

Surveying Surfaces: Amy Potsic's *Skin Stories*

Surfaces are the defining link between two apparently disparate fields of study that fascinate me - colonial furniture and the tattoo. The skin, whether human or wood, provides an entry point into a series of questions about decoration, degradation, and preservation. The surface tells an individual story. In the case of furniture, this story might relate to how the object was used or even the conditions in which a piece has been housed. With tattooing, the tale is of the skin's reaction to the needle, the ink, and the technique of the artist. As with furniture, there is also evidence of a life lived - how much sun the tattoo has received, as well as how the work of its wearer might pose threats to longevity.

With this background informing my understanding of surfaces, Aime Potsic's photographs grabbed my attention immediately. Through precise color, lighting, and mounting choices, Potsic creates a rich and complex sensual experience. Her photographs investigate the physical, spiritual, and psychological terrain of skin. The photographs question the feel of the bodies and prompt a reaction that transcends the visual. As a collection, *Skin Stories* functions as an exercise in how the act of looking ignites the other senses. Extended viewing bares a desire built from an unhindered interaction with the shape, texture, form, and pattern in the bodies and their wounds. The tactile quality of each photograph tells its story - wounds from touch, the doctor's knife, and from fire blend into a narrative incorporating markings of differing origin as agents of seduction, conflict, and beauty.

Potsic's artistic journey to this point has traveled several parallel roads that cross in related diversions. An initial interest in religious fervor developed into a fascinating series entitled "Ritual and Resilience." In this exhibition, first shown in San Francisco, Potsic documented her view of how religion influences day-to-day life. This led, eventually, to a study of religious icons, and slowly to a performative account of bodily scars. These last two projects make up *Skin Stories*, and while the bulk of this essay deals directly with the photographs, it is important not to forget the artist. Some artists devote entire careers to a single obsession. Aime Potsic, it seems, manages to divert a series of obsessions into clear and direct narratives that nonetheless build seamlessly into her own artistic portfolio.

Potsic was born in Chicago and raised in Berwyn, PA. As an undergraduate at Indiana University she decided to pursue photography seriously, working as a staff photographer for the college newspaper. Some years later, Potsic landed in San Francisco and took to conceptual photography as a student at the San Francisco Art Institute (where she received an MFA). Her background resonates throughout in her work, which to an extent incorporates extended periods of documentation with a clear conception of formal artistic composition. The duality proven here extends to readings of Potsic's photographs – which, more often than not, are multilayered in their stories.

Skin Stories combines photographs from two distinct bodies of work, each tied together by an exploration of scarring. The first of these, *Seduce Me*, investigates Christian and commercial iconography. For *Skin Stories*, images from this collection represent a portion dealing directly

with figures of Christ. The project began with literary inspiration. Potsic was fascinated by the erotic poetry written by nuns in the middle ages. Having pledged their lives to Christ, these women found their sensuality through iconographic images and sculptures rather than carnal pleasures. The wounds Potsic discovered through photographing crucifixion and Pieta statues in churches throughout Italy, New York, and San Francisco reference both historical scars and those created by continued touch. Faithful observers add a new layer in the statues life through repeated caress.

Hands, knees, and feet bare the wounds of crucifixion and those developed from touch. With that, there comes a duality of meaning. On one level, the historical lessons of Christ's life. The other story, periods of individual interaction and personal pilgrimage to the icons. For each observer there may be a separate spiritual communion, but the repetition proves a shared experience. It degrades the object; one touched without advanced permission, yet speaks positively about the power of religious experience.

"S-Curve" is a glorious image of Christ's torso and upper thighs. The wound on the proper right rib functions as the only element marring the idealized figuring in the iconography. Religious ecstasy and sensuality oozes from the stylized body, promoting both a historical and physical desire. An overt eroticism develops from both the shape and the musculature of the sculpted body. By focusing on a portion of the whole, Potsic forces directs the viewer's gaze and confronts presents the statue as an object; by cropping this way, the total the power of the wound and of the idealized form become apparent.

Potsic says of *Seduce Me*, “In my exploration of modern and Christian iconography, the overt eroticism with Catholic imagery and mythology has become palpable,” a notion that becomes more real through her technique. Lighting and mounting plays an important role in viewer interaction with Potsic’s photographs. Her large-scale silver gelatin prints are placed on an aluminum backing, a process that much like the cropping of the image influences where one looks. The movement of the shape, too, has seductive quality. In the case of “S-Curve,” the binary of conflict and beauty develop in the two separate sides of the body. The pure sexuality of the religious icon emerges, yet at the same time the wound brings into question its being. Here an inner turmoil within the viewer may arise—a question of where exactly to focus attention.

“Photographer Amie Potsic focuses on the corporeal: the raw, expressive body, broken down into live, creaturely components that come together to comprise a whole,” writes Nathaniel Friedman, providing a particularly apt description of Potsic’s material. Breaking the subject into parts, as in “S-Curve,” the intention of creating a rich and complex experience. To reiterate an earlier argument, divorced from the whole, the portions of the body are not completely removed from the total - there is a balance between what’s shown and what is known to be beyond.

As a student of furniture, the s-curve has direct resonance for me. Hogarth’s vision, or more aptly line, of beauty found form in the middle of the 18th-century, explicitly on the legs of chairs in the Queen Anne style. Working with inanimate objects (in my case hundreds of seemingly similar chairs), I developed an obsession, by necessity, for pinpointing particular elements. As Potsic’s

work shows us, I discovered that close looking divorces distinct portions from the whole. Just as the sculptures bare wounds, the chairs show areas of weakness (repeated breaking at the exact same point in the splat), as well as points of extended touch. For example, I became fascinated by the heel marks stamped by time into the medial stretchers. The stretchers are a structural device, yet through use tell about their lives. An exploration of surface then allows a narrative that diffuses through multiple lanes of existence. *Seduce Me* bares this quality. Potsic finds relevance in the proposed and real experience each object presents. As with any material culture study, the visual effect becomes only a portion of the whole story.

Turning attention to the human body, Potsic complements her study of religious iconography with a series of photographs titled *Thin Skinned Thick*. In these she again focuses on portions of the body, forcing the viewer to confront with the scar directly. *Thin Skinned Thick* involved photographing approximately 20 participants and recording conversations while they viewed the resulting images. The photographs and the recordings make up the second portion of *Skin Stories*. The juxtaposition of human skin and statue surface pushes the nature of the experience forward. Bodies are removed visually from the personal, yet an emotional connection to the bearer never dissipates. This must be navigated in both depictions of the human body and of Christ.

Gretchen A. Case neatly positions Potsic's photographs in a discussion of eroticism and gaze in a section of her dissertation, *Wishing on Scars: Meaning, Memory, and the Misdirection of Scarred Bodies*. She writes,

Potsic gives permission to look and think deeply about something that often is hidden and associated with shame or disfigurement. She offers a view of the erotic, sensual aspects of a body with scars. Potsic uses performative practices to re-direct the typical photographer-subject relationship. Her visual activity is not a staring-at, but a looking-with.

Much of this visual activity is born out of Potsic's technique, which Case details with great care. Of her decision to mount on aluminum Potsic says, "It's part of seducing the viewer into spending enough time with the work, you are not removed from it by a barrier, you cannot see yourself in a reflection... they have a greater objecthood."

This objecthood generates the great contrast Case notes between Potsic's work and the common method of taking medical photographs of scars. Potsic removes the viewer from this direct convention, again using lighting as a method of composing a sensual experience rather than a disturbing or repulsive image. Growing up the daughter of a doctor, Potsic is very familiar with medical photographs. She acknowledges in simple terms the difference in nature and intent of her work and these trade images. She is also indebted to photographer Edward Weston, who influenced her ability to look for sensuality in places others tend to avoid it. Potsic's short depth of field shots, contrasting light and dark, turn her subjects into hyper sensual objects, curves and textures.

This approach locates her work in the history of photography. Case mentions Potsic in contrast to other photographers focused on scarred nudes, Hanna Wilke and Jo Spence. Their bodies, Case argues, are bodies in pain. “In Potsic’s photographs, the scar is a feature of the nude body rather than a blemish”; as Case writes, “the scar does not erase the humanity or the sensuality of the body, the scar does not de-sexualize the person carrying it.” In short, Potsic recognizes the reality of living with scars and having them emerge as powerful symbols of survival. Rightly so, Case briefly points out the degree of anonymity granted to Potsic’s subjects. Here, by focusing on specific points of the body, Potsic gives permission to look.

Images of burn marks offer the most complex readings among the photographs. Potsic invites stares to a woman’s most intimate body parts. There is an element of voyeurism, coupled with the feeling that being given the freedom to look allows one can focus attention on the marvelous patterning in the skin. The dual nature of gaze, as discussed before, grows apparent from these scars. In conversation with Potsic, she mentions a misreading of a scar seen on the arm of one of the participants. Recently hired for a new job, his boss asked, “Where did you get that?” For those familiar with body modification, this little anecdote might not seem particularly jarring, however considering Potsic’s intention to address the scar as agent of strength, sensuality, conflict, and beauty, the question serves to remind of the multiple ways scars are read. An example of “looking with” comes directly from Potsic’s documentation of scars. Reviewing the hip and side scars of one woman with the participant and her husband, a revelation in the interpersonal connection between the couple is made. The husband mentions the scarred portion

of the body as his favorite portion of his wife. Together, though the performance of Potsic's series, new meaning and connection emerges from past pain. The scar as symbol of conflict (with body and fire) clearly becomes a symbol of seduction and beauty, as well.

For the viewer, the texture of the scar yields its own seduction. Carved, as it were, into the body the effects of fire, scarring and skin grafting form powerful tactile desire. Much like with the gaze, this sensual need to feel and experience the grooves and patterns of surface relates to Potsic's composition. The invitation to share is again at forefront.

The scars depicted by Potsic arrive on their wearers through accidents, illness, and surgery. They are markers of exact periods of time. Ephemeral in the sense of being created for a moment, but existing into the future as a document of experience. The most unavoidable are the sweeping arcs of heaving scarring under the breasts of one female participant. There is little question about the reason for the scars. The reaction of the body to the surgery, however, generates the inner conflict. Just how did the scars form that way?

Having navigated gaze, touch, sexual desire, and all the complex associations born out of Potsic's photographs, the performance extends to the subjects voice. The recorded portion adds another layer of sensory experience to the exhibition. Throughout the act of capturing the images, Potsic's inclusion of the participant in each aspect (the posing, the photographing, the selection, and the recording) personalizes the narrative far beyond the potential of a basic sitting.

In the recordings we learn the under breast scars are developed through a rejuvenation of scar tissue. The story personalizes the image and provides key background information.

Rejuvenation versus degradation in the story of all the scars in *Skin Stories* has become my main interest in *Skin Stories*. In the statues, consistent touch brands the object, while in some of the bodies the look of the scar changes with the body's reaction to the wound.

When I spoke with Potsic about the work, I mentioned my interest in pattern and the connections I saw between the scars and what I view in furniture. This might seem odd. I have, after all, spent some eight years thinking critically about tattoos and other forms of body modification. But, the scars presented in *Skin Stories* (especially as shown along side the statues) promotes, in Case's words, "a valuable, shared bodily experience." With the bodies, the experience comes alive through the invitation to share the conflict and beauty of the scares. With the sculptures, the patina of use and the sensual handling of the photograph produce a shared experience through history and interaction with the religious figures. The same is true of all studies of material culture. Close looking breeds a shared experience with the bodies that have encountered the objects past, present, and future.

In total, *Skin Stories* is an engagement with multiple moments in time. The moment of the wound. The life of the participant lived through the wound. The life of the statue in its various uses. Each image is not one simple view, but a series of multilayered stories built into a single

object. Potsic's ability to weave together a full sensory experience into a primarily visual offering is a true strength of the collected photographs.

Skin Stories proves the potential of surface as a unifying device where notions of beauty, conflict, pain, and sexuality all intersect. Presenting selections from two distinct bodies of work, Potsic also suggests ways her the full scope of her oeuvre interacts and builds a distinct artistic voice.

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