

DEFLATED BODIES: A TALE OF MATERIAL AND SKIN

USED MOTORBIKE
LEATHERS TELL A
LONG STORY OF
HUMAN DOMINANCE
OVER ANIMAL, AND A
MORE RECENT ONE OF
CONFLICT BETWEEN
MAN AND MACHINE.



Installation view, Alexandra Bircken, *Eskalation*, 2014 at The Hepworth Wakefield. Photo: Stuart Whipps. From left to right: *Furygan* 2014, *Big* 2014, *Demolition Ball* 2011, *Fat* 2014 and *Ugly* 2014

In Alexandra Bircken's work, to misquote the industrialist Henry Ford, every material tells a story¹. To be more specific, every material tells a human story. *Demolition Ball*, for example, is an enlarged punching ball covered in panels of tan leather that differ subtly in both tone and texture. Bircken stripped the leather from old gymnastic apparatus on which 'thousands of pupils balanced their sweaty hands and bodies over decades during school sports classes.'² The variation between the panels provides a record of the material's life before it was repurposed as a work of art, bearing the scars of daily playful, and no doubt at times aggressive, use. As in much of Bircken's work, the materials used and the way they are deployed incorporate many contradictions: playfulness and aggression, the stereotypical machismo of boxing and the traditionally female domestic craft of stitching or, as Bircken notes, 'living human skin touching dead animal skin.'³

That human stories embed themselves so readily within materials is hardly surprising given their dependence on human creativity and production, even in the case of those with organic origins such as leather. The fabrication of textiles is one of humanity's earliest cultural achievements, a fact that Bircken relates closely to her work as an artist. Recent archaeological discoveries of cut, twisted and dyed flax fibres suggest that humans wove textiles some 36,000 years ago,⁴ while there is evidence that, earlier still, Neanderthal people tanned animal skins to make leather.⁵ These earliest forms of fabrics are recalled by Bircken in works like *Furygan and Storm (Assault)*, in which used motorbike leathers are cut at the seams and splayed open to create wall-hangings akin to hunting trophies, returning them to animal form and underscoring the materials' origin. The scars and bruises on the suits – relics of traffic collisions and scraping on asphalt – prompt a consideration of our own skin, the delicate surface that this other transformed animal skin has been repurposed to protect. These works tell a long story of human dominance over animals, and a more recent one of conflict between man and machine.

CONCEPTUALLY, TIGHTS BELONG TO THE SAME FAMILY OF MATERIAL AS MOTORBIKE LEATHERS, OFFERING SKIN TIGHT PROTECTION AND ACTING AS THE LAST BARRIER BETWEEN US AND THE EXTERNAL WORLD.

Other 'skins' made of women's tights offer reflections on convergences between the history of people and fabric that are particularly pertinent to West Yorkshire, the site of Bircken's largest UK solo exhibition to date, at The Hepworth Wakefield. Here in the 19th century the industrial revolution transformed the cottage industries of textile production into mass-manufacturing businesses, enabling the extraordinary growth of Wakefield and other cities.

In Bircken's 'skins', machine-made tights are cut up and patch-worked back together, disavowing Fordist mass-manufacture through the process of hand-stitching and the unique status of artistic production. The re-use of such materials recalls the process of making 'shoddy', a practice local to West Yorkshire in which old clothes were ground up to be recycled into new composite material. Shoddy was less valuable than the primary material of which it was comprised, to the extent that the word 'shoddy' still retains a derogatory meaning even though this practice is now long forgotten. During the second half of the twentieth century this once dominant industry waned, diminished by competition from a burgeoning global marketplace where labour costs could often be undercut through less stringent employment legislation in developing countries. The increased value of the mass-produced tights, once they have been destroyed and reworked through the labour of the artist, is in stark contrast to that placed on the original material and its production: a direct reversal of the shoddy process.



Repeat II 2012, courtesy the artist, BQ, Berlin and Herald St, London. Photo: Stuart Whipps.

Conceptually, tights belong to the same family of material as motorbike leathers, offering skin-tight protection and acting as the last barrier between us and the external world. Although not part of our bodies, these materials become close to us in more ways than one.

The motorbike leathers are also skin, derived from a living organism like our own. Being not as physiologically close, tights imitate this correspondence, produced in approximations of human flesh colour and in a variety of shades to accommodate a population with skins of varying tones. Works such as *Repeat I* and *Repeat II* focus on the gusset of the tights, an area often fabricated in a darker shade and strengthened to give the extra stretch needed to enable the wearer's mobility. As has been noted previously in regard to Bircken's work, the etymology of the word 'gusset' goes back to the French 'gousse', meaning shell of a nut.⁶ This associates the gusset with a protective barrier or armour, protecting soft innards. In *Repeat I* and *Repeat II* these protective elements are tested to the max, stretched out to their limits and nailed to the wall. As in other works, the evocation is of splayed animal skins, hung as hunting trophies that show the failure of skin to protect the defeated animal body. This holds sinister connotations when the skins in question correspond with multiple female crotches that they were designed to cover.



Installation view, Alexandra Bircken, *Eskalation*, 2014 at The Hepworth Wakefield. Photo: Stuart Whipps. Detail of *Deflated Bodies* 2014

Pantyhose gussets are often patterned, providing a covering with floral motifs or decorative feminine designs. Freud in his lectures *On Femininity* in 1933, linked the invention of weaving with the concealment of female genitals:

*'It seems that women have made few contributions to the discoveries and inventions in the history of civilisation; there is, however, one technique which they may have invented – that of plaiting and weaving. If that is so, we should be tempted to guess the unconscious motive for the achievement. Nature herself would seem to have given the model which this achievement imitates by causing the growth at maturity of the pubic hair that conceals the genitals.'*⁷

Of course this interpretation depends on accepting the highly contentious and contested Freudian notion that women are motivated to conceal their genitalia in order to hide their embarrassing lack of penis.⁸ By this reading, the suspended, stretched gussets are not representative of defeated crotches, but of crotches unhidden. These are the symbolic freed and unashamed crotches of VALIE EXPORT's exposing Action Pants.⁹

The multiple and sometimes contrasting associations inherent in these skin-tight fabrics mirrors the complex nature of skin. As our largest organ, it is the container of the body, the outline of ourselves and the membrane through which we meet and interact with our surroundings. As such, it is both internal and external, visibly covering, protecting and holding the shape of the body, but somehow not the body itself. Despite the focus of skin, Bircken's work has previously only alluded to the body as a whole through implied physical action or fragmented limbs. It is only in her most recent work, the monumental site-specific installation *Deflated Bodies*, that these considerations become figurative.

SECTIONS OF LADDER
ARE COVERED IN A
BEAUTIFUL PATCHWORK
OF 'SKIN', CLEAR LATEX
HEATED ONTO CUT
TIGHTS WHICH WILL
DARKEN AND DRY
WITH AGE.

Five ladders run up the gallery walls, spanning eight metres to reach the sunlight spilling down from an unseen source. On the ladders are multiple figures, male and female, made of cloth sewn to real-person specifications and covered in black latex. The work is theatrical, presenting a scene that longs for a narrative. One female figure halfway up a ladder is wearing a wig, a mixture of human and artificial hair that drops down over three metres. Has she slept for so long that it has grown, or is this a tool for climbing like that used by Rapunzel? Sections of ladder are covered in a beautiful patchwork of 'skin', clear latex heated onto cut tights which will darken and dry with age. There is an absurd linguistic pun here, the cut tights 'laddering' as they are applied and stretched over the rough wood of the literal ladders. These fragile skins cover multiple rungs, preventing some figures from climbing any higher and creating a pile-up on the ground below. One figure sits contemplatively in the corner seemingly observing the scene, while elsewhere a group are hung like suits, revealing integrated coat-hangers that emphasise their materiality – menacing uniforms for a sinister army. Some heads, hands and feet are stuffed to give the illusion of a bodily presence, and some appear to be climbing, reaching for the light, or already there.

THE
HEPWORTH
WAKEFIELD

A GROUP ARE HUNG
LIKE SUITS, REVEALING
INTEGRATED COAT-
HANGERS WHICH
EMPHASISE THEIR
MATERIALITY – MENACING
UNIFORMS FOR A
SINISTER ARMY.



Installation view, Alexandra Bircken, *Eskalation*, 2014 at The Hepworth Wakefield. Photo: Stuart Whipps.
Detail of *Deflated Bodies* 2014

Bircken has worked with latex previously in the series *B.U.F.F.*, oversized totems coated in shiny latex that allude to metallic bombs in appearance, but whose patch-work surface, up-close, resembles bandages and conveys vulnerability. She notes, '*black latex predominantly appears in fetish wear. Fetish wear is about a maximal objectification of the body. Fetish functions through substitute objects and the transformation of a body into an object.*'¹⁰ The word 'Fetishism' was first introduced by French psychologist Alfred Binet in his 1887 paper *La Fetichisme dans l'amour*. Here he gave the etymology of the word as '*from Portuguese fetisso, enchanted magic thing*',¹¹ and there is certainly a sense of magic about Bircken's figures. As carcasses emptied of substance and energy, they seem to have moved into position without any living agency, somehow giving a sense that they might start climbing again the moment there is no-one in the gallery to watch. A skin without the rest of the body is merely the husk of a person or animal, but it still holds that creature's space. Like the ladders reaching to a highest point, testing the limits of the gallery, our skin stretches to the furthest point of our presence in the world, on the front line of our sensations and experiences. In the end, multiple narratives and contradictory associations compete, offering these deflated skins as both defeated and persistent, absent yet present – lost but ever reaching, ever climbing.

Eleanor Clayton, Curator
2014

Acknowledgements:

The author would like to thank Alexandra Bircken, Frances Guy, Samantha Lackey, Naja Rantorp, Nicky Verber and Simon Wallis for their comments and thoughts in the development of this text. *Alexandra Bircken: ESKALATION* (The Hepworth Wakefield: 1 October 2014 – 25 January 2015) is generously supported by The Henry Moore Institute, the German Embassy, and the Goethe-Institut.

Notes:

¹ The possibly apocryphal but oft-repeated quote from Ford is 'Every object tells a story, if you know how to read it'

² In email conversation with the author, 8 September 2014

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Dzudzuana: an Upper Palaeolithic cavesite in the Caucasus foothill (Georgia)*. Available online www.academia.edu/1062050/Dzudzuana_an_Upper_Palaeolithic_cave_site_in_the_Caucasus_foothills_Georgia_ (Accessed October 2014)

⁵ Neumark-Nord Organic Remains. Available online: www.nespos.org/display/PublicNesposSpace/Neumark-Nord+6.1+-+organic+remains (Accessed October 2014)

⁶ MCLEAN-FERRIS, L. (2012) Alexandra Bircken: Recent Work. *Mousse Magazine* (online) Available from: www.moussemagazine.it/alexandra-bircken-heraldst/ (Accessed October 2014)

⁷ FREUD, S. (1933) New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis. Lecture 33: Femininity. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, v. 22. p. 132

⁸ Freud goes on to say 'If you reject this idea as fantastic and regard my belief in the influence of the lack of a penis on the configuration of femininity as an *idée fixe*, I am of course defenceless'. Ibid.

⁹ VALIE EXPORT's now legendary performance involved the artist confronting cinema-going audiences whilst wearing crotchless trousers and brandishing a machine gun, making private areas public in a confrontational and provocative manner. Images available online: www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/export-action-pants-genital-panic-p79233 (Accessed October 2014)

¹⁰ In email conversation with the author, 9 September 2014

¹¹ BINET, A. Le Fétichisme dans l'amour. *Revue Philosophique*, part 1, August 1887, part 2, September 1887, p.144