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Thick skinned

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THICK SKINNED

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by

Alair Wells

B.F.A., The Atlanta College of Art, 1998

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ABSTRACT

“Thick Skinned” is a series of sculptures using the domestic structure as a metaphor for the body. Issues of sexuality, gender roles, and domesticity are explored in this mixed-media installation. Viewer interaction with the work is encouraged for a complete sensual experience.

The body and home are protective, yet fragile and delicately vulnerable. My work confronts notions of beauty and cruelty, bodily function and presence, with a focus on gender-biased social conventions in our culture.

Conceptually, the work is autobiographical in nature, as it pertains to my experiences as a woman. Universally, it deals with the merging of sexuality and domesticity.

This body of work revolves around a motif that is beautiful and grotesque, yet playful, resulting in a surreal landscape of strange fantasy.

“The body appears impenetrable but is always vulnerable. Still, within its vulnerability there are systems of resilience. The complexity of these delicate areas and their layers of defense inspire and move me.”
-Sarah Lovitt

1: INTRODUCTION

“Thick Skinned” is a term associated with someone or something that is called or insensitive. This term could also refer to a protective condition of the psyche, the body, or a structure.

Every person has a few skeletons in the closet. Each of us has memories of past events buried in the subconscious that has helped shape our personality and identity. Often these events promote feelings of discomfort, at least enough to remain undisclosed. A common defense from allowing these emotions to reoccur is to create a mental mask, or thick skin. We build walls to protect ourselves, which also serve to entrap discomfort from resurfacing.

A large part of what has helped shape my personal identity and this current body of work is an attempt at revealing what’s just under the surface of the skin and the psyche. In an effort to confront a somewhat misguided past, I am revisiting notions of sexuality combined with childlike fantasy. As a child, the boundaries between sex and violence were unclear, resulting in confusion in regards to my role as a woman, socially, as well as in the home. The idea of home became a constant search for a place that is physically, mentally, and emotionally secure. This search led me to an exploration of nest building and this construction of house-like structures. Each piece contains physical

components of the body while visually resembling a birdhouse, doll house, tree house, or play house.

My work brings to question issues of domestic roles in the home and the exploration of personal identity. I focus on notions of beauty, cruelty, bodily function and presence, defense, fragility, and protection. Conceptually, the work is autobiographical in nature, as it pertains to my experiences as a woman. Universally, it deals with the merging of sexuality and domesticity. This work revolves around a motif that is beautiful and grotesque, yet playful, resulting in a surreal landscape of strange fantasy.

2: HOUSE/HOME

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines the house as a building that serves as living quarters for one or a few families. We often think of a house in terms of its physical attributes while considering the home in more of an emotional context. In the book, *The Meaning of things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, Mihaly Csikszentmihaly and Eugene Rochberg-Halton state that:

A home is much more than a shelter; it's a world in which a person can create a material environment that embodies what he or she considers significant. In this sense, the home becomes the most powerful sign of the self of the inhabitant that dwells within (123).¹



Figure 1. Gallery view of *House of Trade*

¹ Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly and Eugene Rochberg-Halton. *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge UP, 1981.

For some, the house becomes a place of refuge, a sanctuary or shelter, and a space for growth and security. The home maintains a memory of events and experiences, similar to the workings of the body within the skin. For others, the house is a place of confinement, a thick-skinned asylum pulsing with confusion, pain, mystery, and despair.

Within the home, the self cultivates an intense and diverse relationship with the body. The home is the initial arena where all physical interactions take place. The notion of “self” is largely shaped by the interaction between your skin and the surrounding environment.

3: THE BODY

Each person's life is a collection of experiences. These experiences are usually interpreted as they pertain or relate to one's physical body. The body is a meeting ground of sorts, people come and go. It is fragile, has been penetrated, beaten and bruised, reconstructed, violated and remodeled, yet remains familiar to each. It is the one thing that is truly our own. The body contains the self like the house contains the family.

From a social standpoint, much contradiction surrounds the body and its functions. Many physical components and activities are natural ways of exploring the environment through the use of all five senses. The mouth is a sucking, spitting, sensual hole, where taste becomes desire and a focal point of stimulus, feeding the need to understand that which is outside of ourselves. While sucking was once a necessity to sustain life, there is a point at which references to sucking maintain a vulgar, negative (while desirable) connotation to that which remains discussed only in private.



Figure 2. *Untitled* (detail)

The skin performs two major functions. One, it is a barrier, like a wall, between what is outside of ourselves and the mysterious, fragile inner-workings of flesh and blood. Two, the skin serves as the precise point through which tactile interaction takes place. In this sense, the skin proves to be as important as the eyes in understanding the world. Still, there are limits placed on how much skin can be revealed or exposed before crossing the boundary of taboo. The result is essentially depriving ourselves of fully knowing that which we encounter.

Through the skin and our sense of touch, we experience the world. In a sexual context, we are often taught to suppress or be shameful of the fantasy or desire to be intimate with another person's skin.



Figure 3. *House of Hair* (detail)

4: THE SHOW

“THE HOUSE OF HAIR”

From the skin hair grows naturally from every orifice. While hair serves as a natural protective device for the skin itself, it also serves to heighten sensual physical contact. With this in mind, it's odd that so much cultural contradiction surrounds the perception of the body, and specifically in relation to hair. In America, hair will be caressed and admired yet deemed unsightly and dirty when not properly placed or maintained. The media and magazines are filled with hairless bodies to reinforce the social standard that hair is, essentially, gross. We all send our food back if there is a hair in it. Painstaking efforts are taken, predominantly by women and athletes, to remove most of the hair on their bodies. When hair is not primped and orderly, it can be perceived as an indicator of social status, just as the exterior of a house can seem to represent the quality of life within the home.

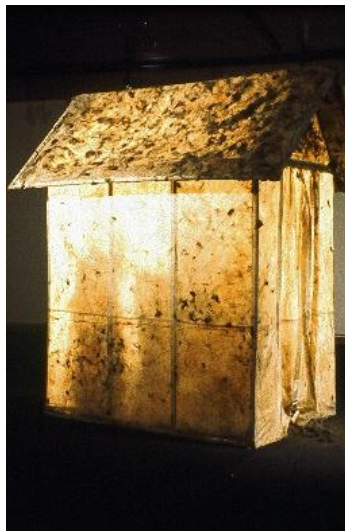


Figure 4. *House of Hair*

The piece *House of Hair* is my reaction to the contradiction I find in our culture surrounding hair. Hair is both beautiful and grotesque. The viewer is instructed to interact with the piece by receiving a free haircut, then leaving the hair behind. The hair is then pasted to the skin-like walls and ceiling, creating a more opaque texture, and shielding the participants from the outside viewers. The issues of public vs. private are addressed throughout the metaphorical act of thickening the skin-like barrier of the walls.

A performance element enhanced the interaction with this piece. During the reception of the show, I was dressed in protective clothing while cutting the audiences hair inside the house. This act illustrated the irony in that while I want the hair, I do not want to touch it. Yet, I am surrounded by a protective structure created by it.

By providing the audience with free haircuts, I have successfully enticed the viewer to help provide the building materials. Usually, once removed from the body, hair is cast out as undesirable refuse. In this case, the hair becomes a valuable material that provides a protective shelter, much as it does for the skin.

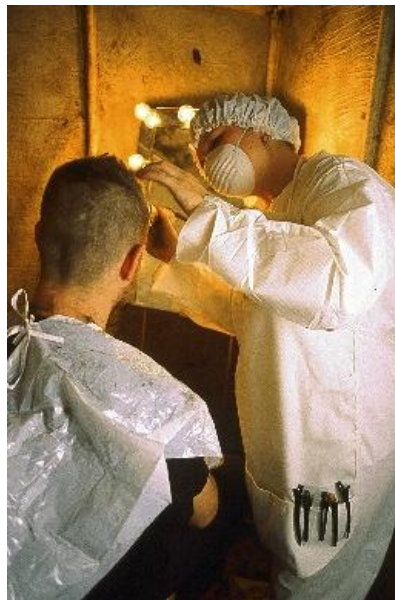


Figure 5. Detail of hair cutting performance

“THE HOUSE OF TRADE”

Inside the home is where most abuse takes place. For many who have survived sexual abuse, the body becomes a token of trade, bartered for temporary comfort and security, disguised behind a jaded veil called love. Victims are forced to create masks to display in the public arena. Similarly, most houses are well groomed on the outside and the inner-workings rarely discussed or put on display. By placing houses in the gallery, the private becomes public, yet remains private. The scale of each structure only allows for one or two people to enter at a time. The settings are intimate, where one is encouraged to engage in activities that reflect the ideas of barter and trade.



Figure 6. *House of Trade*

In the “House of Trade” the viewer is asked to take something directly from his or her own body and exchange it with something inside a vial or container. The shadow-box walls are black, devoid of memory, and are filled with many cavities containing items relating to my own body. Essentially, it is a give and take, a physical exchange of bodily fluids and excrement with no actual personal contact between me and the viewer. The exterior of the piece is encased in recycled wood collected from demolished houses, which maintains the appearance, and often smell, from which they came. The layers of chipping paint and charred ashes denote the passing of time and imply a visual history. The layering of the wood symbolizes the layering of experiences, which help create each person’s identity and inner sense of self.



Figure 7. Inside the *House of Trade* (detail)

“THE HOUSE OF SUCK”

Each person is born with the basic instinct to suck. While it remains a natural impulse, we are trained to suppress the urge through the use of synthetic nipples, pacifiers and negative reinforcement. Once weaned from the breast, we learn the many negative associations surrounding the act, desire, or idea of sucking.

Suckling or feeding from the breast is the infant’s first intimacy with another human. Food can become a fixation to fulfill the want/need of love and nurturing beginning in childhood. In the formative years, the transition between ‘to suck and not to suck’ can be traumatic and sometimes confusing, especially if not handled appropriately by the authority figures within the home.



Figure 8. *House of Suck*

To connect these ideas with the visual symbolism in the piece “House of Suck,” I have written the following:

Babies suck on Mommies.
Daughters suck on Daddies.
Boys suck on boobies.
Girls suck on boys.
Boys suck on boys.
FOOD
What can I put in my mouth?
First I sucked on you for life,
Thanks, Mom, for teaching me this valuable skill.
I’m sure it will come in handy,
SUCKING
It will be my career.
SUCKING UP
SUCKING ASS
SUCK MY TITS
I’LL SUCK YOUR DICK,
You know, a “job?”
A good job it will be-
SUCKING.
SUCKING ON THINGS
SUCKING AT THINGS
SUCK ON ME
SUCK ME UP
SUCK ME IN
YOU SUCK!
For once...
Some call it feeding, I call it fun.
What can I put in my mouth?



The “House of Suck” visually represents both the conflict and desire to suck. Certain activities, like sucking, are acceptable only in conditions in which mental and social barriers can be overcome. The interior of this structure is glossy and pink, organized like a candy store. The viewers are invited to enter the piece and lock themselves in a private space in which they are able to succumb to their personal fantasies. Nipples hang from the ceiling filled with chocolate, cheese, water, whiskey, and honey. The participants may choose to nurse the nipples and freely take pleasure in their oral fixations. Chocolate lollipops and pacifiers are also available. The exterior is plated with fiberglass breasts. Although they appear soft and supple, the actual texture is hard and sharp. The choice of materials exemplifies the common notion that our natural desires are dangerous and should be repressed.



Figure 9. Inside view of the *House of Suck*

5: FORM/MATERIALS

A sense of irony becomes evident in my choice of materials. Using construction materials to visually compose images of the body such as fiberglass, wood and latex, the relationship between human form and structure is reiterated. The mixed-media installation includes:

HAIR
LATEX
PVC
SPRAY PAINT
PRIMER
FABRIC
THREAD
METALLIC PIGMENT
MIRRORS
LIGHTS
STEEL
SCISSORS
WOOD
SCREWS
NAILS
EXTENSION CORDS
WIRE NUTS
BUTT CONNECTORS
TAR
FEATHERS
TIN
CHICKEN SKIN
CONDOMS
WAX
SHELLAC
PLASTIDIP
SINEW
CAST IRON
MILK POWDER
PAINT
GLUE
EPOXY
DEMOLISHED HOUSES
TIME
VIALS
MASON
JARS
URINE

BLOOD
FINGERNAILS
MAXI PADS
MAKEUP
PLASTIC BABIES
BULLETS
MATCHES
BRONZE
PLASTIC
PORN
SYRINGES
GLOVES
HAND-WIPES
ALCOHOL WIPES
BAND-AIDS
SALT
DIRT
SILVER
SPRINGS
HOT TAMALES
SPIT
HAIR
SPEED
BEER
WATER
CIGARETTE BUTTS
ASHES
MUD
BLOWERS
VENTS
CARPET
LEAD
POLYESTER RESIN
PLASTER
LATEX TUBING
PVC FITTINGS
CONDUIT FITTINGS
BUCKETS
SUPERGLUE
ROPE LIGHTS
CHOCOLATE
WHISKEY
CHEESE
HONEY
LOLLIPOPS
FIBERGLASS
SWEAT
TEARS
VELCRO

6: CONCLUSION

The idea of trade and interaction are the unifying themes of this exhibition. The presentation challenges social ideals of how to interact with artwork in a gallery or public setting. So often we are discouraged from experiencing our environment, yet it is through all of our senses that complete exploration of our environment can be achieved. This show created an atmosphere where people were asked to cross physical boundaries by engaging in an exchange with each piece. Through this interaction, two things occurred. One, the experience became a commodity without the need to barter based on a monetary system. Two, an arena existed in which people were encouraged to challenge their own notions regarding unsettling domestic issues in a playful manor.

Confinement created by socially predetermined definitions of female sexuality and domestic responsibility mirrors feelings of entrapment in violent situations. In reaction to this, the gallery becomes a setting for complex, emotional issues to be explored in a safe, somewhat humorous, context.

This current body of work deals with psychosexual associations, which pervade in form and materials. Through the use of bodily elements and construction materials, a visual lyricism is created. Conceptually, the marriage of figure and structure produces a relationship between the body and domestic roles as they pertain to a constant restructuring of an individual's identity.

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1. Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly and Eugene Rochberg-Halton. The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self. Cambridge UK: Cambridge UP, 1981.

VITA

Alair Wells was born in Dallas, Texas in 1975. She attended classes at the Glasell School of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago before graduating from high school at Alief Hastings in Houston, Texas, 1993. She began her secondary education at The Kansas City Art Institute in 1993, then continued on to receive her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in sculpture from The Atlanta College of Art in 1998. In 2001, Alair began her graduate studies in sculpture at Louisiana State University. She will receive her Master of Fine Arts degree in December of 2004.