

# SKIN DEEP

11 March - 5 April 2023

ESSAY BY KATRINA NZEGWU

“As a child, I did not understand spiritual, cathartic and aesthetic processes as discrete and I still don’t.” - Melissa Febos, *Body Work: The Radical Power of Personal Narrative*

An 1893 study published by Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer regarding cases of “hysteria,” identified the efficacy of naming one’s trauma in the subsequent healing of it. To this seminal text, we attribute the nascence of the “top-down” therapeutic method - the talking method.

However, Freud and Breuer’s exaltation of cognitive processes falls short in cases of the inarticulable. How can one heal, if one’s pain is too great to be voiced?

For Bessel van der Kolk, the body is the bridge to healing: it is inherently vehicular, bearing the traces and translations of the stories that comprise one’s history. The politics of memory is inscribed upon our flesh, laced with edicts of expectation and inheritance.

SKIN DEEP engages in this act of storytelling - the agglomeration of figurative paintings crafts a multilayered narrative informed by various experiences of physical and mental trauma.

In the thematic centering of the deeply personal, there is a level of comprehension from which the typical audience is automatically barred, yet it is precisely that lack which allows for the constitution of meaning. The exhibition queries the typical division between what is to be - or even can be - understood, meant, felt or embodied. The knowledge of the absent - a nod to the departed - is an invitation proffered by the artist to share in their trauma, their vulnerability, and their uncertainty. To translate one’s story into the visual is to reclaim self-authorship; through transmutation the artist engages in psychomotor therapy - the individual is recast in relation to their distress, insofar as it is externalised. This transposition of the self outside of the self, reveals the transformative capacity of art - to, literally, (re)frame perception.

In its essence, the exhibition constitutes an ode to coping. Hinging on what it means to change one’s, or embody another’s, point of view, SKIN DEEP evokes

Viktor Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarization. In C Lucy R Whitehead's large-scale renderings of suggestive textures, we are given such a close-up view of the body that the concrete becomes abstract. To this same end, Iga Bielawska's uncanny contortions of coupled subjects allow the viewer to draw individual conclusions about the degree of the figures' intimacy.

In the cropping of cohesive figures, the stories of Bielawska and Whitehead's subjects are juxtaposed against omission; our relationship to the work is established via what we project into the interstices. In the narrative gaps, we may find ourselves or someone we know - in the act of laying themselves bare, the artists are simultaneously protected. Meanwhile, Alice Miller's sensitive nightlife scenes alongside Serpil Mavi Üstün's disquieting depictions of mediated intimacy exemplify the different ways we find connection and reciprocity within our contemporary context.

Human meaning is produced in the overlapping of skins and shins; the investigation of corporeality reveals the inherent entanglement of self and other. In the works of Moussa David Saleh, Preslav Kostov and Naila Hazell, we witness the supremacy of touch in the formation of identity and significance across a spectrum of interpersonal relationships. While Saleh and Kostov's tensile depictions of enmeshed limbs leave room for ambiguity (passion is evident, but of what nature?), the dichotomy of the maternal is centred by Hazell - her renderings of entangled bodies typify the guilt endemic to one's love for their children, at once unconditional and at times ambivalent. Throughout the exhibition, we thus witness the deployment of recognisable features as semiotic objects, metonymic indicators of emotional collectivity. Meanwhile, in Sophie Milner's nomadic naiad, we are reminded of the passage of days and the trauma-associated platitude: time heals all wounds.

In the process of coming to mind-body synchrony, frustration is inevitable: this frisson is inherent to the works of Nina Baxter. Confrontational in their diaristic quality, they are a heartrending externalisation of the artist's state of mind, laced with the quinine taste of dissatisfaction. Ada Bond and Ki Yoong instead lean into pugnacity; their startling portraits of open-faced subjects are refreshingly singular within a contemporary digital climate plagued by toxic positivity. Each artist refuses stagnation and malaise, challenging the pressure to develop means of inoculation - mechanisms devised in a bid to, as van der Kolk describes, "protect the self from feeling the full terror of annihilation".

The immense sensitivity of the exhibition rests in its rejection of neoliberal individuality - the exaltation of flesh suggests that we may all heal, by coming together in the naive act of touch. In skirting around the boundaries of

photorealism, the collection of paintings radically disrupts the division between life and fiction; the potentially fictitious comes to hold precedence over the real. Within this world - where the subject is interchangeable and the version of the story told is arbitrary - a space is created for the healing work to begin. Retracing and reconstructing the events of their lives through the eyes of a stranger, the artists craft a sense of communal responsibility, within which one may be affectionately held. By giving one's trauma over to the viewer, they enter into a unique exchange - becoming at once perceiver and perceived, concealed and yet visible.

#### ABOUT KATRINA NZEGWU

Katrina Nzegwu is a London-based artist, writer and freelance curator. Currently studying MA Print at the Royal College of Art, Katrina is a regular workshop facilitator at Bermondsey Project Space and Community Manager for the project OneWork in collaboration with Lindon Gallery, Artists in Residence and the social commission. She hosts a monthly radio show on RTM, MP3 4 Bois, which engages artists, practitioners and activists in conversations regarding contemporary politics, feminism, philosophy and psychology. Katrina has worked for Bold Tendencies since 2019, first on the Education, Community and Play team, and in her current role as Artist Research since 2022. Katrina graduated from Goldsmiths College with a Bachelors in Fine Art and History of Art. @koenzegwu

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