

ETHERIDGE, ANDREW, M.F.A. An Awkward Specimen: Deconstructing The Body And The Mental Spaces It Inhabits. (2011)
Directed by. Nikki Blair. 11pp.

The written portion of the thesis is an analysis of the conceptual and aesthetic concerns of a series of artworks exploring the effects and relationships of medical and technological interventions on the body. My MFA thesis installation includes video, sound, interactive sculpture, and wearable performative prostheses. A repulsive playfulness is the underlying theme of the artwork. By creating these uncomfortable experiences, I hope to make the viewer more aware of his or her own body.

AN AWKWARD SPECIMEN: DECONSTRUCTING THE
BODY AND THE MENTAL SPACES

IT INHABITS

By

Andrew Etheridge

A Thesis Submitted
to the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2011

Approved by

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
AN AWKWARD SPECIMEN: DECONSTRUCTING THE BODY AND THE MENTAL SPACES IT INHABITS	1
CATALOGUE OF IMAGES.....	7

An Awkward Specimen:

Deconstructing The Body And the Mental Spaces It Inhabits

It is through the body that we base our knowledge of the world around us. Everything that the human does is in relationship to the body, from technological advancements and social interaction to personal decoration and pleasures such as fashion, music, and luxury items. The human has always tried to explore its skin in order to understand, cope, and advance its existence.

The focus in my most recent series of work is the examination of the body, especially my own body. The content of these pieces comes from a rigorous exploration of the mental and physical manipulations of my own body through past experiences. At the age of twelve years old, during a simple routine physical to play soccer, I was diagnosed with a rare blood disorder called Aplastic Anemia. Aplastic Anemia is a condition where white blood cells attack the bone marrow causing low replacement cell production. Unlike typical anemia, which only lowers red blood cell counts, Aplastic Anemia patients have a loss in red and white blood cells as well as platelets. Symptoms of this disorder include extreme fatigue, high risk of infection, uncontrolled bleeding, and possible death.

I spent the following six years of my life in and out of hospitals. I went through numerous tests and was under constant surveillance. This was such a traumatic period in my

life not only enduring the pains of puberty, but also learning to cope with this disease and all its complications and anxieties.

My connections to the bio-medical world aren't simply from my own health issues. My family plays a pivotal role as well: my grandmother was a nurse, my stepbrother is a bio-chemical engineer, and my mother is a nurse and now an infection control coordinator at Wilson Medical Center. As a young child I spent time in my mother's office often playing with the sterile medical equipment that collected in her cabinets. This has resurfaced in my recent work as I reflect on being a child simply interested in the medical devices, unaware of their role in my future.

A particularly influential memory as an eleven year old was when my mother brought home a strange briefcase containing a prosthetic breast used to educate trainees on how to check for cancer. My mother proceeded to inform me about this device and further demonstrate how to operate it. There is nothing quite as awkward as feeling your first breast, fake or not, while checking for lumps with your mother. As I laugh about this now I realize what an absurd and strange experience it was. It is this type of repulsive playfulness I often try to portray within my work. Through such odd personal occurrences I began to view the body in a new way while becoming more aware of my own. My research explores the mental and physical complications of the human experience through medical and technological interventions of my body.

I started my research by using myself in *The Awkward Machine* (Fig. 1). This piece was inspired by my anxiety when confronted by the common social introductions made

amongst people. I noticed that every time I would meet someone new, I would be highly concerned and aware of how my facial expressions shifted, where I looked, and how I spoke. With *The Awkward Machine* I relinquished control of my actions allowing a machine to manipulate my face and the sounds coming from my body. By projecting this awareness onto others, I want to bring the viewer into my psyche and make him or her feel as awkward as I often do in such situations. I hoped this would make a playground for interaction that was sympathetic or more hopefully empathetic, to such issues. The idea of physical restraint or manipulation is an important factor in this piece since for many years I did not have control over my body. *The Awkward Machine* manipulates the face in ways similar to artist Tim Hawkinson's *Emoter* (2002) but focuses on my personal relationship to my own body. By setting up a scenario in which my control is willingly surrendered, I made space to re-acquire that control that I felt was lost when hospitalized as a child.

Continuing in this same vein the *Dermis Suit* (Fig.2) brings up the physical and psychological act of control and power through voyeurism. *Dermis Suit* is an audio and visual piece in which I have placed myself in a nylon suit that is tethered to the wall thus creating a fixed position that alludes to the "other" that intervenes or controls. The physical cocooning of self symbolizes the mental construction of inadequacies and limitations, which are themes, related to video artist Bruce Nauman's work. In the video, I can never quite find a way out. The audio portion of the installation examines the fight that is occurring inside the suit as I struggle to break free from my own skin. The listening device for the piece is a

stethoscope that creates an intimate listening experience and allows the viewer to penetrate my skin.

The skin, as an idea, has also guided the work in new ways. Skin and our senses are the first things we use to engage our environment and ourselves. Our skin is a complex membrane that holds our body together, acting as this thin protective shield between the inside and outside worlds. The skin is also malleable, regenerative, and an interface for extensions i.e. prosthetics. In *My New Skin, Glove* (Fig. 3) I use the ideas of skin, prosthetics, and control as a way to create an awareness of self. This new skin acts as an extension of my body. Artist Rebecca Horn, in her piece *Finger Glove* (1973), attached appendages to her hand in order to extend her body into space. In a similar vein, I am expanding the idea of expanding the realm of touch but transforming it into sound.

Everything I physically touch is turned into an unpleasant sound emitted from an amplifier in the glove. How often do we notice that which we touch? Do we notice when we touch our pants or scratch our nose? This amplification causes me to become hyper-aware of my body and my behavior. Meanwhile, the video from a wireless camera built into the glove is transmitted to a security monitor for the viewer to watch. By wearing this prosthetic, I gain the power of invading others with my body through sound while simultaneously the viewer investigates me through video transmission.

For the piece, *Specimen 2190* (Fig. 4), I wanted to push the feeling of discomfort that is sometimes shared between observer and the observed. This piece is a direct reflection of the feelings that came from six years of hospitalization as a child. I collected two thousand

one hundred and ninety slides of my own blood, each representing a day spent in the hospital. The slides were used for the glass panels of a sterile cramped booth. Inside the booth, viewers are confronted with two videos of my eyes looking at them through magnifying lenses. As the eyes blink the word specimen is murmured forward and in reverse. The reversal of the word specimen throughout the piece implies the role reversal of the viewer from one who is observing to one who is observed.

In the series *Body Study* the viewer is the sole operator of the artwork. The viewer's participation is vital to the piece. These works all approach the body as a transformative, synthetic object to be manipulated or played with. The macabre is combined with humor that makes interacting with these pieces perverse yet fun and relate to sculptural objects created by such artists as Matthew Barney and Robert Gober. I use silicone rubber combined with a pink pigment to create a fleshy skin for each object. The scale and texture resembles children's toys or even erotic sexual devices. Having scaled the objects to fit within the hand evokes a primal urge to touch. The skin is where our sensory experiences reside. Touching an area of exposed simulated skin brings to mind a feeling of delivering pleasure or pain. The idea of handling or manipulating these forms is encouraged but the visceral quality of the work leaves the viewer reluctant to engage.

As an artist using the body for a source of investigation, I have looked to the surgical performances of Orlan as well as the human-machine interfaces, created by artist Stelarc, that push the body's limitations. These influences, as well as the sculptures of Jason Briggs and Belinda De Bruyckere, have pushed the sensual and visceral qualities of the fragmented

human form that appear in my objects. Whether based in sculpture, video, performance, or technology, the purpose of my work is to create an experience whereby the viewer becomes more aware of his or her own body.

CATALOGUE OF IMAGES

The Awkward Machine, 2010, steel, cam system, steel leader cables, DC motors, battery,
speaker amp

Dermis Suit, 2011, nylon suit, video, stethoscope, tubing, earphones, wood, steel

My New Skin Glove, 2011, piezo contact microphones, speaker amp, silicone rubber,
wireless camera, monitor, artist performance

Specimen 2190, 2011, silicone rubber, two video monitors, speakers, blood slides, artist
blood, plexiglass, aluminum, wood, tile, magnifying lenses;

Body Study Series, Pluck, 2011, silicone rubber, thread, medical sutures, artist hair, steel,
plastic containers;

Body Study Series, Suck, 2011, silicone rubber, medical sutures, glass, catheter tubing,
thread, vinyl tubing, siphon pump, steel

Body Study Series, Abject Emissions, 2011, silicone rubber, monitor, glass, IV tubing,
video, artist saliva, wood, steel, pillow, plaster