Jennifer McRorie: Philosophy of the Flesh

The gallery is lined with skin, twelve large paintings of naked, glowing flesh. Each magnifies a parcel of human veneer against a sliver of cool background. Warm figures swell beyond the picture-plane and threatening to press their raw, ambiguous bodies against the viewer. From a distance, the images appear photorealistic; up-close, they are abstract topographies. Though expertly rendered in sensuous oil paint, visual pleasure is arrested by a visceral disturbance; scars tear against the grain of each lovely surface.

A beautiful representation of an ugly thing is one of Art's paradoxes. Through their seductive craft, artists coax us into considering subject matter and content we might otherwise avoid and have us see deeper meanings in the prosaic. Jennifer McRorie is not out to disgust. She displays healed injury, not open wounds. Her works impart a philosophy of the flesh; they suggest that though trauma writes on our bodies, on-going contemplation of those marks can transcend their initial, terrible inscription.

Transfigured marks a subtle shift in McRorie's expressive strategy. Her earlier encaustic paintings are more abstract, fleshy and tactile: fair, formless skin stretched across panels conflating figure and ground, surface and picture plane. Attracting fingertips as deftly as eyes, these waxy epidermal layers imitate rather than picture skin. For the present work, she pulls back a little for more perspective. Slender strips of background establish shape. Blurred edges and chiaroscuro produce volume. Figures emerge. These paintings are more image than object, more optical and conceptually oriented than the previous series. This slight distancing and appeal to the mind as well as the senses stimulates narrative as well as affect.

My first reaction to these works is physical—twinges and winces, a desire to retreat from these intrusive disfigured bodies. I respond to the pictures before the paintings, the representations before the coloured paste and skill that generates them. Affect unfolds rapidly, involuntarily and without analysis. Empathy is a sensation, not an argument. Looking at "Cate," I feel a warm pinch on my left knee, matched by a memory flash—laceration, blood—I cringe. This is followed by a smile as I recognize how my body and mind are being played by the artist's legerdemain. Representational art is a condensed, composed and arrested sight that moves us as deeply as a memory because our brain does not always distinguish between real and fictional events.

Freud coined the term scopophilia to describe compulsive looking. Such visual pleasure comes not from aimless gazing, or even finding, but from looking-for. There is always an imagined subject of the scopophilic gaze. We are always looking-for some thing. At the most fundamental level, as James Elkins explains, "our eyes are built to seek out complete figures."[1] Survival depends on being able to distinguish figures from grounds. We project our mental constructs, schemas and desires onto the world. Having them

[1] Elkins, James. *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co. 1996. 125.

matched provides one type of satisfaction, but having them teased, in suspense and incomplete is a richer, often aesthetic experience.

By pulling back to an intimate distance and allowing figures greater autonomy—but not retreating so far that we can always confidently identify the body part—McRorie makes us aware of our mental operations. In “Marie ll”, is that a hand grasping a wrist, an ankle, or some other part? If you are looking-for erotic images, you may find something suggestive but are more likely to see the magnification of a horrific possibility that will douse the other type of arousal. Self-preservation trumps sex drive. Is that a small cut on a finger or a huge gash across a flayed torso? Just as a toothache draws exaggerated attention to the throbbing site, so the hyperbolic representation of an old cut causes me to wince in swollen proportion.

The injuries vary. Some seem due to accident, others are self-inflicted; a few may be surgical. I feel the self-cuttings most sharply. They are poignant lines inscribed on the skin by a distressed mind—or is it the body writing to the brain? Perhaps each line is a cry for help addressed to imagined sympathetic viewers. Receiving the information third hand, and being helpless to do anything, the scene may make some uncomfortable with passive viewing.

Just as we are hard-wired to look-for figures, we are also instinctive story-makers. While narration is an artificial order we impose on experience, it is very useful. However, before it has utilitarian value, it is a compulsion. The sympathetic physical responses aroused by seeing distressed skin may reanimate our similar, forgotten pains; but more often, an *as if* response is triggered. The mind produces a spontaneous stream of pictures and sensations, fictions not memories. When looking at “Fran,” I am not remembering—nothing like this happened to me; instead, I see-feel a razor slicing through the tender skin of my calf *as if* it were really happening, but not quite.

Empathetic responses begin with a sensation, which, if we do not take flight, are followed by a cascade of more complex and repetitive mental scenarios. Our brain automatically produces short, rapid visual narratives. The images play out possibilities; they try to puzzle out the many ways the pictured event might have happened, why it occurred, what it felt like, how it might be avoided, what it might mean. Art works similarly. However, the narratives or pictures are provided by another mind in conjunction with our own in the safe space of reading. Both operations are geared to increase our sophistication at dealing with future experiences through mental rehearsal.

Enduring the stress of looking at gorgeously unpleasant things is beneficial if the parade of sensations, feelings and thoughts that follow do not resurrect unresolved personal trauma and lead us into shock but send us into the *as if* narrative state. McRorie plays on our drive to story by presenting images that seem loaded with narrative possibility. But by denying resolution, she keeps the viewer in the *as if* stream until they choose to disengage. The real story behind each wound and healing is denied us. While the images represent facts, our attempts to story them can only result in fictions. This knowledge

may have viewers reconsider their own self-narrations: ‘When I think of my wounds, am I remembering or constructing? Am I even the same person?’

In Western cultures, the skin of our face and hands is public; the rest, to varying degrees and contexts, is private. This convention is routinely violated in visual art’s acres of flesh. Art history is replete with exposed private skin. Artists often reveal our concealed parts to evoke a common human condition—we all have bodies and fear of destruction. Artists make a spectacle of skin to excite our empathy, to draw us into the picture. Providing a convincing sense of the feel as well of the look of skin is one of the representational artist’s highest crafts. It is a formal process of strong drawing, clever under-painting, soft brushes and inventive glazing. But to show how the flesh feels to its bearer, the artist usually includes and animates the rest of the body, especially the face. Bare skin is inarticulate, requiring context to engage the viewer’s affect and meaning-making engine. By breaking this convention, McRorie pushes us into an uneasy tension.

While her magnified patches of skin break with art tradition, her strategy does resemble conventions of another visual craft. Clinical photography isolates parts from wholes, separates bodies from personalities. Medical illustrations are impersonal. They record typical aberrations so doctors can recognize like occurrences in other bodies. The identity of the afflicted is superfluous to this end. If you were only to ‘read’ McRorie’s pictures, you might consider her gaze clinical. But art works include their titles, and these change everything. McRorie invests each work with the name of the person who bares/bears the painted scar. The effect of this gesture is to give the medicalized body back its larger identity.

This is not a documentary project. If it were, McRorie might have simply shown the photographs accompanied by accounts of the scars from those pictured. She chose instead to present not scars themselves, nor photographs of scars, but paintings of photographs of scars. Through this layered process she moves ever farther from the sources and into our imaginative space. She abstracts the wounds and removes them from their contexts for our contemplation. If they were too specific, we would likely appreciate them, understand them, but not let them get under our skin. Unmoored from particular stories, viewers are more likely to become empathetically engaged in an inter-subjective experience. If we can find our way into meaning with these works, we know that our efforts and results will have more to do with ourselves than the pictured subjects.

If you tried to make sense of these pictures apart from their titles, you are likely to engage an existential reading. The scientific gaze is concerned with facts, measurement and comparison, with ‘what’ and ‘how’ rather than ‘why’. The accidental wound, the scar due to chance may be the most traumatic. Such injuries are disturbing because they are ultimately unexplainable. Some thing happened, a puncture without intent. These marks may belong to a class of unreadable signs, testaments to the randomness, even meaninglessness of life. Such scars may come as an existential shock, a sign that we are not only mortal, permeable, perishable, but that there is no author of our destruction.

McRorie's titles discourage such bleak readings. They are metaphors binding a person, wound and representation into one being. "Zhong," for example, claims that the mark is not only on Zhong's body, the scar *is* Zhong, Zhong the scar. Pairing the name and intimate mark suggests that Zhong has ownership of the wound and its meanings—they co-exist—and that the scar has changed the previously unmarked man. The painting, too, is 'Zhong'. This gesture desires a raised ontological status for the picture. The title can be read as a claim that the image has some status of being above mere real things; it has a presence that approaches human beingness.

Naming is one of the most profound thing people do. We confer names to distinguish things of importance, beings, from mere real things. People get names, so do pets and works of art. Naming is a form of transfiguration.[2] 'Transfiguration' is "a change in outward appearance," but it also has a metaphysical meaning, an evolution from a material or secular state into a spiritual one. As a verb, it describes special actions: "to elevate, glorify, idealize, spiritualize."[3] In the exhibition named *Transfigured*, Jennifer McRorie encourages us to read her paintings and our own scars as signs of transfiguration, a metamorphosis of the flesh from meaningless incident to transformative possibility.

[2] Danto, Arthur. The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
[3] "Transfigure" and "transfiguring." Oxford English Dictionary. New York: Oxford University Press. 1981.