, marrying the material with the conceptual, the cultural with the political. Crucially, Parbs has developed a unique dialogue between craft methodologies, apt to amplify our relationship to the skin of our own bodies.

Nella Themelios 2008

Nella Themelios is the Curatorial Officer of [Craft Victoria](#)

Footnotes

1 Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004) 36

2 This notion of 'enfolding' is derived from Connor (2004) 36-37

3 Connor (2004) 59

Through allegories of disconcerting adornment, artists such as Tiffany Parbs elucidate the futility of corporeal excessiveness. With a heightened awareness of exaggerated bodily forms, Parbs commits to unravelling the signifiers associated with cosmetic procedures. With its judicious interventions her exhibition *cosmetic* acts as a timely incisive excavation of the social body politic and its obsession with achieving evermore-rising standards of beauty and evermore-invasive methods of achieving them. Gone are the days of applying rouge in the hope of highlighting our beauty. Surgical developments seem to have emerged overnight. However the market acceptance of cosmetic surgery is the most extreme example of the struggle to find ways to sustain the illusion of youth. The fleeting beauty of a crinkling, twinkling eye has shifted to the rigid fixity achieved by fillers and injected poisons. From teeth bleaching, chemical peels and liposuction, there are smaller steps towards discarding the natural in favour of the manufactured. The natural is a misnomer in contemporary capitalist nations. So complex the intertwining of synthetic and biological, so untraceable and insidious our impact on the planet and other bodies that we indelibly alter substances just by being present. Historically, many cultures have employed progressive



procedures that indelibly alter the notion of a natural body. The obsession with extending and transforming the limits of bodies is an intricate phenomenon.

There is something sinister about bodily alterations that aim to turn back the clock. Yet we are all implicated in the encroaching fear of aging and death, if not by our own feelings, then by the shifting reactions of others to our surfaces. The emphasis on youth, the invisibility of senior members of society is perhaps the catalyst of the resort to cosmetic surgery. Rather than processing the pain and pressures of life, mixed emotions are sliced out, discarded with the precision of a scalpel. The fictionality of youth buffeted against buoyant saline implants. Is it really now the puckered, parched skin of us mere mortals that look increasingly abnormal next to the hyper-real plump skin we see in magazines and on red carpets? It says a lot about capitalist societies, that the erasure of traces of time and effect take precedence over the pursuit of wisdom and inner allure.



Craft is generally associated with the things we hold dear to us both metaphorically and literally. Pieces close to the body intertwine the interior and exterior body. Drawing out complexities and contradictions of experience, these artworks assist us in drastically evaluating our relation to the world and others within it. The body is adorned with prosthetic accoutrements, temporary but affecting. Unlike art which seeks to have a generalised relationship with the body, craft goes further to become a possession close to both flesh and heart. For punks, jewellery and style were acts of resistance, a visible communication with authoritarian powers. Dissent measured in piercing marks and neon pink Mohicans. Parbs often conceals the brutal potential of such embellishments with the veil of delicacy, a lightness that belies any affliction of physical distress. Her previous *marked* series involved playful bruising and ephemeral markings, embellishments left as a residue or remainder on the skin after the jewellery removed, fleeting allusions to experience. There is an afterimage of sorts, likened to a recurrent memory, or a photographic negative. More recently though she has produced increasingly playful works which take false eyelashes to extraordinary lengths or prompt and capture tears leaving no traces on the skin. Unlike the French performance artist Orlan whose highly invasive procedures are likely to shock and transgress, Parbs nudges us gently to contact the everyday, mundane nature of emotion, pain, and fleshy knowledge. Parbs' precise operations with jewellery and temporary attachments act as an emotive collage. She gets under our skin.

By extending the limits of audience participation and viewing through technology, Parbs problematises the limits of the surgically enhanced body. In doing so she questions whether we should interpret this body as authentic and truthful. The work in *cosmetic* approaches the instruments used in surgery and skin treatments as tools to affect temporary change in direct opposition to surgical procedures. Rather than covering or beautifying the face, *clamp* exposes gums and teeth whilst contorting lips with an elasticised contraption. Invoking through parody the pearly white Hollywood smile, clenched teeth provide the background in a dramatically set grinning grimace for the camera. Beauty is and has always been a subjective fiction, misleading and unreliable. But within this subjectivity it remains desirable and inescapable. We can shape the world, so why not ourselves? The stakes are high. It is a question of the dubious need to conform to acceptable ideas of beauty sanctioned by the mass media.



When bones fracture, they knit back together but can never return to the same state. Skin has the same restorative properties forming a scar as evidence of the wound. This begs the question if we erase the visible memory present in our bodies, what is left behind? In other words does the emotional rupture heal over once more, leaving us to gaze longingly at the imaginary scar? Cosmetic surgery can dismember any preconceptions we may have of ourselves; it erases the indexical passing of life's events. Evidence of bodily knowledge and memory is wilfully subtracted. This is not always a bad thing; perhaps there is a need to escape our past. But can all things be simply altered for a price, as risk is ignored in the pursuit of a perverse regressive progress? It is important to question the overbearing presence of manufactured bodies, whose sinews and soft tissue dissect natural conceptions of beauty and nature, notions so easily taken for granted. By working so closely with the body Parbs provokes a displacement of the markers by which we define ourselves. The work in *cosmetic* makes explicit the absurdist nature of cosmetic surgery in contemporary society, whilst exposing a painful construction of identity, under the increasing pressure to conform to unrealistic societal norms.

Daniella Watson 2008

Daniella Watson is a UK based writer, curator and co-director of The Embassy Gallery, Scotland

Images: (opposite top to bottom): **Tiffany Parbs**, *extension*, 2008, hair, digital prints 330 x 470 x 35mm (each print); **Tiffany Parbs**, *clamp*, 2008, sterling silver, elastic, digital print, 330 x 470 x 35mm. (this page): **Tiffany Parbs**, *peel*, 2008, glue, skin, digital prints, 330 x 470 x 35mm (each print). Photos: Terence Bogue.



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