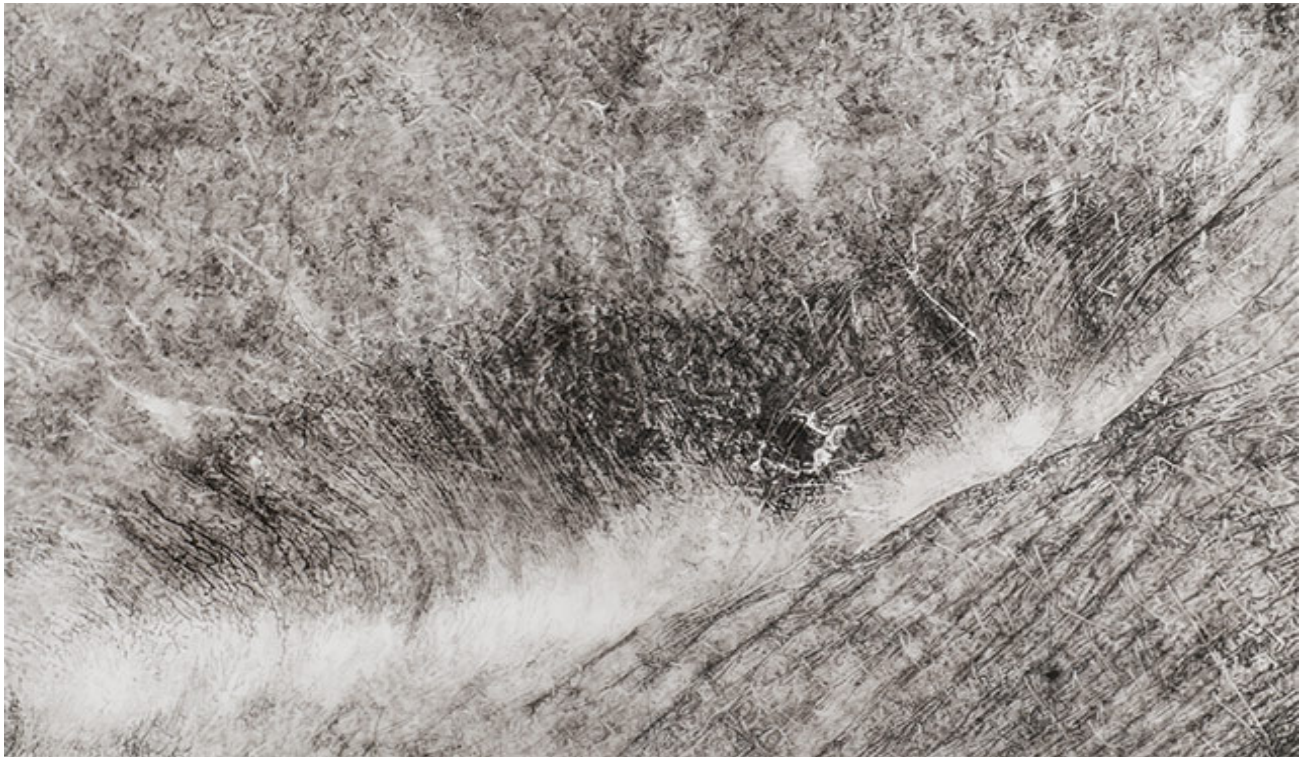


# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## Finding Empathy in the Confines of Our Skin

by Susan Silas on April 8, 2013



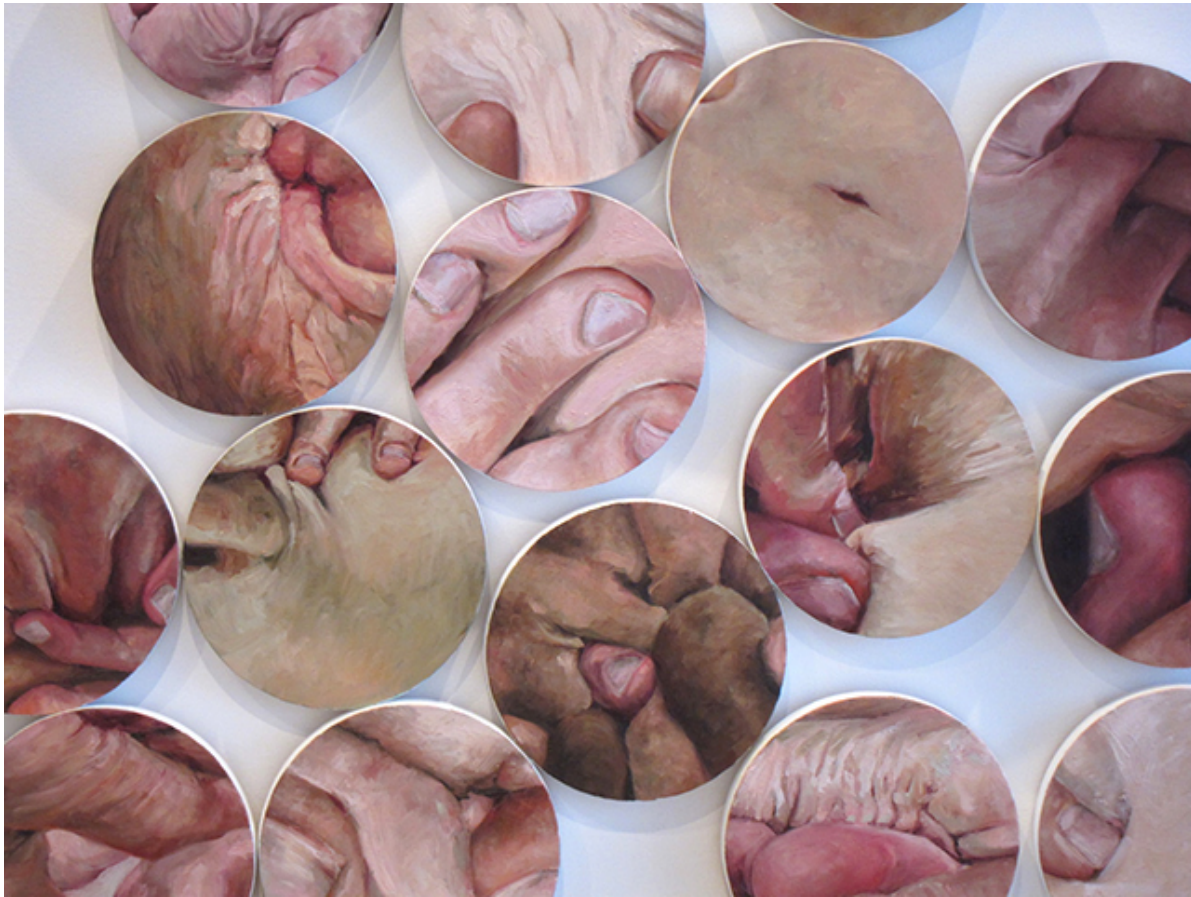
*Cynthia Lin, "CropB32910W firescar" (2010), ink on mylar, 50 x 34 in (all images courtesy Garis & Hahn unless otherwise noted)*

Two billion cells make up the skin encasing our bodies, and 300 million of them are replaced every day. We need a sense of bodily integrity so much that if we lose a limb, we imagine it's still there, itching and aching, and yet our skin, that exterior layer actually holding us together, is constantly dying off and renewing itself, sloughing off and repairing.

Cynthia Lin has made skin her subject matter for some time. She has taken parts of that body casing, often the face, and calibrated them on a large scale in two-dimensional space. She has focused on scarring, on imperfect repairs. There are many means to invoke the fragility of sentience. The uncanny nature of a compound fracture and the nausea accompanying the abrupt appearance on the outside of what is meant to be on the inside say much about our association of bodily integrity with unbroken skin. We acknowledge the importance of the breaches that exist — the orifices that create a path through the invisible inside, from top to bottom. Any other break carries with it pain and horror, although the depiction of a wound is at the heart of the Christian mythology that permeates our culture.

In her book [\*The Summer of Her Baldness\*](#), the artist Catherine Lord remarks: “I cannot imagine anything more terrifying than looking through a hole directly into the interior of my body, but the thing which actually haunts me more than the image of the interior of my body is the idea that the body can repair such a wound.” In Lin’s drawings, the repaired wound and the orifice are rendered in graphite on so monumental a scale as to become a lunar landscape. In art, scale represents ambition, but in the work of Cynthia Lin it feels like both ambition and self-flagellation at the same time.

Imagine the enormous labor and commitment required to render a detailed drawing at this size. And the scale of this representation of skin invokes the entire body, both because we imagine the making of the work, the artist scaling a ladder to render an eyelash, and because we are forced to dance back and forth in front of it, moving in and observing the details dissolve into abstraction (sometimes even into drawn pixels) and then moving out in order to have the work cohere into a recognizable image, at once beautiful and grotesque. Perhaps the flesh is always tortured flesh. Francis Bacon seemed to think so. In Lin’s works, it is also a giant map of our finitude.



*Diana Schmertz, "Container of Time and Space (II)" (detail, 2012), oil on wood, 6 in each (photo by Susan Silas)*

At first glance, Diana Schmertz's treatment of the skin brings to mind the surrealism of Rona Pondick's masses of [little pink heads with teeth](#), which in turn bring to mind late Philip Guston. Maybe it's all that pink.

An old cliché has it that rendering hands is one of the most difficult feats of representation. Brave of Schmertz to render so many. Her painting gives us a seemingly endless column of dismembered hands, each one clutching the next; it is aptly named "The Cause of Itself." Here the body is invoked by its absence, a self-reflexive awareness, not through scale in the manner of Lin, but by suggesting the artist's hand, rendering hand after hand after hand, so tied to the canvas in a reciprocal relationship.

"The Uncertainty Principle," a work that calls to mind the organization of a Damien Hirst dot painting from afar, reveals at closer range that each dot is a small tondo with a closely cropped image of clutching hands trapped within. We often think of wounds as circular — Christ's stigmata, created by nail holes or spikes, not to mention the endless images in popular culture of bullet-pierced skin. If this is a wounded canvas, it is an

orderly one. Installed on the lower floor of Garis & Hahn, an extension of this concept gives us an entire room full of dots, this time tiny photographs of paintings mapped onto the wall from floor to ceiling. At first, I mistook this for wallpaper, but it is, in fact, many individual photographs. To what end, I wasn't exactly sure. Perhaps it is to Schmertz's credit that the piece brings to mind the work of other artists. We now know from recent scientific studies that the brain really is partial to the familiar; hence the greater reception of artworks that embrace the new without being too new, often recycling the familiar with just the right balance of new elements, thus enabling a claim of originality while also remaining on already trampled turf. The pitfall here is that I feel as if I have seen these paintings before, either by her or by someone else.

Curious that the tondo is so appealing to artists examining the flesh. Gwen Hardie, too, is attracted to the circular canvas, as well as the oval. She paints small patches of skin on a larger scale, concerned with the translucence that suggests what's pulsing below the surface.



*Gwen Hardie, "Body 04.29.09" (2009), oil on oval canvas, 36 x 30 in*

Hardie is able to evoke that surface with enough skill to suggest touch. Painting seems especially well suited to the representation of skin: a taut canvas stretched over a skeletal structure. A canvas can refer to itself and its own making or it can infer dimensional space, representing something. Before modernism truly announced itself, there were patches within representational paintings that foresaw the future, only recognizable in hindsight. One can look at a small corner of a representational image now and see an area that would blossom someday into a full-blown painting of its own. Hardie's work brings those worlds together on a single canvas.

A friend once referred to the desire to be touched, once it reaches the level of urgent need, as "skin hunger." We have only to take a quick look at the Bible to see where that leads or what it leads away from.

For all that is in the world — the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions — is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality ... [etc.]

All of that moralizing seems always to miss or elide the point of presence. Christ suffered in a coat of human skin. Being present in our own skins is both the key to empathy and the finite obstacle to merging with the other.

[Borderline: Depictions of Skin](#) continues at *Garis & Hahn* (263 Bowery, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through April 27.