

*The body only reveals itself when it ceases to be supported by the bones, when the flesh ceases to cover the bones, when they exist in a mutual relation, but each independently, the bones as the material structure of the body, the flesh as the corporeal material of the Figure.*

*– Gilles Deleuze, The Body, the Meat and the Spirit: Becoming Animal*



## ***Becoming Object***

If, according to Gilles Deleuze, Francis Bacon was "unmaking the face, rediscovering or pulling up the head beneath the face" and with it, the spirit that is the body, and the animal spirit that is within the body; Erica Mahinay has pushed her bodies elsewhere – unmade them, and pulled out the bones. In Mahinay's unmaking, the body reveals itself to be the object – a disquieting hybrid of goddesses that have folded in on themselves in *Threshold #1* and *Portable Peerings*, with echoes of Kubrick's Korova Milk Bar table, Alan Jones' mannequin furniture and the leg-lamp from *A Christmas Story*. These seem somewhat sadistic reference points.

But Mahinay's bodies are missing their heads, cut from their spirit, or their character it seems, reduced to the sum of its parts: hair, skin, fat. And while that sounds sadistic, it manages to pass as less callous, less brutal than the table that the Droogs rest their feet on while sipping drug-laced milk. Perhaps they are closer to the taxidermy deer legs as shelf bracket or gun rack? But still they are less brutal: these skins seem less like trophies repurposed than something shed, dropped to the floor like a bathrobe in the body's transition into cyborg. Whether the creature who has shed its skin here has acquired the machine's complexion, encasing its animal spirit inside of it, is unknown. Only the parts are left, a memento mori that fails to remind me that I will die, rather it prompts me to recall all of the ways death is forever forestalled through a myriad of preservations.

*Threshold #1* rolls around on its own set of wheels, fat (or milk) running down its legs, its mirrored table top holding an assortment of lemons where a head might have been: lemons for cleanliness, for freshness, for preservation. Cast in resin and silicon, I touch my breast and imagine lemons in place of the tissue inside. From the ass of the table emerges the long blonde, braided hair, falling to the floor and pooling at and becoming the feet. The whole contraption mounted on dry, matte ceramic tile. The body has melded with the hairdresser's cart, but the floor has melded with it. In *Relics from a Future Spa: Heat Soak*, some other detritus lingers. Bags of plaster? A goldfish. A shattered slab. What ritual was performed with these tools? In what dusty, sun-faded spa were treatments performed? These are vignettes of a future ruin: a science-fiction fantasy where the body finally escapes the demands of its own anxiety about death.

For the 21<sup>st</sup> century body, death is no longer apprehended through the rearrangement of classic signifiers (flowers, fruit, skull) since the body can always be refilled, painted and sanded back down to its youthful veneer, and in time even

married to a technology that will repair and improve the body indefinitely. How can the rotting and festering flesh of the fruit ever provide me a context for my demise when I've replaced my own flesh with the forever-taut silicon blubber? No, I replace my meditation on decay with a meditation on renovation – project my desire on the second skin that surrounds my body – the house that has absorbed all of my wealth. I quiet my unease through an externalized angst, pulling up the tiles of the bathroom, replacing the counter tops, faux-finishing the walls. And when none of this is in my grasp, I satiate myself with the imaginary: an endless loop of how-to texts and youtube videos of hands re-painting, re-building, re-storing the externalized body again and again and again.

This constant doing, or prosthetic doing, feels productive, even healthy. It suspends the body in a liminal space where it needn't progress, like Penelope weaving her shroud by day and unweaving it at night to keep her relentless suitors at bay and the return of Odysseus imminent. Progression – rot – is locked out, unable to creep in and infect the body through a smoke and mirrors trick that appears to freeze time through a relentless, ritualistic, refinishing of surface. This is what remains in *Relics from a Future Spa*, the collapse of these two projects spaces: Home Depot's plaster and the plastic surgeon's silicon.

Dusted with glitter, Mahinay's paintings are of the shimmer of becoming – the boundary moment when the figure appears or disappears and ontological status is unclear. In conjunction with the ruins of the spa, contemporary being is situated as a state of constant suspension: a specter, a glimmer, a quiver, never complete abstraction nor total reification. As shroud, the skin of *Thin Skin(s)* is re-purposed and re-stretched across the bones, the frame of the painting the new material structure of the body, their visible skeletons another articulation of the in-between. In *Thin Skin #7: Glitter Portal*, a gateway is cut in the skin that leads nowhere. A transparency trapped in a transparency, a liminality within a liminality.

Donna Haraway spoke of the cyborg as a creature of the post-gender world, and as I wander Mahinay's ruins I can't find the biological woman's body per se. The relics speak to feminine ritual, but explicit markers of gender are absent. Stepping gingerly through the shards of a lost and last ceremony for the body, I wonder if in the body's transition into objecthood, the spirit has transcended, released at last into the cyborg utopia Haraway imagined, free from the oppression of feminine and feminist taxonomies.

*Thin Skin(s)* might picture as best they can, that transcendence, articulating the shimmer between being and not being that is the uncertainty of contemporaneity.

And the condition of the now, fraught with anxiety about not living forever, not achieving the same immortality of the object which vies for and achieves value beyond us, beyond our time or our labor, requires a new mode of reflection. But it is not as simple as memento vita, which is what is hoped for when all of our energies are channeled tenaciously into making making making things. Mahinay's paintings are almost made, the images almost there, but they decline total realization. These *Thin Skin(s)* grapple with the hubris (and the alienation) of truly becoming object versus maintaining a modesty and eye for death. These Thin Skin(s) are a different kind of memento, perhaps a memento capto, a reminder of the delicacy of desire and the impossibility of apprehending uncertainty.

- Shannon Stratton, Chicago, April 2013



*Thin Skin #7: Glitter Portal, Acrylic and glitter on fabric, 2013*