

Nov 28 - Dec 5 2015

annadunmill.com

thank you

Carla Adams, Renae Coles, Mardi Crocker, Louise Dickmann, Melissa McGrath, Rebecca Orchard, Leigh Robb, Bella Snell, Gemma Weston

free range gallery
Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts

special thanks to Danni McGrath

free range gallery | 339 Wellington St Perth



In body theory, 'skin envelope' refers to the post-eighteenth-century idea of the body's margin as an enclosing vessel or garment, with specific openings. Before this, the body was often envisioned as a kind of porous sponge, with no clear boundary between it and the world. Probing these ideas, *Skin Envelope* is an expanded, performative drawing made up of many small elements: embroidery, ceramics, text, and stick-and-poke tattoo.

images

cover: Anna Dunmill, *Study for Skin Envelope*, 2015
air-dry clay, glazed stoneware, tattoo on Melissa
photograph: the artist

right: Anna Dunmill, *Enclosed, but gently*, 2015
linen, embroidery thread, stoneware, watercolour
photograph: the artist

poster: Anna Dunmill, *Smoke and Water*, 2015
ink on studio wall
photograph: Alessandro Bianchetti



SKIN ENVELOPE

new work by Anna Dunmill

RITUALS

Gemma Weston

I'm talking to Amy about Anna and Rebecca's exhibition, called *Daily Rituals*, which they held in a Maylands share-house. Amy, who has a scratchy drawing of a dead bird on her forearm, a dachshund curling around a calf, a turquoise line in place of a wedding band, til death do us part. Like usual I'm making it about me: *Amy, I grew up without god, I don't know how to give myself over to ceremony, never felt the holy water on my forehead. I have no rituals in my life.* Amy is practical and generous, like a kindergarten teacher framing a moral lesson for a smaller mind: *Everybody has rituals, I'm sure you do. Perhaps you just don't call them that.*

Every morning I add a pair of black wings to my eyelids and colour my pale lashes to match. Otherwise, I feel like an overgrown child. J asks me, sarcastically, if could go a week without doing this and I say, *It's just something that helps me feel comfortable in my skin.* like my skin was something I'd been issued, an ill-fitting uniform. Funny, using facepaint to feel properly grown.

I impulse-buy a pair of shoes on the way between work and our appointment, and when I arrive the glossy bag feels like sacrilege, like I've carried the world's lesser desires up the studio stairs. It's a transaction of some kind, still; we have agreed to swap a piece of writing – this one, in fact – for an arrangement of dots punctured into the skin of my right arm.

We'd met earlier and I'd chosen colours, the rest is out of my hands. Anna has worked out a series of lines in black offset with teal dots, which she practises in front of me like a nascent signature. She wipes a table down with disinfectant, lays out the instruments, sits me down under the light. She does the black first, and then makes some decisions on the run, adding a purple accent, some blue to deepen the teal haze. I trust her. Taking shape it almost holds the contours of a face - as much as anything does if you look hard enough – with two looping scribbles set against a smiling curve, but it isn't this or any one thing. It's a gesture, a melody, a cool breeze. A feeling made to last.

Every second shower I scrub myself down with a tube of plant fibre that was once alive, in its own way. There are roughly 40,000 more cells that I can do without each minute. While I do this I think of the word: *slough*. A noun that means the thick, soup-like stasis of the swamp, a verb that signifies a casting off, regenerating, becoming new. if I rub myself hard enough against the world I can get a little bit closer to it, make myself a little bit newer, faster.

Waiting for another kind of appointment I read in a breathy article that there are risks to this practice; for all the cells I slough off, or turn to slough I may be gaining the same volume in bacteria. 'Microbiome' apparently already outnumber my own cells about 10-to-one. These things that are not me but are of me, that are too small to see, occupy not only my surfaces and insides but also form a uniquely constituted aura that extends roughly a meter from my body in all directions. If forensic tests go well, this microbial cloud alone might be used to identify my presence in the absence of more tangible parts and fibres. Even when I am not there, there I am, somehow.

I should remember what we talked about, but I don't. Appointments with the motorised needle can feel like routine, like a haircut, and I've found that the small talk is similar. Stick and poke tattooing feels different, slow and close and personal and more gentle, an accumulation of small, soft hurts rather than a cutting pain

you can detach from. It takes a couple of pokes to get a line going down in the dermis of your skin, down where keratin and exfoliation can't touch it, where there are only white blood cells to fight pointlessly against ink particles too big to shift. The rapid fire of a motorised needle closes the distance between its points of entry, but Anna's drawing preserves the wobble of her hand, the hesitations and reorientations. They're lines that can't pretend to be certain, they'll always be points caught momentarily in empty space. Watching these lines form is like watching the bottom of a river as silt settles. All of a sudden, there it is, something legible.

When S and I walk anywhere together I reach out and grab the head of a white rose so the petals become confetti in my fist. There are white roses leaning through white fences everywhere in the suburbs that we walk through, so there has been opportunity to make this a regular game. If she doesn't see me do it I throw them over her straight away, surprise! If she does see I wait so we can build mock-anticipation for this silly, momentary, meagre parade, petals in her hair, littering the footpath. When I started doing this she hated it and would ask me to stop.

Why?
Isn't it enough that I asked you not to?
Come on, these are the kinds of cute things you'll remember when I'm gone.
Are you going somewhere?
No. I don't know, where everybody is I guess.

Now when I walk alone I shower myself with white, too, because why not? And because I hope she'll see those scatterings later, someday, forever, and think of me.

Once Anna is done I walk out on to William St already late for dinner, but there's a halo on the streetlights and the horizon and I detour towards the park instead to fight mosquitoes who can sense my raised pulse and the fresh channel opened between my insides and out. As I walk I catalogue the marks I have collected so far, adding these new, small ribbons of colour to an all-over peppering of freckles, the darkest ones exiled, leaving pale-pink ghosts; to an eye-shaped paleness where a dropped glass ricocheted off of hard tiles; to a drawing of a naked man and women embracing that I think of as halves of the same whole but which offends my sister on behalf of her kids; to Paul Klee's 'The Little Jester in a Trance' re-drawn by Norton Juster in a book called *The Dot and the Line* that belonged to my father, who hates all tattoos; to an electrical socket left-over from a laparoscopy; to the lattice-work on my right thigh so faded now that, thankfully, it almost doesn't qualify; to a cluster of geometry on my left wrist; to the silhouette of an aeroplane flying over my lower back towards a joke stussy 's' made too of needle dots, which seemed like a good idea at the time. Most of these things I cover, but still, there they are. Most of these things are changing with me, but still, there they are.

Closer home now I try to add to my catalogue all the other gymnast ribbons and confetti swirls and clusters of colour that Anna has made on other skins: on Danni and Melissa and Carla and Renae and Bella and Jacqui and Liam and Thomas and Claire and Hayley and Xanthea and Joshua and all of the others I don't know about, or I've missed. And Kate-Anna, wherever she is. I picture us from above, all of us walking, markers on an enchanted map making lines with our movements, some intersecting and some running parallel and some separated by a space too vast to chart. And as I run my index finger over the cuts in the blade of my house key, like I always do before opening the front door, I try to turn that wavering image into something more solid, threading us through the warp and weft of the world, just for a moment, before I close the door behind me and let the thought soak back into the night.

SMOKE AND WATER

THE THINGS I TATTOOED ON YOU
ARE GONE NOW:
EVERY BLACK PINPRICK
THAT PLOTTED YOUR EDGES, HELD YOU
ON COURSE, FOR A WHILE.

WE USED TO MARK EACH OTHER
LIKE SAILORS DREAMING OF LAND,
DREAMING OF SOMETHING
TO HOLD ON TO.

YOU SLIPPED AWAY
AT NIGHT.

THE LAST VESSEL YOU TRAVELLED IN
WAS MADE OF WOOD.
THERE WAS ONLY ROOM FOR ONE,
AND I COULDN'T FOLLOW.

THESE MARKS:
LIKE US, THEY'RE MADE OF
SMOKE AND WATER.
THEY SURGE AND RECEDE.
THEY'LL FLOAT IN OUR SKINS
FOR ONLY SO LONG.