

Under My Skin

A sensory reflection on the exhibition

Sonia Boyce, In the Castle of My Skin

Under My Skin A sensory reflection on the exhibition *Sonia Boyce, In the Castle of My Skin* by Sonia Boué



shifted during lockdown: uncertainty and possibility hold hands in this brave new world of our emergence from Covid-19 restrictions.

As our bodies move through the galleries at MIMA, we will each experience something different. This truth feels encoded in Sonia Boyce's magnificent extended sculpture *'In the Castle of My Skin'* which winds through the exhibition, encrusted with jewel-like works from the Middlesbrough Collection and in the works by the 10 contributing artists. Multiple sensory worlds are reflected and refracted from both flat and angled surfaces. We are treated to a gamut of media and scale.



after autopsy. At first glance this is one of the quieter pieces in the show belying its punch, as Margolles conjures the spectre of enforceably disappeared and murdered people of the Mexican border town Ciudad Juarez. Ghostly, stained with blood, body fat and hair, this work cuts through all news fatigue and upends the gentle art of watercolour. Skin as paper bearing traces of human skin offers the most intimate and chilling witness. Margolles has allowed a violent truth to surface while documenting the human caresses involved in the ultimate ritual of care.



This exhibition gives us so many ways to think about skin. In the long months of social distancing we've all been learning to live inside our skins a little more. The Black Lives Matter Movement, emergent during the pandemic, has made skin our foremost social justice concern, rightly waking us from collective cultural amnesia to face what has been a very long-standing and pervasive oppression. What lies beyond our skin has also

The exhibition contains many layers of allusion and forms a dazzlingly complex whole. I've chosen to reflect on a selection of works and the subject of skin. These are the artists and works which have spoken to me most from a sensory perspective.

Teresa Margolles' *Papeles de la morgue (#9)* was made by pulling watercolour paper through the water used to wash corpses



Anna Barham’s utterly hypnotic found video titled *52nthjt3k8* features a very different form of caress. It shows a dead squid whose skin becomes a kaleidoscope of dots at the touch of a finger. Mesmerised, I found it hard to pull myself away!

Barham’s *Liquid Consonant* video animation deconstructs the mechanics of human sound production to the point of abstraction. I often experience and enjoy language as pure sound (detached from meaning), yet I find some sounds like chewing extremely challenging. As the bisected head rotates we view it from the outside and inside at turns, the animated skin pleasingly elastic to my eye. The mouth cavity is architectural, a sound palace housing a flicking reptilian tongue. I’ve watched this video over and over and listened to it with my eyes closed. The work feels human but not human and it gets right under my skin.



Flora Parrott and Lindiwe Matshikiza’s installation *I’m in the bath on all fours* is

inspired by German cave loach fish that have evolved from surface-dwelling fish. Their skin is almost colourless, their eyes appear unresponsive to light, so they navigate by intuitive sensory means. Parrott suggests, “It seems to be something to do with sensors in their skin, they read the space through vibrations.”

As a disabled person I also navigate by feel and intuition. Rather than being an impairment, the cave loach’s evolutionary sight loss can be seen as an adaption to cave-dwelling. As a species I think we tend to prize intellectual understanding above intuition, but what do we actually need to survive and how adaptable are we?

Harold Offeh’s gloriously playful *Selfie Choreography* comes from workshops in which he made selfie stick sculptures with paper and tape. I reveled in Offeh’s video, losing myself in its movement as I did with the mouth in *Liquid Consonant*. Offeh exploring the smartphone/selfie

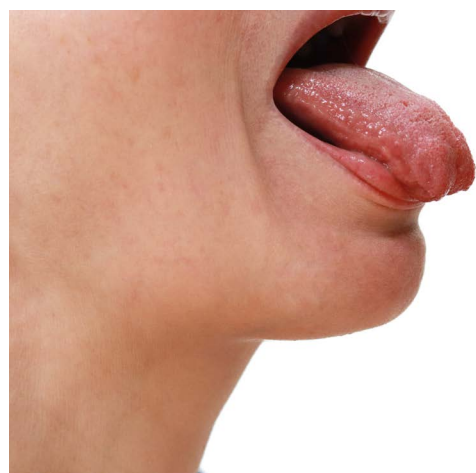


stick as a performative support and an extension of human skin brings to mind Kev Howard's chromogenic prints *working lives* 2021 which feature prosthetics. These works call into question how honest we are about our dependence on technology and they highlight cultural perceptions about prosthetics. How would I manage without glasses and a dental crown?

Alberta Whittle's complex and compelling sculpture *matrix moves* combines a limbo dance frame and a soft colourful costume



Sonia Boué, Dental Crown, 2021



Sonia Boué, Tongue, 2021

with a black cloth face. The appalling history of the slave passage that this work recalls foregrounds a sustained history of oppression. A set of defiant poking metal tongues protrude at each end of the pole. By using an enduring material to cast these haunting heart-like tongues, Whittle suggests courage and creative resistance. In this exhibition, the tongues form a conversation with the works of Barham and Offeh. This detail will stay with me for a very long time to come.

Artworks cited in the text:

Sonia Boyce

In the Castle of My Skin 2020

Plywood, timber, fixings, pasted paper, paint
Designed by Sonia Boyce, Gavin Wade, Matt Foster and fabricated by Plane Structure

Teresa Margolles

Mexico, 1963

Papeles de la morgue (#9) 2003

Papers from the Morgue (#9) 2003

Water from autopsies on watercolour paper
Presented by the Contemporary Art Society

Anna Barham

England, 1974

-52nthjt3k8 2015

HD video, colour, looped, 2 min

Liquid Consonant 2012

HD video, b&w, looped, sound, 60 sec Liquid Con

Flora Parrott and Lindiwe Matshikiza

London, 1981; South Africa/England, 1983

I'm in the bath on all fours 2019

Cast aluminium, birch face ply, digitally printed cotton satin, bin liners, box wood, copper, pen shells, rubber

Harold Offeh

Ghana, 1977

Selfie Choreography 2019

Video, iPhone, selfie stick

Kev Howard

England, 1965

working lives 2021

Chromogenic print on brushed aluminium composite and plastic sheet
Commissioned by MIMA

Alberta Whittle

Barbados, 1980

matrix moves 2019

Mixed media

Sonia Boué is an artist and writer and is a leading consultant for neurodiversity in the arts. Her cross-disciplinary arts practice examines home and the domestic as metaphors for exile and displacement and her writing centers on autism and art.