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Embodied response

Allison Heather Rosh
University of Iowa

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EMBODIED RESPONSE

by

Allison Heather Rosh

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts
degree in Art in the
Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2016

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Anita Jung

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Allison Heather Rosh

has been approved by the Examining Committee for
the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree
in Art at the May 2016 graduation.

Thesis Committee:

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Susan White

To Ryan and my family

There is no 'authentic' body. It is at the mercy of our lived experience which continuously shapes and reshapes it. The body is extremely reactive, responding and adapting to the slightest impulses and influences. We know this, and yet we do not know it, because we do not have any idea of what it really means.

Eva Schmale
The Connected Body?, Sensual Unrest

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I am beyond grateful for each and every one of you.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

This work explores the body and its limitations through the lens of printmaking. The surface of the body acts as a barrier between our internal and external selves exposing the vulnerabilities between mind and body. As fragile and receptive beings, the past builds up and manifests itself through our daily actions and repetitive tendencies. There is a strong desire to control our appearance and physical signs of well-being.

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INTRODUCTION

The surface of the body acts as a barrier between our internal and external selves exposing the vulnerabilities between mind and body. As fragile and receptive beings, the past builds up and manifests itself through our daily actions and repetitive tendencies. Constant awareness of our physical forms and emotional states are impressed upon us. There is a strong desire to control our appearance and physical signs of well-being. The length to which one will go, to appear well and put together, intrigues me. These preconceived expectations of self, become overwhelming, and the focus of our obsessive thoughts.

The presence of the body is suggested in these pieces, through various processes that reflect healing and destructive patterns. Veiled pieces are mended meticulously by hand, creating another skin. Etched impressions on copper are abstracted and deteriorated. Surfaces are abraded; etched; mended, and covered. These processes act to highlight the subtle and startling effects of our physical movements, mental states, and overall health.

CHAPTER 1

THE BODY

The body is our vessel for life. It is the first thing people see and judge. Over time our bodies expand, contract, morph, and rearrange based on our environment and sensations. I am constantly noticing changes in my body as parts of my life change. Growing up as a woman it is inevitable to judge oneself with regards to outward appearance. Society has embedded an ideal desire for perfection that a young woman should emulate. Appearance is relentlessly foregrounded.

When I was a teenager it was hard not to judge and be very critical of my body. This began while I was dancing ballet. Your body physique and shape are continually surveyed and scrutinized. Often in ballet you are asked to “suck in your stomach and tuck in your bottom.” This created the ideal dancer’s body. I was oblivious to the intense nature of judgment that was happening, but it has affected the way I view certain parts of my body. Despite the scrutinizing tendencies that were picked up from dance I also became fascinated with the body. How does our body language translate into emotions? What are the limits of this body we reside in?

The body goes beyond a mere physicality, it also shares a connection with the mind. We lose sight of this connection and how our mental health affects the body’s well-being. *Emergence* is a body of work that focuses on the skin and how it is affected by fixations. Body Repetitive Focus Behaviors (BRFBs) are harmful, relieving, and repetitive actions that are caused by copious amounts of stress, the inability to relax, and unachievable high standards.¹ Often one does not realize that they are picking at their skin or pulling out their hair. This fairly common behavior can become a hindrance. Depending on the person this fixation can reach a point where people cannot function. BRFBs are a part of the work in *Emergence* and *Embodied Response*. I easily become fixated on imperfections on the body and pick skin or scabs. There are times when this becomes problematic, causing oneself to become self conscious.

Skin is an extremely receptive and judged part of the body. It makes up our personal appearance, protection from external forces, and acts as a signifier of personal

¹ Roberts, Sarah. “The impact of emotions on body-Focused repetitive behaviors:

identity. I began to notice the surface of the skin and how there are certain areas that I become fixated on. Philosopher Michel Serres describes these fascinations of the skin:

“Observe the surface of the skin, the changing, shimmering, fleeting soul, the blazing, striated, tinted, streaked, striped, many-colored, mottled, cloudy, star-studded, bedizened, variegated, torrential, swirling soul.”²

With my work I am often considering how skin becomes scraped, torn, and bruised but always heals. Figures 19 - 21 from my show, *Embodied Responses*, illustrate the ideas of healing. Each set is focused on progressions of bruises. That get worse before they get better. The idea that the body is constantly healing and recovering from our surroundings is what has continued to drive the making of this work. In figures 14 - 17, an impression etched on copper distorts the body into worn and degraded shapes emerging from the darkness. Revealing a disfigured and segmented form. The body can be broken down into forms, grotesque and dark hinting at a more distressed side of the self.

I am physically placing my body into this work. The pure endurance necessary to create the work has caused my body to be pushed to its limits. It may not be outwardly apparent that the labor has been happening that intensely, but my body has the memory of it.

² Serres, Michel. *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies (I)*. London: Continuum, 2008. 23.

CHAPTER 2

MOVEMENT / ACTION

As a young girl dancing became a voice of expression and exploration. Over time my practice and dedication for the sport grew. Dancing involves a strong awareness of the connection between the body and self. The body is constantly in motion, even when we are resting. Naturally we have impulses but often do not act on them. Society dictates that we repress these impulses due to their inappropriateness. The body has limitations in its range of motion that is determined by our kinesphere. The kinesphere is the outer reach of movement our limbs have without changing the way we are standing. It also refers to personal space.³ In figure 18 the kinesphere determines where the lotion is placed on the wall. My feet remained planted in one location in front of the wall and are only moved when I lose balance trying to stretch further out. The fixed movement triggers a tension throughout the body that was felt the next day. Steady reaching, dragging, and bending in the body push past its limit and stretch beyond comfort. The movement and action in the work is about endurance and a sincere attempt to heal or cover. For five days I was in the gallery working on the wall drawing. Every two days the application of the lotion changed. Dragging to smearing to scraping. Constantly moving towards a heavier application of lotion, or interface.

The etchings utilize movement in isolation compared to the drawing. There is a greater consideration of body halves. A copper plate is pinned to the wall or laid on the floor in preparation for the body to press onto it. Consciously moving, I embrace myself, tucking in or rolling down. Pressing and pulling away from the plate distorts the body impression. Interacting with the material creates a strong connection to movement in the body and as a limit to the range of motion possible.

³ Schiller, 2001

Actions that have attributed to the work:

Mending

Perfecting

Embedding

Representing

Rejecting

Concealing

Healing

Fixating

Overwhelming

Erasing

Pushing

Emerging

Embracing

Veiling

Bruising

Replicating

Peeling

Duplicating

Analyzing

Invading

Worrying

Returning

Anxiety

Compensating

Obsessing

Collecting

Smashing

Curling

Pressing

Breaking

Distorting
Smearing
Overcoming
Identifying
Touching
Manifesting
Sweating
Connecting
Obscuring
Cornering
Concentrating
Resisting
Moving
Leveling
Charting
Becoming
Itching
Changing
Rubbing
Picking
Resembling
Covering
Stressing
Destroying
Mapping
Altering
Soaking
Blotting
Wiping
Applying
Buffing

CHAPTER 3

PROCESS

Printmaking is a highly involved process based practice which has allowed my obsession with perfection and order to manifest itself into a two dimensional form. Before any piece is started a series of preparations are necessary. These preliminary tasks include measuring matrices, mixing color, tearing paper, polishing copper, or melting material. These have become a ritualistic practice in producing these works. There is a meditation and reflection that occurs during preparation. The work is constantly in flux, as impressions are covered, destroyed, revealed, and concealed during the formation. For certain pieces this process is outwardly apparent, while for others it is just an underlying layer.

Excavated Silkscreen

Excavated silkscreens are the built up of layers that can be sanded away to reveal an image. When creating the print I predetermine what colors will be used and the order they will be printed in. When printing, the order of color is a determining factor of what colors will be most prominent and which will barely be noticeable. Each color is printed at least twice, and some may be up to three times. Building up multiple layers allows for a slower progression between colors when the print is sanded. Layering a new color on top of the one below, that new layer will slightly vary from its true color. I have had time to see the colors and how they dry one on top of another. The final sanding outcome is not determined until the printing has been completed.

Each silkscreen was created either with a specific raised surface that has been placed underneath the print or from memory. Based on pressure, sandpaper, and the hand each color field is sanded to create an image reminiscent of areas on the skin. During the process the body must be in control of its motions, weight, and rhythm. Excavated silkscreens can easily go too far. Once the color has been worn away it cannot be redone or saved. A fine dust is produced from sanding that is collected.

Lotion

In the show *Embodied Response* the etchings were created with lotion interfacing with the body. I made my own lotion using beeswax pellets, coconut oil, and cocoa

butter. This gave me the ability to alter the greasiness of the lotion. This allows for a more detailed impression since the lotion will withstand a longer amount of time in the ferric acid. After the lotion is made into little cakes, I cover my body making sure that there is an excessive amount of lotion on the surface of my skin. Then a rosined copper plate is laid on the floor or nailed on to the wall before pressing my body on to the surface. I reference back to the photographs of the body I have. Beginning these etchings it was unclear how my impression would be left on the surface of the copper. Each impression is a different act of placing the body on the metal. The results are unpredictable until they are printed. The residue is all that remains of the body.

Lotion also appears in the four veiled digital prints and the wall drawing. Each digital print has been overlaid with faint traces of an impression on rice paper. The thin nature of the rice paper and lotion create a transparent ghost that is not apparent before the impression. *Residual Obsession*, figure 18, was an on-going drawing that involved a wall and lotion. The drawing was altered everyday for five days. Every two days I would change the way I applied the lotion. In the beginning the cakes of lotion were balled into tiny pellets and dragged across the wall. As the week went on I progressively added larger amounts of lotion, warming it with my body heat to be smeared across the wall. Layer upon layer built up, attempting to cover the wall.

Sewing

Sewing has become a way to mend or secure a range of material together. Each stitch is done by hand causing variation and imperfections. Currently I use this process to attach thin sheets of rice paper to digital images and veil excavated silkscreens with waxed etchings. A neutral color palette has been the thread of choice due to its ability to integrate itself with the imagery. Line after line of thin thread stretches tightly across the surface creating wrinkles. The process of stitching speaks to the obsessive nature within the work as a whole.

CHAPTER 4

MATERIALITY

Materials help to create work that is reminiscent of the body and skin. Handling and manipulating the material create a connection to the body. Paper, wax, metal, lotion, and thread are used to create the work. Combinations of these materials create the ability to mimic forms or places on the body.

Paper is fragile, durable, and traditionally used in printmaking. It can withstand soaking, pressure, sanding, waxing, buffing, and bending. For the series of excavated prints (figures 1 – 9) in *Emergence I* veiled them with waxed and buffed etchings. The mulberry paper has been transformed to resemble the surface of skin. As layers of silkscreen are printed on paper it begins to bow and curl becoming object like and less two-dimensional.

Copper sheets that are finely coated in rosin are perfect surfaces for picking up fine detail of the lotion. The feeling of cold metal against bare skin is sharp and jarring as my body lays on them. These two materials combined create an eerily transformed image of the body. Using natural ingredients I am able to control the amount of wax and grease that is suspended in the lotion. These two components allow the impression to hold greater detail.

Thread is used as a connector of materials in *Emergence*. Figures 2, 4, 6, and 8 have four small stitches are placed in the top corners of the print. The stitches become a part of the piece without taking away from the delicacy of the image. Thread plays a different role in *Embodied Response*. In figures 22 - 25 it is used to mend the images together. It is prominent and outwardly noticeable, becoming abstracted shapes on top of the recognizable image.



Figure 1. *Persistent*, excavated silkscreen, 15" x 11", 2015



Figure 2. *Relief*, etching, excavated silkscreen, wax, thread, 15" x 11", 2015



Figure 3. *Flushed*, excavated silkscreen, 14" x 11", 2015



Figure 4. *Groomed and Mangled*, etching, excavated silkscreen, wax, thread, 15" x 11", 2014



Figure 5. *Residual Presence*, excavated silkscreen, 14" x 11", 2015



Figure 6. *Slow Growth*, multiple plate etching, excavated silkscreen, wax, thread, 14" x 11" 2015



Figure 7. *Break Out*, excavated silkscreen, 14" x 11", 2015



Figure 8. *Pruritus*, etching, excavated silkscreen, watercolor, wax, thread, 14" x 11", 2015



Figure 9. *Enough*, excavated silkscreen, 15" x 11", 2015

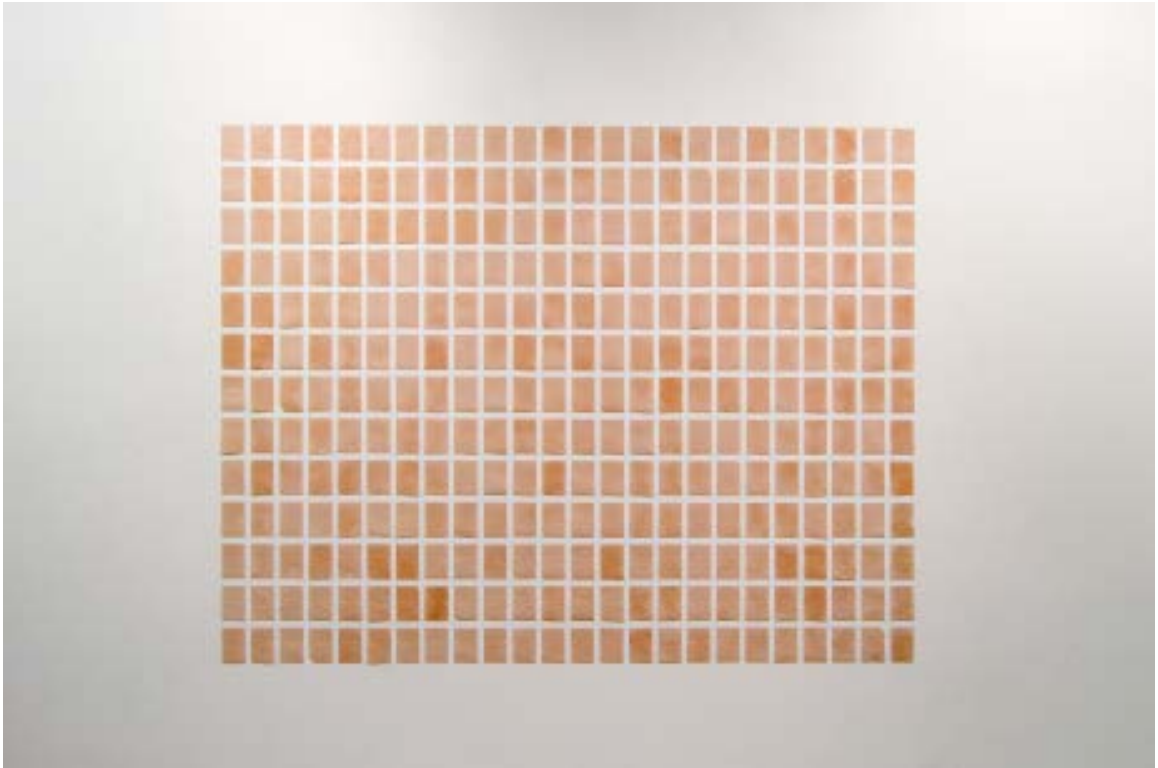


Figure 10. *I'm Sorry*, powdered pigment, paper, adhesives, natural body oil,
54" x 42.25", 2015



Figure 11. *I'm Sorry* (detail), 2015

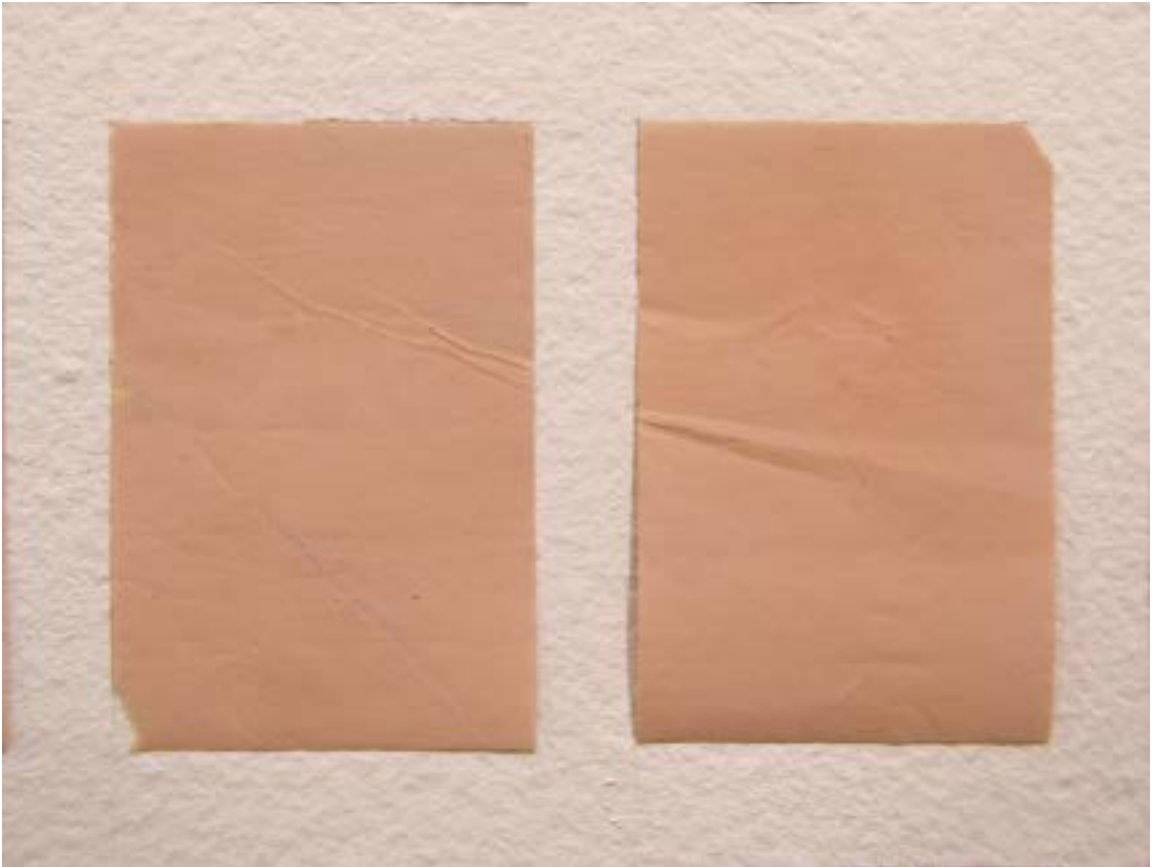


Figure 12. *I'm Sorry* (detail), 2015



Figure 13. *Emergence*, installation detail



Figure 14. *Emergence*, installation detail



Figure 15. *Fractured*, etching, 24" x 18", 2015

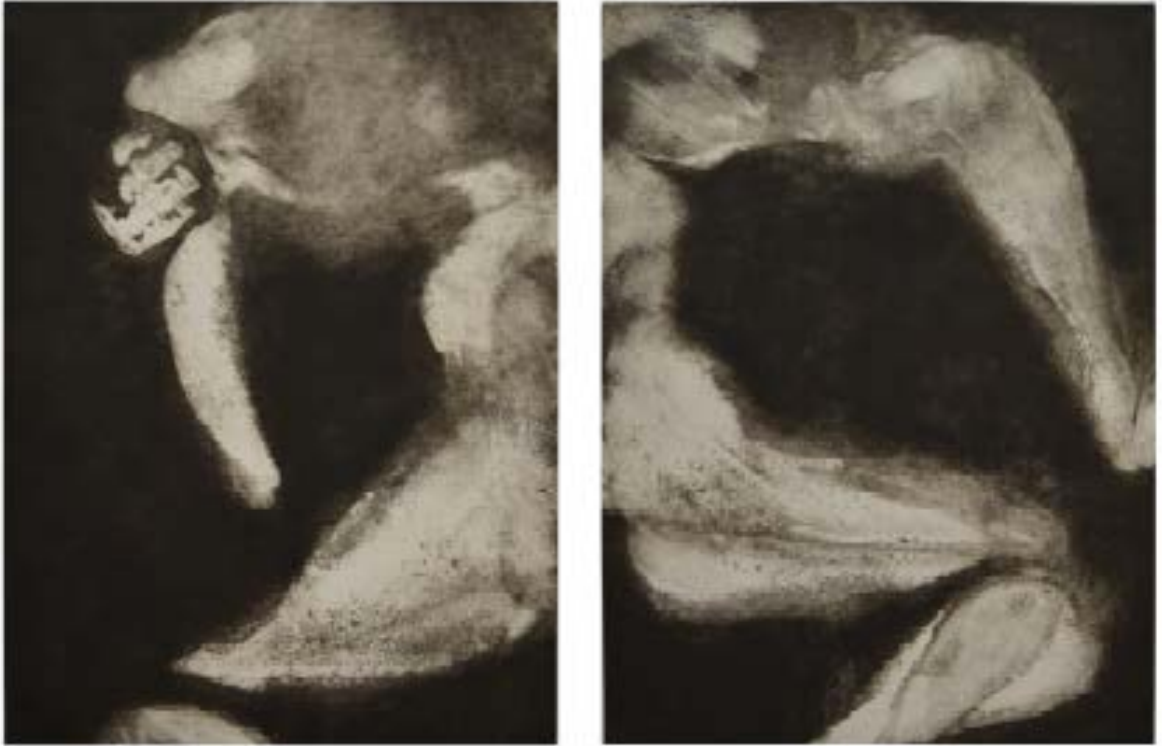


Figure 16. *Corporal Flux*, etching, 48" x 36", 2016



Figure 17. *Fleeting Perception*, etching, 24" x 18", 2016



Figure 18. *Forms of Being*, etching, 24" x 18", 2015



Figure 19. *Residual Obsession (On-going drawing)*, lotion (beeswax, coconut oil, shea butter), 2016



Figure 20. *Residual Obsession (On-going drawing)*, detail



Figure 21. *Unsightly Progression I*, excavated silkscreens, 2016



Figure 22. *Unslightly Progression II*, excavated silkscreens, 2016



Figure 23. *Unsightly Progression III*, excavated silkscreens, 2016



Figure 24. *Folded In*, inkjet digital print, rice paper, lotion, thread, 24" x 18", 2016



Figure 25. *Taken*, inkjet digital print, rice paper, lotion, thread, 24" x 18", 2016



Figure 26. *Malleable Barrier*, inkjet digital print, rice paper, lotion, thread, 24" x 18", 2016



Figure 27. *To You*, inkjet digital print, rice paper, lotion, thread, 24" x 18", 2016



Figure 28. *All that Remains*, excavated etching, 24" x 18", 2016



Figure 29. *Embodied Response*, installation detail



Figure 30. *Embodied Response*, installation detail



Figure 31. *Embodied Response*, installation detail

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