



**Rebekah
Miller**
SKINS

JANUARY 23 - FEBRUARY 21, 2014

Clothing and Enclosure

Inhabiting the Space of Rebekah Miller's Skins

Near as my own skin, a layer of weather dresses me. A prickling attention turned outward. Cold and heat come similarly as fingertips graze the variable surfaces of the forest, receptors of touch and pain.

Rebekah Miller is an artist of exceptional acuity. In *Skins*, a body of work bringing together drawings, print work and sculptural interventions, Miller handles her subjects with poignant sensitivity and occasional violence. The sheen of feathers, deep furrows through fur – the eye traces what the hand might feel. From the optical to the physical, a transference occurs. The visual tactility perceived in the reflection of graphite, smudging like powder from a butterfly's wing. The thinness of the skin, the pulse palpable through a sheet of paper, yearning toward externality... Skin defines the border between the territory of self and the outside world. Miller traverses these intimate borders, seeing her subjects through various stages of being and becoming.

Nature models these transformations before our eyes, legible through the cycling seasons; the maturation and death of every living thing, on its way to somewhere... In her depiction of *Raven*, *Fox* and *Buffalo*, the artist confronts us with what she terms a “primary encounter” – a frontal study of each species emphasizing its initial intactness and the animating force which impels it. Each hyper-articulated image hums with a kind of self-contained energy. Miller demonstrates a quality of attention bordering on mesmerism, hand-rendering the labyrinthine filaments of fur and feathers which play across the surface of these rich drawings. The skin these animals inhabit is strange to us, speaking of what seems an impenetrable wildness. A video work titled *Uncovering* documents the artist as she engages in a ritualistic process, transmuting the skeleton of a bison from three dimensions to two. Bleach white bones change to black as they receive a coat of ink followed by a skin of gauze. An imprinted shroud is peeled back to reveal the stark remains once more.

Clothed in their seeming strangeness lies a parallel experience, twinning that of human pursuits in the perpetual endeavour to adapt and survive. Miller

looks to the natural world as the source for her material investigations, working toward a mode of integration that allows her to “mediate between the human and natural realms.” In her untitled works utilizing butterfly wings and wasp nests the artist introduces the use of sewing notions to bring together that which has been torn. In doing so, Miller performs an act of regeneration – the transformation of which can be observed forwards and backwards, as a zipper heals itself closed. Communicated within this gesture is the suggestion of craft's restorative power, an abiding faith in the work of hands. Butterfly wings are bifurcated and rejoined. The chambers of a wasp nest are sealed shut, the closure of which spirals open to reveal an interior of compounding complexity. It is here that we begin to truly comprehend the metaphor of skin as an envelope (and the meaning enfolded there.)

The pouch of a wasp nest, the sleeve of bark encircling a tree trunk – Miller's work incites us to wondering what messages shuttle within these organic forms. Needle and thread pierce the surface, passing through the other side before reappearing. The skipping traces of a stitch... Switching from micro to macro scale, a large sculptural installation simply called *Skinned* asserts its swaying presence prominently in the gallery. Through a gradual process of accretion, the artist builds up a store of peeled birch bits from which these hollow structures are assembled. An emphasis is placed on process, as we picture the artist inserting herself among the trees, fitting through gaps in the permeable screen of forest. Bark is stripped from the circumference of tree trunks, careful to retain the integrity of the curves. Understanding the delicate touch through which this is accomplished, the violent connotation of skinning is felt to be less aggressive than might initially have been thought. The matte paper wrapping is shed, only to be reconstituted into a new wholeness. Each resurrected husk reads as an extension of the body, the verticality of which is towering but tenuous – a patchwork, grafted together. These forms feel familiar, approximating a stand of trees. But they are only surrogates. Denied the armature of a solid trunk which might stabilize them, these shapes are instead suspended from the ceiling. A network of ropes connect the structures, holding them in tension. A pile of rocks anchors the arrangement – this too levitates just above the floor. The apparition of this grouping hangs together in a kind of interdependence. Shadows double the image... an illusory root system of intersecting lines.

The hook and the eye – a clasp to bind them. With this body of work, Miller conjures a worldview which allows for multiple vantage points. The natural and the manmade exist side by side, sutured together. Skin is the barrier but also the point of entry.

ARTIST STATEMENT

When a natural object is initiated into human culture, it moves from a highly functional state in nature to one of autonomous non-function in the human realm. But the object transformed, though losing its original purpose, gains a value in human culture. Through human adaptation, many natural objects also become subjects of ornamentation and even reverence. When the source of the adapted object is visible, there is a sense of the inherent absence of its former life within its newly bestowed presence in the human world. In the transformations that I mean to display, I hope to evoke a recognition of the simultaneous celebration and subjugation of nature which lies at the heart of our culture, derived, as it is, materially from nature.

One highly developed form of artistic expression in human culture is that of clothing design. Clothing is not merely functional. Within our clothing, we find our identities, ourselves, and, to some extent, our homes. We inhabit our clothing as we do our skins. The notion of the skin as a form of clothing, a covering as well as primary indicator to the form in question, is a central concept within my practice. In this exhibition, I represent objects adapted from various ideas of skins, coverings, or clothes present in nature to those present within humanity. I hope to pose the question of skin, the body, and clothing and how these mediate between human and natural realms.

Rebekah Miller, 2013

BIOGRAPHIES

REBEKAH MILLER is an emerging artist originating out of Buck Lake, Alberta. She attended the Alberta College of Art and Design in Calgary, graduating with a BFA in Print Media. Recently she completed her MFA at the San Francisco Art Institute in California, USA. She currently lives and works in Dawson City, YT.

JENNA SWIFT is an independent writer and artist currently residing in Calgary, Ab. Language holds a sustaining fascination for her as she seeks to translate between the visual and the tangible. Past honours include a curatorial research internship at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage and, more recently, the Canadian Art Foundation's Writing Prize for 2014.

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