



Skin Deep: Liminal States

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Skin Deep

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From childhood memories, and from a few others, there emanates a sentiment of being unintegrated, and then later of having gone astray, which I hold to be the most fertile that exists. [1]

Andre Breton, First Manifesto of Surrealism

Skin Deep is a gathering of recent sculpture by Lyn Carter and Carl Tacon.

A veil, trembling, draped over a mass that is almost unthinkable heavy: a mammoth limestone block. The veil, pulled toward the monumental block of stone, flowing and coalescing against it like a shore lining new land. Some of the forces unleashed in this gathering might have been a Canadian epic. The forces are huge. In an earlier time, we might have spoken of this with confidence, describing the primal limestone mass and a culture's heroic mastery of the land. However the earlier myths of our land seem distant now. Our confidence in this solid ground of bedrock and scoured granite has been replaced by less-certain qualities. Behind the monumental face of this limestone Carl Tacon has made a curious new surface. The veil carved on the back hovers, broken by the shifting surface of the stone and by a projected illusion, a pattern of light and dark that retraces precisely the shadows and highlights of the real carving. The stone's earth-bound location has been replaced. We are pulled to the surface amidst an archipelago of drifting gravities.

A different veil, enclosing a brittle residue. To the interior there is contracting matter. Wire, dry twigs, tensing into a rictus. Some distance outward from this skeleton floats a new delicate skin elated by an unseen pressure. Succulent plants make this kind of form when they are blooming, full of water, resplendent. Bloated things, injured or recently dead, also make this form. The membranes would evaporate without their skeletons-the fragile skins would have the momentary life of froth, of breeze, if it were not for the inward-pulling centres anchoring them. Gently pulling and pushing from outer and inner gravity. Lyn Carter has made delicate bubbles with dark cores.



Carl Tacon's stone skins and Lyn Carter's fabric surfaces work in counterpoint in this exhibition. These skins make outsides and insides. The flowing draperies and fragile membranes that make up the work have gentle qualities, but the boundaries are far from innocent. The sculptures create very-public faces where normal things comfortably belong, and they also make places outside of that. Places of exclusion. Together Tacon and Carter make a poignant essay speaking of the ambivalent nature of boundaries. An amphibian state results, restlessly moving.

The original stone blocks of Carl Tacon's sculptures speak of a national bravura. The blocks were salvaged during the demolition of the Toronto Postal Delivery Building, a much-loved icon of Toronto's waterfront. The building was decorated with imagery of the wild including monumental beavers, cat-tails and northern pines. The Queenston limestone here used in *Fold*, 2002 is a plain block that originally flanked the upper frieze, cut with a wide shelf along its rear surface for mounting. The stone is saturated with fossils of marine life that speak of primordial origins.

Tacon has concentrated on the rear side of this massive block. The carving has developed a deep relief of rippling drapery swathing the surface opposite to the massive public side of the stone. However, instead of acting according to the continuous wrapping that real drapery would obey, this fabric behaves according to the rules of projection. At the location of the mounting shelf the drapery cleaves, broken by the shift in planes. A curious sense of magnetism in the stone seems to guide the play of the cloth, making it cling to the mass rather than hanging freely. Similarly, the natural play of light and shade has been displaced here by a strange glow created by a photographic slide projection playing on the surface that precisely duplicates the light-and-dark play of the drapery. The play of the sculptural relief is dramatically heightened by this lighting, but it does this by disrupting the familiar play of our eyes over solid forms. Instead, our eyes trick us into seeing this as an *image*, taken away from its origin. The persistent experience of optical illusion is inextricable from the knowledge that this form is, even so, solid and real.

Here in the margin behind the public façade, earth-bound gravity and natural light have been replaced. In contrast to the brave sentiment of the original architecture, no certain progress lights this replacement. The result is an uncanny dislocation and a lurking sense of loss.

Lyn Carter's constructions float and sag beside this stone. They puff outward making balloon-like husks. The skins are a gauze-work made from organza of infinitesimal mass. To the outside, their gossamer surfaces shimmer with beautiful light. If these bubbles were empty, we might find ourselves amidst an idyll, bathed in cheerful light. But a set of core skeletons stand within these forms composed of shrunken, brittle materials. These interior elements work in stark contrast to the floating wisps of the outer shells. Like Giacommetti sculptures, each of the cores seems in convulsion, collapsing inward into a state of pure tension. The cores are dark, eating light.

Part of our reaction to Carter's work is wholehearted, reaching out to these delicate things and folding them into our understanding. Far from a closed boundary, that gauze skin floats like the porous edges of a jellyfish whose outer sea-world is barely different from its liquid interior. Dry branches, with a salt-rime of shrunken bark puncture the viscous surroundings into sharp, centrifugal focus. The delicacy of the outer surfaces and the brittle compression of the inner cores both register as whole-body sensations mapped onto our own anatomy: skeleton, skin. It is my skin that floats, bathed by humours passing within and without. My own bones implode.

Carter's work speaks volumes of the workings of empathy. The 19th century German philosopher Robert Vischer studied empathy in art and spoke of it as akin to a religious encounter:

We seem to perceive hints and traces of attitudes, of emotions- a secret, scarcely suppressed twitching of the limbs, a timorous yearning, a gesturing, and a stammering. These signs are instantly translated into their corresponding human meaning... In the branches of a tree we spread our arms longingly. ... [W]e will recognize this central, genuine empathy toward pure form to be the natural mother of religious personification. ... [W]e thus have the wonderful ability to project and incorporate our own physical form into an objective form.... I project my own life into the lifeless form... .I am mysteriously transplanted and magically transformed into this Other. [2]

Robert Vischer, *On the Optical sense of Form: A contribution to Aesthetics*



But why is there the faint tinge of nausea, embarrassment, in our gaze? Empathy also has its discontents: repulsion. Parts of Carter's work are emphatically dead. The artist does acknowledge that her work includes not only pleasure, but also aching loss. Speaking of Airbags, she says 'Caught within a room, within a building, the deadness of the tree seems to implicate its surroundings.' [3] We shift between empathy and repulsion.

Oscillations between surface and depth are central to both Carl Tacon's and Lyn Carter's new work. Instead of relying on solid ground, we move into open, yawning space. An uncanny, insecure surrounding emerges. The prevailing feeling here is vertigo. Vertigo: we do know the sensation of losing the earth, sometimes on a fire escape, frequently on subway gratings. The stomach-lurching feel of hollow ground; the dream-sensation of falling. And a parallel vertigo of the psyche, more insidious, in which we lose the boundaries of ourselves, dissociated. As biologist Rogier Caillois said, describing insect behaviour: "I know where I am, but I do not feel as though I'm at the spot where I find myself." [4] Do we always flee from this feeling?

We may be tempted to shun it. However when Sigmund Freud described states of blurred boundaries he invoked illness but also the possibility of revelation:

Pathology has made us acquainted with a great number of states in which the boundary lines between the ego and the external world become uncertain or in which they are actually drawn incorrectly. ...the ego detaches itself from the external world. Or, to put it more correctly, originally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present ego feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive- indeed, an all-embracing- feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world around it...The contents appropriate to it would be precisely those of limitless and of a bond with the universe- the same ideas with which my friend elucidated the 'oceanic feeling'... [5]

Sigmund Freud, Civilization and its Discontents

Tacon and Carter are offering vertigo as a kind of perception. The Skin Deep project offers a series of thresholds to unknown things. A subtle anatomy of different experiences emerge from their two bodies of work, involving two kinds of alterity. On one hand, Carl Tacon's work speaks of the sublime. In that space, we encounter vast presence: light, stone, massive force. Visceral struggle is fundamental to this experience. On the other hand, Lyn Carter's shaded forms use uncanny qualities: bloating; quietly convulsed. The spectres of hesitant touch and of latent suffering speak there.

In this work we find ourselves in a volatile state. Presence here is acutely felt. We move above and beneath a new tremulous ground. Vertigo: new presence.

References

- [1] André Breton, 'First Manifesto of Surrealism', 1924, in Manifestoes of Surrealism, trans. R. Seaver and H. R. Lane, Michigan, 1969
- [2] Robert Vischer, 'On the Optical sense of Form: A contribution to Aesthetics', 1873, in Empathy, Form and Space, Problems in German Aesthetics 1873-1893, ed. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikononou, Oxford 1994
- [3] Lyn Carter, artist's statement, 2002, unpublished
- [4] Rogier Caillois, 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia', 1932, in October: the First Ten Years, Cambridge, 1984
- [5] Sigmund Freud, 'Civilization and its Discontents', 1930, in Civilization, Society and Religion, trans. James Strachey, London, 1985