

FRAGILITY, MORTALITY, AND EMPTINESS:
ANIMAL FIBER AS SCULPTURAL MATERIAL
IN CONTEMPORARY ART

By

KRYSTLE K BREWER

Bachelor of Fine Arts in Studio Art

Oklahoma City University

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

2009

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
May, 2014

FRAGILITY, MORTALITY, AND EMPTINESS:
ANIMAL FIBER AS SCULPTURAL MATERIAL
IN CONTEMPORARY ART

Thesis Approved:

Dr. Louise Siddons

Thesis Adviser

Dr. Jennifer Borland

Dr. Toby Beauchamp

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my committee members Dr. Louise Siddons, Dr. Jennifer Borland, and Dr. Toby Beauchamp for the inspiration and guidance they have given me over the past two years. This project is a culmination of the influences they have had on me, which is apparent through my research topic and approach. I would also like to acknowledge Mary Kathryn Moeller for her steadfast friendship and dedication that has allowed us to accomplish many feats in addition to our individual research endeavors. Finally, I would like to thank Professor Dianna Bottoms and Dr. John Steen for their emotional support and encouragement through the entirety of this project. It is only through the patience and graciousness of each of these people that this paper was possible.

Name: KRYSTLE K BREWER

Date of Degree: MAY, 2014

Title of Study: FRAGILITY, MORTALITY, AND EMPTINESS: ANIMAL FIBER AS
SCULPTURAL MATERIAL IN CONTEMPORARY ART

Major Field: ART HISTORY

Abstract: Born out of the performance art of the 1960s, which focused on the artist's body as an artistic medium, artists and curators of the last three decades have looked to skin as a manipulative material and metaphor for art making. This paper analyzes the work of three contemporary artists who are working in a subcategory of this genre, in which animal materials are used as a sculptural medium. Doris Salcedo, Janine Antoni, and Sonya Kelliher-Combs use animal fibers to address issues of fragility, mortality, and emptiness through the violences rooted in their unique and distinct historical, geographical, and cultural moments. This paper argues for the relevance of the use of material from a slaughtered animal to convey ideas of violence. By situating these artists in their cultural context while also contextualizing them within other trends in contemporary art, this thesis argues that these artists continue the momentum of the performance art movement while reacting against ready-made or industrial materials. Their work reminds the viewer of the disconnection from animals in today's culture. By using these once-living materials, these artists employ Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject and the Derridean concept of the trace as interpreted by Mieke Bal, which this paper aims to illustrate. The work of these artists engage in these theoretical approaches in order to convey the intensity of the violences suffered by groups of people shown through a material harvested from animals that have also been the victims of such violence.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
I. SKIN IN CULTURE, ART, AND EXHIBITIONS	10
II. VIOLENCIA Y VACÍO: DORIS SALCEDO'S <i>ATRABILARIOS</i>	27
III. FEMININE SLAUGHTERING: JANINE ANTONI'S <i>SADDLE</i>	35
IV. HIDDEN NOTIONS: SONYA KELLIHER-COMBS' <i>COMMON THREAD</i>	42
CONCLUSION.....	52
REFERENCES	57
IMAGES	59

INTRODUCTION

The research for this project began nearly two years ago in the form of a seminar paper that focused on the work *Saddle* (2000) by Janine Antoni (American, b. 1964). Although the initial paper produced from this study paid close attention to the submissive position of the figure and the implied entity of power, the artist's choice of cow rawhide as a material captured my interest and led to me look at other contemporary artists using a similar medium. This search expanded to analyze skins in particular, including both animal and human, and skin used as a metaphor. While I found many common themes throughout all of the artists I researched, the works of three artists in particular appeared to have striking similarities: *Atrabiliarios* (1992-7) by Doris Salcedo (Colombian, b. 1958), *Saddle* (2000) by Janine Antoni (American, b. 1964), and *Common Thread* (2008-10) by Sonya Kelliher-Combs (Native Alaskan, b. 1969). Despite the fact that each artist is working in very different circumstances and is addressing a distinct set of issues, themes of fragility, mortality, and emptiness tie them all together. Because of the themes these works shared, for this inquiry I chose to focus on the material, geo-political, and formal qualities of these sculptures.

The process of selecting these works began by looking at all artists I could find that used skin as a medium, which also included human skin. I then narrowed it down by looking at what each of the pieces were conveying and finding similarities among them. Some of the other artists, such as those that used their own skin, either as a manipulative material or canvas, were finally excluded because they did not have obvious dialogues with other works in the way the final three did. I also chose not to discuss race in the way some of the exhibition catalogues have because these selected works speak to a broader human connection that transcends boundaries based on skin color or the social construct of race. One of the primary goals of this paper is to cross cultural boundaries and speak to the universal experience of skin.

The use of animal fibers as an art making material brings to the works a collection of implications, including death and violence, inherent in the material's origin as an animal product that would not be present had the artists chosen a synthetic or plant-based material. The uses of this material, along with common themes of fragility, mortality, and emptiness threaded through the three works, serve to unite these works despite the fact that they are separated geographically and culturally. Because they are able to convey these same themes through their material usage, their work transcends the culturally boundaries in which they work. By using these life-based, or maybe more accurately death-based, materials, the works of art are able to evoke a history of violence to support their own themes of violence specific to their subject matter.

Doris Salcedo's work *Atrabiliarios* (Figure 1) features the shoes of disappeared people from Colombia, which the artist has placed in shoebox-sized cutouts from the wall. Surgical thread is used to sew sheets of animal fiber coverings over the shoe. By creating close relationships with the family members who have donated the shoes of the missing people, she is able to visually tell their stories of loss and grief in a country fraught with violence. On the floor around the works are hollow shoeboxes also made of animal fibers that suggest the ongoing disappearances that will end in more shoes to be placed in the wall. The use of the animal fiber

allows the membrane covering the shoes and the boxes to be translucent. The ghostly covering of the shoes echoes the uncertainty of the wearer's fate while also creating a physical boundary between the viewer and the missing individual.

Influenced by the adjacent cow farm during her one-year residency at the Wanas Foundation in Knislinge, Sweden,¹ Janine Antoni created a body of work about cows and consumption from which her work *Saddle* (Figure 3) emerged. In this work Antoni used a full piece of rawhide placed over a plaster cast of herself on hands and knees to sculpt a likeness of her body. The resulting sculpture, with the cast removed, is translucent and allows light to pass through the empty cavity within. This luminous quality allows the viewer to feel the absence of both her and the cow when faced with the empty shell of what once was. This separation of empty interior from the outside space through a thin barrier alludes to ideas of absence, boundaries, and the veil².

Strongly influenced by her Iñupiaq and Athabaskan heritage and the importance of her sense of place, Sonya Kelliher-Combs' *Common Thread* (Figure 5) is made up of ninety-three small tusk-shaped pockets made of rawhide and other animal parts hung on a wall in three horizontal and parallel rows. The use of these materials ties her to her heritage because of the utilitarian uses gained from the animals as well as incorporating needlework that plays a role in the practice of beading. Her use of the empty pockets called "secrets" represents the secrets we all hold, but more specifically, refer to the secrets held by those in her community: high rates of suicide and domestic violence. Though her material and concept of violence, this work is also in

¹ Nancy Princenthal, "Janine Antoni: Mother's Milk." *Art in America* (September 2001): 29.

² I am using the term "veil" because Janine Antoni uses it to describe her work in her interview on *Art 21*'s segment of her. This is a loaded word that has a multitude of identities throughout history. Some of these connotations include the American history of race in which it was used to conceal identity, religious uses to separate the holy from the secular, veiling of the deceased, a bridal veil, and others. I believe Antoni uses the term to refer to burial and bridal veiling. While the cow is not involved in a marriage ceremony, the veil is used to show the innocence of the butchered animal. See Chapter III, *Feminine Slaughtering: Janine Antoni's Saddle* for a more in depth discussion of this work.

dialogue with both Salcedo and Antoni's discussion of emptiness as they are all engaging with and employing a vacancy in their work to show fragility and susceptibility to violence.

These objects fit within the larger context of contemporary art, third-wave feminism, and a newer trend that explores the concept of skin through art. The artists do not use traditionally accepted methods or mediums³ in the construction of their works and use the viewer's space in unusual and captivating ways. One example of this is how *Atrabiliarios* recedes into the wall to create a niche for the shoes by creating a new space, as opposed to projecting into the space.

To varying degrees, the works engage with third-wave feminism's ideals of equality for all, which extends to minorities and those on the periphery. Salcedo's work elevates the issue of women disappearing in Colombia. In the work of Kelliher-Combs, she focuses on her own Native Alaskan culture, bringing attention to her heritage while also addressing and engaging with issues that cross over her cultural boundaries into broader understandings of American culture. Antoni's work addresses Foucaultian issues of biopower over another weaker life form⁴ in order to advocate for the animals being consumed for their materials. Each of these works also fit within the current movement of artists to address issues inherent in skin or using skin to convey their concepts. This movement is much broader than the material approach I have chosen for this paper; it also includes depicting skin in painting and photography, using skin while on the body as a ground for writing or drawing documented through photography, creating a second skin through sculpture and performance, and body modification of the artist. Following a discussion of this trajectory, I will delve into how the above-mentioned works by Salcedo, Antoni, and Kelliher-Combs fit within this genre.

³ By traditional methods and mediums, I am referring to painting on canvas or wood panel, sculpting from wood, stone, or metal, and other similar approaches that have historically been accepted as ways of art making.

⁴ I am referring to Foucault's discussion of power in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I* surrounding his definitions of "the power over life" and "right to death." For more on how these concepts are at play in this work, see Chapter III, *Feminine Slaughtering: Janine Antoni's Saddle*.

Although skin has arguably always been a topic of discussion in areas such as skin care, health, tanning and bleaching, body modification, tattooing, and scientific research, one major point of relevance in the field of contemporary art, and more broadly cultural studies, is a new interest in skin. Over the last twenty years, there have been numerous art exhibitions on the topic as well as books published in neighboring fields of cultural studies and anthropology. Although the scope of this paper cannot fully answer why there has been a renewed interest, the points discussed will make a contribution to the acknowledgment of this shift.

A second but related issue is the lack of academic writing on the topic of skin through a contemporary art historical lens. As I have noted, there are numerous exhibition catalogues that have been published⁵ as well as books in other disciplines, but there is a stark lack of discussion in scholarly writing on skin in contemporary art, either through a material or metaphorical approach. By providing scholarship on these key three works, this paper's acknowledgement of and research on the topic contributes to the broader field of art history in hopes to bring attention to the notable shift and the impact it has the potential to have, as well as how it represents our changing relationship to the material in the twenty-first century.

What is added to the work by choosing the material of skin? Why are these artists coming from such different places geographically and culturally choosing to work in this medium to discuss the same topics of violence and mortality? The answers to these questions are rooted in the use of this animal-based material, which inherently includes violence and death that could not be achieved in the same way through other more traditional materials. The fact that these artists are all turning to the same uncommon medium to address these issues demands attention and exploration.

⁵ The shortfalls of these catalogues will be discussed in the third section of Chapter I: *Skin in Exhibitions: The Constructed Conversation*.

To answer these questions I take three approaches: biographical/historical, visual analysis, and an application of the trace and psychoanalytic theory of the abject. Because the works are rooted in specific locations and moments in history, they cannot be understood properly separated from them. I also focus on the objects themselves and what their form, content, and materiality contribute. Finally, Julia Kristeva's discussion of the abject logically follows the analysis of material. Since the animal fiber is a processed form of an animal product, it can be associated with and repulsiveness. The abject is also an appropriate theoretical model as it serves to bring together phenomenology and psychoanalysis, which are complementary to the notion of the trace for the discussion of these objects.

For the structure of this paper, I begin with a chapter that looks at the concept of skin more broadly to summarize the research done surrounding skin. They are broken down into the categories of skin in culture, skin in art, and skin in exhibitions. This chapter functions as an extended introduction and lays the groundwork for the following chapters that look closely at the three key artists, Salcedo, Antoni, and Kelliher-Combs through these lenses: importance of place, translucency of material, empty cavities, fragility of boundaries, and a quieted violence.

The first section of Chapter I is "Skin in Culture: A Constructed View." Although a cultural analysis of skin is seemingly periphery to the field of art, it is relevant to discuss the use, study, and beliefs surrounding skin leading up to the contemporary context in which these works were created. This section will briefly acknowledge body decoration, metaphor of skin in language, and the changing views of skin in science that structure our attitudes towards it today. By recognizing that other moments in time did not share our repulsiveness to animal or human parts that are engrained in today's Western society, we can realize that the relationship we have with these art objects is a direct result of a changing culture that has constructed these shared feelings of disgust.

The following section, “Skin in Art: Canvas, Material, and Metaphor” discusses the broader use of skin in contemporary art. Because of the focus of this paper, including three artists who are looking at skin through medium, it is important to give a broader context of what I am referring to as the movement towards an interest in skin. I believe this shift is born out of the performance art of the 1960s and 1970s, and while this paper’s main objective is not to prove this claim, it is necessary to document the trajectory that led up to this point.

The last of these sections, “Skin in Exhibitions: The Constructed Conversation,” further supports the previous section by looking at three example of exhibitions that draw connections among the types of works using skin in a variety of ways. A discussion of these shows and the literature produced by them will serve as support to why I have chosen to structure this paper in a way differing from what has already been done, while simultaneously creating a broader base for the works to be discussed within.

The next three chapters hone in on the three key works of this research project. To root the artwork in the cultural and geographical context from which they have come, I take a biographical and historical approach. Each of the artists’ works are tightly tied to a specific place and circumstance that is relevant to understanding the work. This leads to a close visual analysis of the artworks that focuses on the unique functions of each piece. After allowing each work to stand alone on their own merit, the last chapter discusses the commonalities of material, emptiness, fragility, and mortality through a discussion on the abject as presented by Julia Kristeva and the trace as discussed by Mieke Bal. This chapter is the most theoretically based and leads to the conclusions of why the use of animal fibers contains a cultural history and death-based process that cannot be separated from the works of art.

A key limitation of this project is the ability to physically access the works. As far as I have been able to find, they will not be on display during the period I am working on this paper

and I also lack the resources to travel to where the works reside. Currently versions of *Atrabiliarios* are in several museum collections, including San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMoMA) and Art Gallery of New South Wales, though the work at SFMoMA is inaccessible as they are currently closed for the expansion of their building. *Saddle*, of which there are actually three versions, has shifted ownership just throughout the duration of this paper. At the current moment, two of the versions are in private collections, including the specific piece I have used, and one has been gifted to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). While many of Kelliher-Combs two-dimensional works are housed in museum collections, I have been unable to locate her work *Common Thread*. Because of this I am relying on my familiarity with animal skin in other forms (such as vellum, parchment, leather, etc.) as well as the written descriptions of the works from those who have seen them first hand. I do not anticipate this limitation impacting the overall project other than in visual analysis, because noting that the material has the origin of an animal will be sufficient in the understanding of the points I make.

At the completion of this research project, I would like to continue to add to the larger topic of skin in art in two ways: first, by reworking chapters of this paper into publishable journal articles and second, by branching off in a new direction. In researching about artists who use skin as a material or metaphor, I also learned of artists who may or may not actually use skin or animal fibers as a medium but create a “second skin,” such as in the work of Sylvia Hatzl and Hunter Reynolds, which are discussed further in the following chapter. Through these second skins, the works of art actually draw attention to the fragility of the human skin instead of protecting the natural layer of skin. By creating a second skin, it promotes a focus on the layer underneath. This use of the second skin employs Foucault’s repressive hypothesis that states that by repressing, or in this case covering, we are in fact drawing attention to the thing that is intended to be hidden. Through more research on this concept of the second skin, I would be able to compare the

findings to those found in this work and to discuss how the different approaches to skin as material and synthetic skin layer differ in what they say about skin and the human experience.

Through the following chapters, I lay out the fundamental cultural ties to the skin and animal fibers while positioning each artist in their uniquely specific context of culture, history, and geographic location in order to provide three case studies of animal fiber used as a sculptural material in contemporary art. In each of these chapters, I provide evidence of a history of animals that cannot be separated from the animal fibers as a material. Further, the connection animal fibers hold to human skin, while either still on the body or removed, is analyzed through how the animal fibers function as a stand-in or surrogate for the use of human skin in some cases, and alludes to human skin in others.

CHAPTER I

SKIN IN CULTURE, ART, AND EXHIBITIONS

Because nothing happens in isolation of simultaneous events nor does anything exist without a history leading up to the event being analyzed, this chapter serves to place the works of Doris Salcedo, Janine Antoni, and Sonya Kelliher-Combs in a context that gives insight to these connecting threads. In order to do this, I have chosen three primary veins to look at: changing relationships to animal material through history, other artists that are using skin in both material and metaphor, and exhibitions that have been curated around topics in skin.

The section on historical and cultural contexts of the use of skin and animal fibers is not intended to give an encyclopedic discussion on the topic, but is meant to remind the reader that using skin in art, either in the form of human skin, animal fibers, or metaphor, does not come without its historical origins. By looking at these examples of past and present contexts we can see ideas and relationships of skins that are conjured by or connected to the works being discussed presently.

The following section on artists who use skin in their work is intended to situate the works of Salcedo, Antoni, and Kelliher-Combs in a contemporary art context. By looking at how

other artists who are using skin materials or concepts, we can then see the significance of the choices made by these three key artists. For example, why are they choosing to use a material that was once living as opposed to a synthetic or plant-based material? The answer is because of the connotations mentioned in the first section of this chapter, but by comparing the work to other artists, these differentiations become clearer.

In the last section, I look at three exhibitions that group artists to contribute to the conversation of skin in art. I include these for several reasons: to further support the argument that there is a movement toward skin, both in human and animal, to raise problems with their organizational approach, and to highlight methods in discussing skin and animal fiber among works of art.

Skin in Culture: A Constructed View

Our perception of skin has changed over the centuries as shifts in culture, fashion, and science have occurred. While the history of skin is not exclusively rooted in art, when looking at contemporary art that uses a similar material, as this paper does, it is imperative to recognize the feelings and thoughts associated with skin as well as how these viewpoints are seeded in a past of changing cultural practices. This history cannot be divorced from the materials and must be acknowledged prior to an analysis of the works of Salcedo, Antoni, and Kelliher-Combs. This evolving history inherent in the material of skin and animal fibers allows the viewer, or reader, to better understand the relationship they hold with the art object without disregarding the past relationships people held with the material despite their blatant differences.

Because our obsession with skin in today's western society is mostly rooted in beauty, health, or how it affects our livelihood as an organ attached to our bodies, we do not often

think about skin as an object removed from the body. This differentiation between skin as a living organ and as an inanimate material is an important distinction to make because the function skin serves changes at the point of transition from living to deceased. More specifically, it is significant to point out that the relationship we have to skin, whether on our bodies or used as a material, is a cultural construction built over time that cannot be removed from the practice of using the material. Keeping these past practices in mind in later discussions the work of Salcedo, Antoni, and Kelliher-Combs is crucial because these very cultural uses of the material informs how we engage with the works of these artists.

Although Salcedo, Antoni, and Kelliher-Combs use animal fibers in their work, and not human derived products, by looking at the relationship we have to our own skin provides a better understanding and potential for sympathy towards animals and the uses of their bodies. Because of the human ability to sympathize with animals, human and animal skins function in shared ways once removed from the body, and often these lines are blurred.

At many points in history the use of skin, even human skin, as a material was a culturally accepted one. In medieval Europe, countless manuscripts were made of parchment derived from animal skin, predominantly sheep. As Sarah Kay points out in her article “Legible Skins: Animals and the Ethics of Medieval Reading,” no matter how refined the parchment is, the hair side can still be discerned from the flesh side and the backbone can still be seen, among other traces of the once living animal.⁶ While at this time, it was viewed as completely normal to read a book derived from an animal, there is an added intimacy between the reader and the sacrificed animal as they engage in a skin-to-skin embrace.

Aside from the material of these manuscripts, the content also invokes conversations about skin. As illuminated manuscripts often told stories and included images of tortured saints,

⁶ Sarah Kay, “Legible Skins: Animals and the Ethics of Medieval Reading,” *postmedieval*, 2 (2011): 14.

the animal skin can substitute for the saint's skin. In another article by Kay on the flaying of Saint Bartholomew, she uses the "concept of suture to argue that, for the reader of narratives involving flaying, the parchment support might cease to be merely a neutral writing surface and resume its significance as flayed skin."⁷ In this way, the lines between animal and human skin began to blur and the sacrifice of both the human saint and the animal sheep coalesce in one manuscript.

In the seventeenth century it was an accepted, yet uncommon, practice to bind books with human skin harvested from the person to which the content of the book related. This practice is known as anthropodermic biblioegy. Case files from the trial of a convicted murderer could be bound in the criminal's own skin. Another such book was bound with the skin of a psychiatric patient to hold the notes and files from the doctor who worked with the patient. Sometimes the books were meant to commemorate a life, such as poet or writer, by having their work bound in their own skin postmortem.⁸

The eighteenth century saw a shift contributing to how we view skin as the perception of skin changed from barrier to permeable sieve. With the emergence of clinical-anatomical medicine, skin began to be viewed no longer as an impenetrable border, but as a layer to be removed to gain access to the organs, muscles, and bones kept within.⁹ From antiquity, the skin has been a valuable tool to diagnose illness based on its coloration, moisture content, and other factors. The skin was a reflection of what lies beneath it, which was viewed as invisible and inaccessible.¹⁰ With advances in scientific research and the dissection of cadavers, at least in the field of science, the view of the function of skin changed. While amputations were practiced to remove limbs and body parts too injured or infected to treat, this point in medical history marks

⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁸ Navya S. Nambudiri, "Anthropodermic Biblioegy: Lessons From a Different Sort of Dermatologic Text." *JAMA Network*. JAMA Dermatology, Jan. 2014. Web. 21 Feb. 2014.

⁹ Benthien, Claudia. *Skin on the Cultural Border between Self and the World*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. 10.

¹⁰ Ibid.

surgery as a means to rebuild or repair an injured internal organ as opposed to the approach of simply removing the limb. This investigative approach also signifies a point shifting from peeling back the skin to see beneath versus simple removal.

Despite these advancements, we still struggle to separate identity from skin. Skin holds the facial features, scars, hair, and other aspects that we use to differentiate one person from the next. An example of our association of skin with identity is relayed by Nina Jablonski in her introduction to *Skin: A Natural History*. Jablonski tells the story of her students' hesitation to remove the skin of a cadaver. She says that the students have difficulty with the skin, especially that of the face, because it reflects the identity of a person who had a life of happiness and sadness just as the students have had. However, once the skin has been pulled back and the body is no longer easily identifiable, the hesitation subsides and the students are able to focus on learning from the cadaver.¹¹ Although we cognitively understand that we are made up of the bodily systems that are made visible with the removal of skin, it is with the skin that we associate identity. Jablonski's class demonstrates the lack of comfort we have with handling skin that the majority of us share, even medical students interested in the topic. Because of the tie we feel between our skin and our identity, we struggle to separate skin as a material from that of skin as a part of the body. Through our skin we can discern a person's health, age, ethnicity, and other factors. Since skin completely covers our body, if it were removed we would not be able to recognize even our own bodies.

Of course there are many things made of animal skin that we use on a regular basis that can go unnoticed, such as leather goods. The refined state of the leather makes it easier to separate the end product from the producer of the material. Especially in the twenty-first century United States, as artist Janine Antoni comments, we see animals, including their skin, as a

¹¹ Nina G. Jablonski, *Skin: A Natural History*. (California: University of California Press, 2006), 4-5.

consumable product. However, in one of my courses we discussed medieval manuscripts and our professor presented us with a piece of parchment that still had its rough edges intact. She offered to pass it around for students to feel the texture and to better understand the material of medieval books. Surprisingly only a percentage of the class was willing to touch the parchment. Those that refused complained that its raw edges were “gross” and they were repulsed because it looked too much like the goat skin it had come from.

Another avenue in which to gain understanding of our cultural ties to skin is through language. In the English language we use many idioms and metaphors surrounding skin such as the thickness of one’s skin, “He has a thick skin,” or, “Be kind. She has a thin skin.” When someone irritates you they “get under your skin.” When we are repulsed, our “skin crawls.” More literally, we experience “skin to skin” contact. Many of these originate from the mid sixteenth century but follow through to today as a reminder of our perception of skin.¹² Through these uses of the word skin, some are used to describe a personality, such as the thickness of the skin, while others point to a passing feeling of irritation or repulsion. While another discussion could be raised on the linguistic history of the use of the word, which could certainly be addressed across languages, I bring it up here to show that the word “skin” has not always been used to talk about the physical organ covering our bodies and in fact for some time has been used as a metaphor for another quality. This history and the varied meaning of the word “skin” are evoked when a viewer sees a work of art that uses the material.

Aside from historically and culturally constructed ideas about skin, I also want to point out the physical functions skin performs for us. A closer look at these roles are worth noting so that when we think about the skin removed from the body, we can acknowledge the loss of these functions and look at how through removal the uses and meanings of skin change. The skin, when removed from the body, is on average twenty-one square feet, making it the largest organ of the

¹²Ibid., 4.

body. This organ is also the most responsible for stimulus and information intake. It functions to warn us from danger, protect us from microbes, and allows us to bond with other people. To prove the importance of touch for bonding, tests that are now deemed inhumane studied the reactions of young chimps when they were not allowed to touch their mothers after birth. The young that were allowed to see, smell, and hear their mothers, but not allowed to touch them, were found to exhibit behaviors of covering their faces while rocking in the corners crying.¹³ Touch is necessary to make one feel loved and accepted into the group. Other studies correlate the amount of touch and nurturing, finding it to have an inverse relationship to the amount of violent behavior found in adults. These studies, plus countless others, support the significance of touch in humans, and other mammals¹⁴ and by extension, the importance of the material as a living organ.

While each of the ways of thinking about skin mentioned above could provide the start to long discussions on the matter, I intend this overview to serve as a broad starting point from which to explore the topic of skin in art. The removal of skin or other animal fibers from the body necessitates a sacrifice of the skin's original functions. Living skin as a mechanism for receiving stimulus only exists mutually exclusive of skin as a dead material. So, by evoking skin or using skin as a material for art making, there is a conscious choice to engage with the death of another to have the material.

Further, though the artists that are the focus of this paper do not use human skin, understanding the connection between the viewer and skin as it is rooted in historical context is transferable to the reaction to animal skin. Because of our reliance on synthetic materials, instead of animal derived goods used for the same purpose, we have a lower tolerance for objects made of animal fiber compared to past times when animal objects were more common. This unique

¹³ Joel L. Swerdlow, "Unmasking Skin." *National Geographic*, (2002), 36-63.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

contemporary moment that holds this relationship to animal fibers allows for the artists to easily substitute animal skins for human skins. Though the reaction to animal skin may not be repulsion to the extreme that one would have to human skin, understanding how we came to have the common relationship to skin is applicable as we look at these works of art.

Skin in Art: Canvas, Material, and Metaphor

There is a general movement towards and a growing interest in the concept of skin, in other disciplines as well as in art. While I selected the three works I focus on in later chapters for their commonalities in material, ties to location, and themes, in the process of narrowing in on these works I came across a multitude of contemporary artists and curators who engage with skin in a variety of ways. This chapter serves to highlight the most common of these different approaches to skin to provide a broader knowledge base of trends in contemporary art surrounding the topic. By exploring the other ways skin can be addressed in art objects, the choices that bring with them a certain set of implications, made by Doris Salcedo, Janine Antoni, and Sonya Kelliher-Combs become more apparent.

While Salcedo, Antoni, and Kelliher-Combs are using animal fiber for their sculptures, other contemporary artists are using their own skin to talk about violence to themselves. Dutch artist Joanneke Meester (Dutch, b. 1966) had the assistance of a surgeon to remove a section of skin from her abdomen in order to construct *Pistol* (2012), a five-centimeter gun (Figure 9). She stitched the layers of her skin around a plastic and fiber mold using surgical thread. She says of this work, “The pistol out of my own skin was the most vulnerable and most violent [thing] that I could think of. Everything I read, saw, and heard concerning violence around me came together

in that sculpture. I was not only culprit and artist, but also victim.”¹⁵ Her tiny sculpture is kept in a jar of formaldehyde in her basement, perhaps inspired by Damien Hirst’s work *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, but is similar to Doris Salcedo’s *Atrabillaros* as the skin is stitched together with surgical thread. This use of surgical thread is contradictory as it is intended to bring skin together, but achieves this by puncturing new holes. The work is small and personal, but has the mark of the artist, physically through the material, but also, upon close inspection you can see what appear to be fingerprint-like patterns and hair follicles on the skin.

Another artist who uses his own skin is BLK group member Donald Rodney (British, 1961-1998). In his work *My Mother. My Father. My Sister. My Brother.* (1996-7) he constructed a tiny house, no larger than an inch and half, from his skin that was removed from one of his many surgeries to combat sickle cell anemia. The house resembles a child’s drawing with a simple gabled roof style, though missing the gable. The simplicity surely comes from the complexities in working with human skin, but evokes a return to childhood in the moments leading up to death. The relaxed hand that holds the house in the photograph rests on a white hospital sheet in a weekend state and speaks to the embrace of family and a sense of home while his body slowly began to fade.

His work holds ideas of family and mortality as his father died while Rodney was also in the hospital and unable to be at his father’s bedside.¹⁶ It also speaks to the consensual violence done to his body in hopes to prolong his life. Further, he documents the sculpture with photography to allude to the frequent use of body documentation he personally underwent in the

¹⁵ Joanneke Meester, “Pistol Made of Own Skin.” *Joanneke Meester*. <http://joannekemeester.wordpress.com> (accessed June 6, 2013).

¹⁶ Tanya Barson, “In the House of My Father.” *Tate*. <http://www.tate.org.uk> (accessed September 11, 2013).

form of x-rays. Similar to the work of Meester, the delicate work also contains the individualized lines of the artist's skin.

In both the works of Meester and Rodney, we see the artist using the hand of a doctor to remove the skin from their own body to be used for art making. While both differ greatly in the intent behind the procedure, they are both willingly subjects allowing violence to happen to their bodies from an outside force. By sculpting with their own skin, the artists engage in an interesting conversation of what it means to be an artist of one's self: to sculpt with the self, a material produced from one's own body. The intimacy of this material speaks acutely to the personal violence experienced by both the artists, intentionally becoming the victim as in the work by Meester, and genetically the victim as in the case of Rodney. The theme of self-inflicted violence contrasts to the themes of violence in the works of Salcedo and Antoni, in which they speak on those receiving violence from an outside, more powerful force, but is similar to the discussions of suicide brought up by the work of Kelliher-Combs. In the work of Meester and Rodney, as well as Kelliher-Combs, there is a similarity in the feelings of weakness or helplessness that leads one to use their own body as the thing they still have control over.

Control over one's own body is seen in the most extreme way in the work of Orlan (French, b. 1941). While similar in the use of manipulation of the artist's skin, Orlan undergoes plastic surgery to permanently alter her body as a performance piece (Figure 13). She takes local anesthesia to avoid feeling pain but forgoes the medication that would allow her to sleep through the procedure. This retained consciousness allows her to be aware and a part of the process of changing and modifying her body. She has assistants record the procedures, which become documentation of her process.¹⁷ She engages with idealized views of beauty in order to become them but ironically, becomes an outcast or freak herself.

¹⁷ Larry List and Martha Wilson, *Skin Trade*, exhibition catalogue, PPOW: Brooklyn, 2013, 30.

In contrast to the artists using skin and animal fibers as a sculptural material, Iranian artist Shirin Neshat (Iranian, b. 1957) uses photography of skin as a canvas. Neshat's series *Women of Allah* (1993-97) depicts women wearing the hijab and bearing weapons¹⁸. On their exposed skin, she inscribes lines of Persian calligraphy of female poets. Through this she speaks to the militancy and Islamic fundamentalism experience of women in her home country. By using photography and adding the written work over exposed skin, she is using the skin as identity of the women. By writing words of poetry written by women, she is making a visual connection to the exposure of the face with written word, which is not allowed. Pairing these images with weapons, she is planting visual cues of power while also commenting on violence. In her image *Speechless* (Figure 11), half of a woman's face fills the right side of the composition while the left side is the black shadow of the hijab from which the barrel of a handgun faces the viewer. The hidden weapon and the engaged expression of the women further support this image of power and violence.

While Neshat's work is seemingly unrelated to the work of Salcedo, Antoni, and Kelliher-Combs, she is in fact using concepts of power, violence, and identity through skin in a very similar way. The most obvious of these is her political voice through her work which she uses to raise awareness of suppression endured by women, including their right to literacy. Salcedo's work *Atrabiliarios* is similar in how she uses her work to raise political issues of violence on the less powerful. Salcedo's shoes give the disappeared women an identity in their independent niches similar to the Neshat's use of documentary photography.

¹⁸ An artist whose work makes for a great comparison to Shirin Neshat's photographs is Ronit Bigal's work *Untitled*, (Figure 4). In Bigal's work, he focuses on the beauty of the human body in close up photographs that abstract the figure. He then places gibberish writing in neat rows following the body's contour to create organic lines and shapes. By juxtaposing his work with Neshat's, we can see more acutely the significance of her political voice that contrasts with Ronit's interest in contours and lines.

Instead of using skin as a material or canvas to draw upon, Hunter Reynolds (American, b. 1959) and Sylvia Hatzl (German, b. 1966) both create a second skin as part of performance pieces. In *Mummification Performance Skin #1* (2011), the artist was wrapped in plastic wrap and then layers of duct tape so that his body was unable to move (Figure 14). Assistants then took him to a public city street using his available arm to maneuver him to a place on the sidewalk. After covering him in different colors of glitter, he was then propped up and removed from his cocoon with scissors. What then remains is a body outline in glitter on the ground, the duct tape second skin, and the video documentation.¹⁹

In German artist Sylvia Hatzl's work *The Visible and the Invisible* (2013) she creates translucent dresses out of fiber, linen, and animal intestines. The works hang from metal supports corresponding to the varying heights of the garments. For her performance at Rosenfield Porcini Gallery at the opening of her exhibition, she wore one of the works and performed a lyrical and biomorphic dance while a sound artist played live. Both Reynolds and Hatzl create a "second skin" through which they draw attention to the fragility and mortality of the first and natural layer of skin.

While the work of these artists varies widely, there are a few common threads that can be seen throughout. Themes of violence, mortality, and identity reappear continually. While all of these works deserve a more intimate discussion, I provide them here to further contextualize the key three works to be discussed, but also to support the claim that there is a growing interest in skin in art. This is due to the types of ideas that have a need to be conveyed, which skin can provide. This brief description of other artists working with skin as material or metaphor is not all-inclusive but further supports the argument that there is trend towards an obsession with skin in art.

¹⁹ Larry List, *Skin Trade*, 52.

Skin in Exhibitions: The Constructed Conversation

In addition to the increasing number of artists working with skin, there has also been a notable increase in the number of exhibitions addressing issues of skin. Looking at these exhibitions adds to the understanding of the discourse on skin in contemporary art as they vary in approaches, artists, and meanings. While the list of exhibitions on skin continues to grow, as far as I have found, they all take a conceptual approach instead of looking at works actually made from the material of skin or animal fibers. This is important to notice because neither Janine Antoni nor Doris Salcedo have been viewed as skin or animal fiber artists even though they have used animal fibers in their work.

It is hard to say whether curators are feeding off the artists' move to the subject of skin or if they are simultaneously inspired by each other. In either case, the focus on skin in curatorial practice is relevant to this discussion on animal fiber as a sculptural medium because curating creates a dialogue between works of art that is not present when the work is shown singularly or within the artist's own body of work of which it is a part. The aim of this section is to draw attention to this movement of curators to work with the concept and metaphor of skin in art and the content that arise among the works. Further it is important to analyze the structure of the exhibitions to understand how they function and how they achieve the goal of the curators. In order to do this, I will look at three key exhibitions from the past decade to compare the structure and approach taken.

Skin Trade at the PPOW Galley in New York City was on display from June 27 to July 27, 2013 and was curated by Martha Wilson and Larry List. In this exhibition the curators separated the works of art into categories of *eros*, *identity*, *beauty*, and *mortality*. In the introduction of the accompanying catalogue the curators state:

In slang, the term 'skin trade' refers to 'any or all aspect of the burlesque, exotic dance, pornography or prostitution industries.' But taken in parts, skin – trade, can imply many

types of exchange – one made with another person, society at large, or even a private bargain made with oneself. There are many possibilities but they are almost always concerned with eros, beauty, identity, or mortality.²⁰

While I find their categories problematic due to the segregation and limitations imposed on the art, for their purposes of the exhibition they function to highlight certain aspects of the individual works. By creating these subcategories, some of the pieces included actually become less about skin than they are about the subcategory in which they are placed. One example of this can be found in the work *Vanity* (2011) by Bonnie Rychlak (American, b. 1951). Larry List describes the work as being influenced by Modernist furniture, swimming pools, and “the body conscious beach culture of southern California.” The work is composed of a desk lamp but instead of the bulb and shade, it has a mirror surrounded by an anamorphous flesh-toned beeswax form with a drain of some sort sticking out of it (Figure 16).²¹ While this work has a clear connection to the subcategory of beauty and its fleeting qualities, it does not add to the discussion of skin directly. Despite the failure of a selection of the works to contribute to the discourse on skin individually, when placed together and taken as the sum of the parts of the exhibition, they begin to take on a new meaning.

While Orlan’s piece *Omnipresence: Seventh Surgery Performance* in her series *The Reincarnation of Saint-Orlan* (1993) was categorized as *identity*, in the gallery it was positioned on a wall adjacent to Elana Katz’s *Color Me Clear* (2011) performance (Figure 16), which was labeled under the category of *beauty*. In Katz’s work, for six hours she meticulously paints her face with makeup before wiping it off onto a small canvas. She repeats this 144 times.²² The placement of these works near each other creates a conversation on how the two artists are repetitively recreating their image to achieve beauty.

²⁰ Ibid., 7.

²¹ Ibid., 38.

²² Ibid., 36.

In the exhibition *Skin: an Artistic Atlas* (2013), the Royal Hibernian Academy worked in conjunction with Irish Skin Foundation to create a show to discuss skin both in medicine and art. Unlike *Skin Trade*, the curator Patrick T. Murphy focused on what each individual work of art had to say on the topic of skin. Interestingly, and as suggested by the involvement of the Irish Skin Foundation, the exhibit began with a collection of medical watercolors that documented skin disease. Noting the empathy found in the treatment of the depiction of the patient by the artist, Murphy began research to discover other works of art that would be in dialogue with this starting point.²³ Similar to *Skin Trade*, there are works that speak to the sexuality of skin, but also several others that show tenderness and comfort in ways that were left out by *Skin Trade*.

An interesting similarity in the two exhibitions is the use of art from two of the same artists. One of these artists was Robert Mapplethorpe (American, 1946-1989); in *Skin Trade*, his work *Man in a Polyester Suit* (1980, Figure 17) was included and in *Skin: an Artistic Atlas*, both *Lisa Lyon* (1980) and *Ken and Tyler* (1985) were shown. In the work *Sweat Pore Sweat Pore* (1999), Jeanne Silverthorne (American, b. 1950) recreates a microscopic view of a sweat pore in flesh-toned rubber (Figure 18). The close range of the image abstracts the content to a pure composition of flowing organic lines. This specific piece was included in both exhibitions.

A third exhibition for discussion is *Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor*, which was on exhibit in 2009 at the National Museum of the American Indian. The title holds a double meaning, as is explained in the catalogue: “There is a literal *material* hide—whether buffalo, deer, or walrus—and the reference to that which is *hidden*, under the radar screen, disguised, out of view.”²⁴ The director, Kevin Gover (Pawnee) writes that skin and its pigmentation has been

²³ Patrick T. Murphy, Aidan Dunne, and Dr. Eoin O’Brien, *Skin: An Artistic Atlas*, Royal Hibernian Academy and Irish Skin Foundation, (2013): 5.

²⁴ *Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor*, (New York: Smithsonian Institution, 2010), 9.

very important to Native Americans, especially in the last several centuries. At times it has been venerated while at other times it has made him and his people “vulnerable to hate and violence.”²⁵

This idea of skin tone as identity, or the thought that Natives should appear a prescribed way, is found throughout the exhibition. In a photographic work by Erica Lord (Native Alaskan, b. 1978) titled *I Tan to Look More Native*, the artist poses with her back to the camera (Figure 19). The title of the work reads across her back in block letters as though the letters were placed on her before tanning and now reveals her natural skin tone. In other works in the series she uses phrases of “Indian Looking,” “Half Breed,” and “Colonize Me” to confront the “insecurities and superficial characteristics” that both Native Americans and non-Natives use to evaluate mixed-race Indians.²⁶

A similar approach in using language through photography is found in the portrait series by KC Adams (Native America, b. 1971) in which the sitter wears a white t-shirt against a white background with phrases like “Adopted Out,” “My Grandmother Was Cherokee,” and “Chief” on the shirts. The stark whiteness of the images functions to highlight the darkness of the sitters hair and skin tones which has been perfected by the artist as well as given a uniform glowing bronze hue. Each phrase is tied to the sitter to reflect a personal story of their experiences. For example in the work *Cyborg Hybrid Yatika*, the sitter Yatika Fields was once a bike messenger who was repeatedly called “chief” by his frequented patrons rather than learning his name (Figure 20).²⁷

This exhibition includes works made of hide, metal, and other materials as well, but was focused on the concept of skin tone as identity. Race and skin tone were absent from *Skin: an Artist Atlas* as it took a broad unifying approach to skin. In *Skin Trade*, three works addressed race through contrast of black and white, but did not address other possibilities.

²⁵ Ibid., 7.

²⁶ Ibid., 21.

²⁷ Ibid., 32.

The purpose of this discussion is to point out the increase in exhibitions on skin while also looking at the ways in which the curators are piecing together works of art to create dialogues on the topic. It is also worth pointing out that as far as I have researched to find, not yet has there been an exhibition that focuses on skin as a sculptural medium. Instead, they each approach skin as a metaphor. While I am not saying that one approach is more appropriate than another, it is noteworthy that this approach has not yet been taken.

CHAPTER II

VIOLENCIA Y VACÍO: DORIS SALCEDO'S *ATRABILARIOS*

Colombian artist Doris Salcedo (Colombian, b. 1958) creates sculptures and installations to discuss and draw attention to the corrupt politics and need for social justice in her country. Despite the growing economy and a stable political system when compared to other countries in the region, Colombia's greatest struggle has been with violence surrounding drug trafficking. In 1988 alone, 3,000 Colombians lost their lives²⁸ from involvement with the drug cartel, becoming victim to acts of violence for political purposes, or through random acts of violence and kidnappings. How or why these people lose their lives is not always clear, but it has a measurable impact on the people living with the losses. Compounding the effects of loss, many of these individuals are missing for long periods of time before being found dead, if they are ever found at all. The disappeared people make up a unique type of violence and grief as the loss of people is magnified by the lack of knowing if the person is alive or not. One such work is her installation

²⁸ *The Killings in Colombia*, (Washington DC: Americas Watch Committee, 1989), 1. This older version was referenced instead of the most recent since it would have been current information as Salcedo was first beginning to work on *Atrabiliarios*.

Atrabiliarios (Figure 1) in which she collects shoes of disappeared individuals, predominantly women, and places them in niches carved out of the gallery wall. She then covers the opening with a thin layer of animal fiber. The openings in the wall are slightly larger than the shoes they hold and visually draw on images of shoes nestled in shoeboxes. The animal fiber that covers the openings, like a door or lid, is stitched to the wall using black surgical thread, which gives the appearance of a post-surgical site of stretched skin. Each time the work is installed, it varies in the number of niches and spacing between each one, but consistently constructed are the ways in which the shoes are displayed in groupings with varying distances between each one. They are placed in this way at eye level so the average viewer can peer directly into the niches. Metaphorically the ease of viewing the shoes is similar to the viewers' relationship to the actual events they represent. The work and the violence only ask the viewer to turn their head to see, as opposed to work that is more demanding of the viewer's participation.

This chapter considers how the artwork functions for the families and people of Colombia but focuses on the use of material and how these materials speak to themes of loss, violence, and mortality through emptiness. Further, the medium of animal fiber will be analyzed closely in how its use contributes to and supports these themes. Among the violences and deaths of Colombia, arguably the most difficult to bear is the loss of people who disappear without a trace. Often these individuals are never recovered and without the body to bury and mourn, the families are left without a sense of closure or knowing the facts of the fate of their loved one. In the rare case that the bodies are found, they often show signs of torture and abuse.²⁹ The shoes in this work were donated to Salcedo by the families of the lost individuals. With these donations, Salcedo spends a great length of time with the families to truly understand their stories and pain. In an interview with Salcedo, she describes the work as more than just the art that comes about, but as an intimate experience through which she gets to know the family and missing person in

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

such a way that she personally takes on the pain felt by the families. Salcedo then uses these stories as starting point to build from.

Salcedo states that, “I don’t formulate the experience of the victim, rather, I assemble it so that it remains forever a presence in the present moment.”³⁰ Though the shoes are not labeled with any identifying information to tie the object to their individual owner, the shoes themselves represent the people in a much more personal way than a name could. As the shoes were utilitarian objects used by their owner, they carry the marks and scuffs of the actual experiences of that person. Further, the shoes' interior holds the imprint of the specific feet belonging to the person. As the shoes were worn, with each step the soles of the shoes became more formed to the individual foot. Similar to a fingerprint, the shoes serve as a very personal connection to the missing person.

As art historian Mieke Bal discusses in her book *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art*, the concept of the trace functions in a way similar to the fingerprint.³¹ The trace is a lingering element personal to the individual that captures or represents the whole of the person in their absence. The concept of the trace functions in this work in two ways. As Bal explains, the shoes hold a trace of the person who owned them and has left their mark within them through the visual evidence of imperfections of the shoes, but mostly through the fingerprint-like imprint of the soles of their feet in the soles of their shoes. In this way the trace is not just a representation or substitute for the absent person, but in fact is an extension or remnant of the physical body. In Bal’s discussion of Salcedo’s work, she focuses on material and emptiness:

³⁰ Madeleine Grynsztejn, *About Place: Recent Art of the Americas*, (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1995), 137.

³¹ Mieke Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 34.

“In *Atrabiliarios*, the trace is material. It is the shoe where a foot has been, should be, can be again. Precisely because of that materiality, the trace is marked by the absence of the content of which is literally a senseless container. This is the material paradox: it is both material and materially empty.”³²

It is not the shoe itself that is the trace but the emptiness that the shoe holds that is the trace of the person who is gone. If the individual were to be found, their foot would replace the trace, which would then cease to exist.

Secondly, the animal fiber that covers these holes is a material only brought about through the death of another living being. In order to produce the material of the animal fibers, an animal had to be slaughtered and processed. Because of this, the fibers hold within them a trace of the animal that once lived, but was also killed for the construction of this work. Both of these deaths, the person and the animal, are significant in how all of the materials for the installation are produced and come to be in the gallery through the deaths of many. The death of the animal for the material of its fibers functions to further emphasize the deaths behind the objects of the shoes. This added element of the animal’s death increases the emotional weight of the installation; it is literally constructed out of the deaths of numerous life forms. The only material that could be questioned as being outside of this common origin of death is the surgical thread. While Salcedo is not clear on the type of thread she is using, it is important to note that historically the thread was formed from catgut, which comes from the intestines of sheep and horses.³³ Even if Salcedo is using a synthetic based surgical thread, it alludes to its history of animal products, further supporting the concept of material origin in death.

Because of the nature of the violence, often the bodies of the victims are never recovered, which leaves the families in the dark regarding the fate of their loved one. This refusal to allow

³² Ibid.

the families to mourn their losses keeps many of them from seeking closure with the false hope that they may see their family members again. The memorial quality of the work serves this human need to seek acceptance of loss. The shoes in the wall are like ashes in a mausoleum of a family tomb.³⁴ While it is said that *Atrabiliarios* gives a burial to the unburyable, the number of shoes in her work cannot compare to the vast number of individuals lacking a memorial service. Because of this lack of representation, the few represent the whole.

This theme of emptiness continues throughout the work. As mentioned above, the trace represents the lost person as well as the death of the animal for its parts, but the lack of material and the emptiness within containers is seen in both the niches and the boxes on the floor. The literal and figurative emptiness of the shoe is held within the emptiness that is carved out of the wall. Through the use of animal fibers, Salcedo covers and attempts to conceal this hollowness, but its translucency allows a skewed view into its confines. Further, the boxes on the ground are empty as they represent the future losses to be had. The translucency of these boxes is important for the viewer to discern their emptiness. Had they been opaque and disguised their lack of filling, they would be viewed as a heavy element holding the deaths of others. By allowing the viewers to be able to peer within, it has a lighter and more ghost-like appearance, foreshadowing what is to come while inviting intervention.

Atrabiliarios is complex in how it speaks to the individual lost and the violence in Colombia as a whole. The shoes are highly individualized, but because the owner is unidentified, through metaphor, the shoes become symbolic for the everyman, or predominantly in this case, the every woman. The shoes are further segregated in how they are displayed in a grouping but each pair, or individual, is kept in its own grave-like space. Contrast this to the mass killings in Nazi Germany and the photos that circulated of stacks of corpses (Figure 22). Though the boxes

³⁴ *Doris Salcedo*, exhibition catalogue, (New Museum of Contemporary Art and SITE Santa Fe: 1998), 20.

are suggestive of these mass graves in the manner in which they are stacked, because of form, they allow for personal space apart from the other casualties. Through this imagery, the stacked boxes allude to the masses at which people are lost while also focusing on the individualization and humanity that was absent in the Nazi imagery.

In *Atrabiliarios*, there is an intertwining of the individual and the generalized. To make this point, we can juxtapose it with an image of a mass grave from Belson concentration camp. In the mass grave the bodies are piled in a careless manner lacking order. There is nothing memorializing or individualistic about the burial of these people: there is no grave marker, indication of name, or personal space. Similarly, in *Atrabiliarios* there is no indication of who resides in the metaphorical grave, but order is retained and space is provided for each individual. While some niches have a single shoe, most of them have a pair, but never more than one set of shoes in an individual niche. In this way, she allows each person to have his or her own personal coffin-like space. A visual comparison is the way in which the boxes are stacked which speaks to the stacking of bodies in the mass grave image. Because of this comparison, Salcedo's work compares the tragedies in Colombia to that which was seen in the genocide of Jews during the Holocaust. The purpose of this is to incite a sense of urgency to address these social issues in Colombia.

Choosing to incorporate animal fiber into the work brings a new set of qualities to address. First, because of the translucency of the medium it allows the viewer to peer into the niches while distorting and altering the shoes within. While the niches with the animal fiber closures function as tombs, they also create a visual and physical barrier to the shoes within as if metaphorically representing the separation the viewer and the families have from the missing person. In addition, this distortion that eludes the details of the objects within gives the objects a

ghostlike quality.³⁵ The ghostliness and ambiguousness also serves to represent the unknowns and unknowables surrounding the loss of the individual.

Looking at this material not just in the effect it has on the work but on what it contains inside itself is important. Surely an undeniably similar effect could have been achieved with a different type of fibrous paper. Why then does the work necessitate the product from an animal to convey its meaning? Supporting the theme of violence through the use of surgical thread, the inherent death in the production of the animal fiber carries the weight of the loss of lives in the installation. Although the victimized cow is not the subject of the work, similar to how the shoes hold a trace of their former owners, the animal fiber encases the animals' lived experience. Again, it comes down to the value of the work being constructed, literally, out of death.

The use of surgical thread to bind the rawhide coverings to the wall represents violence and healing. The act of stitching, repetitive penetration and pulling, bores new holes in the animal fiber that cannot heal because the fiber is a post-mortem product. There is an absurdity here in the post-surgical moment that *Atrabiliarios* exists because though sutures function to hold skin closed while it repairs itself, in this installation, the thread holds lifeless materials together without the hope of healing or having the stitches removed at a later point. This creates a paradox of wanting to heal the wound left by those who have disappeared with inability for these people to heal without knowledge. Or, even looking at it from a wider perspective, the lack of clarity or hope that Colombia will be able to heal from these violent happenings.

The unevenness of the stitching appear as though they were carelessly stitched together in such a way that even if healing were to happen, the scar left would be hideous in comparison to a meticulously stitched wound that heals to show only tidy rows of healed needle wounds. The

³⁵ An interesting connection to make here is found in the work of Sylvia Hatzl whose sculptures in the form of dresses constructed from material such as intestines also have this ghostlike appearance. Something about the material draws artists to use it for these aesthetics. See also Chapter I, section *Skin in Art: Canvas, Material, and Metaphor*.

haphazardness of the stitches then function to show that when Colombians find peace, a clean healed scar will not remain in the past but these acts of violence will leave a gruesome mark on Colombia's history.

Salcedo's use of animal derived materials represents not only those who have perished in the violence surrounding the drug cartels but also the fact that overcoming these violences is not a clean an easy task. It accepts that to reach social justice, more people will lose their lives. While Salcedo is very invested in the current state of her native country, she is able to convey these concepts of violence and mortality through the use of the trace. The trace, as I have identified as being the absence of the body, functions by using emptiness as an object to convey this violence and mortality. Through the use of the medium of animal fibers, she is able to use its translucency inherent in it to blur the objects that hold the emptiness for purposes of ambiguity to allude to the unknown fates and possible ghostliness. By using an animal product, for which animals had to die, she has created an installation that is completely constructed out of death to further push a sense of urgency to find solutions for Colombians. While Salcedo offers us no solutions for Colombia, she uses her political art to bring attention to the events that have plagued her country for decades.

CHAPTER III

FEMININE SLAUGHTERING: JANINE ANTONI'S *SADDLE*

In a historical moment focused on the problems of industrialized food, with limited laws regulating the treatment of the animals, American artist Janine Antoni produced a body of work that questions the ways in which we consume meat, specifically beef. In her work, she not only makes claims about the animals, but in order to do so, creates parallels to the treatment of women. By using cow rawhide, she engages with the work of Salcedo and Kelliher-Combs by incorporating emptiness and fragility to speak on issues of violence.

In 2000, Antoni spent a year at a residency at the Wanas Foundation, located in Knislinge, Sweden.³⁶ While on the rural estate, Antoni created a body of work inspired by her reaction to and feelings towards the adjacent dairy farm. Through these works she coalesces concepts of the nurturing maternal figure with that of mortality and consumption. The exposure to the dairy farm influenced concepts of consumability, objectivity, and industrialization of the maternal. Her body of work shows sensitivity and compassion as well as the violence toward

³⁶ Princenthal, "Janine Antoni: Mother's Milk." 129.

biological. The works she produced there all incorporate these concepts: the cow, her body, and animals. While this chapter will focus on her work *Saddle* (Figure 3), other works produced out of this residency are in dialogue with and contribute to her conversation about consumption and animals.

For instance, her work *2038* (Figure 4), Antoni is photographed while nude in a bathtub that is functioning as a water trough inside a barn. Though there are many cows within the frame, the cow with the ear tag number 2038, that the work is named after, has her head bowed down taking a drink from the trough. Hidden below the lip of the tub, one of Antoni's breasts and the cow's mouth are just out of view, suggesting that the cow is nursing from Antoni. In a 2003 interview Antoni stated that this work represented how her whole life she had drank from the cow, and in this photograph, the positions are reversed so that the cow is drinking from her.³⁷ Through this act she is equalizing herself with the cow, which not only shows compassion for the cow but also offers her own body to the cow for consumption.

This leads to the work *Saddle* because again she is putting her own body at the same level as the cow. For the creation of *Saddle*, Antoni took a full rawhide and draped it over a plaster cast of herself while down on her hands and knees. While the material was still malleable, she formed it to the mold capturing the details of her feet, hips, and shoulders. Once the hide had completely dried, the cast was removed and the hide was stiff enough to stand on its own. By removing the plaster mold, the rawhide allows light to pass through its walls. The use of this material in conjunction with the position of the artist on hands and knees visually makes the connection between animals and women in their shared experience of inferior life form used for consumption.

³⁷ "Loss and Desire." *Art 21: Art of the Twenty-First Century*. PBS, Season 2, 2003.

In an interview, Antoni explains this work as being directly about the emptiness within the piece. At the end of the process of its creation the artist and the cow are no longer present in the piece in their live form, but are represented in the form of shadows of their former presence. They are both no longer physically there but through the construction have left a ghostlike quality of them with in it. “So actually she [*Saddle*] is totally hollow inside,” says Antoni, “and that is really important also because I really want to the viewer to feel the absence of me and the absence of the cow.”³⁸ While Antoni states that she and the cow are no longer there, it is more accurate to specify that they are no longer there in the same state. While it is true that the cow and artist are gone in the form of a breathing body, they are both still present through the trace as discussed by Mieke Bal.³⁹ Through the specificity of the form unique to Antoni’s body and through the actual physical remains of the cow’s body, both have left behind a ghost-like substitute for themselves. As Antoni says the work is about their absence, it is actually their presence in this reduced form that causes the viewer to notice their absence.

In addition to absence, Antoni describes the hide as depicting “the body underneath the veil.”⁴⁰ While veils historically have been used to conceal for an array of reasons, they all ultimately are used as a barrier to keep separate two opposite things; such as holy and secular, dead and alive, etc. What is interesting about this idea of the veil as it applies to this work is that there is nothing actually being concealed or separated from the outside in *Saddle*. The form has been removed and all that is left under the veil is the space that was once occupied by the plaster cast and ultimately, Antoni herself. The veil in essence covers the *idea* of the female figure that is hollow inside leaving just the fleshy shell that is no longer a representation of what is within. Perhaps her link to the use of the veil is to create a longing towards what is hidden beneath the

³⁸ “Loss and Desire”

³⁹ For a more in depth discussion of the trace see Chapter II.

⁴⁰ “Loss and Desire”

veil. Or perhaps this shell-likeness is to say the woman underneath is viewed only by her exterior and that her interior, under the veil of cowhide, is seen as nonexistent by an outside viewer.

The orientation of the work also plays a key role when analyzing this work because it seems to have a strategic placement. Most sculptures are meant to be viewed at all angles, this piece differs as in nearly every photograph the work is shot with a view on the backend of the sculpture and in galleries it has been placed so the viewer comes up from behind the sculpture as well. In addition to this deliberate placement, the artist molded most of the details into the feet and back portion of the sculpture creating more visual attention to the rear end in comparison to the front end of the work. Compare the details molded into the toes and the fold that seems to suggest a tail with the front end that only hints at a hand of fingers. The front has been left as natural folds in the material without much suggestion of what lies beneath.

This focus on the hindquarters of the sculpture seems to evoke feelings of shame or melancholy as the figure represented is turned away not wanting to make eye contact or engage with the viewer. Antoni says, “All the cow pieces were an effort to relate to the cow to understand it and to understand my relationship to it. For me to get on my hands and knees is really to imitate the animal in some way but also it is clearly a submissive pose.”⁴¹ To further support the argument for the work’s submissiveness, the figure’s head is bowed, not looking straight ahead or at the ground grazing mimicking a cow as she suggests.

Selecting the title of *Saddle* gives it an obvious sexual and domination implications as saddles are utilitarian objects intended to be sat upon and ridden. This implies a physical relationship between the saddle, in the form of a woman, and the implied rider. The idea of calling it a saddle suggests an interaction between an object being used and the person using the

⁴¹ “Loss and Desire”

object. Also, calling the woman a saddle further objectifies her as not a woman but a tool for pleasure or utilitarian purposes.

Saddle also implies the death of a cow for the production of an object from its hide. The cow and the saddle cannot coexist. It is only with the death of the cow that the saddle can be created from it. This speaks to the concept of the person with the power slaying one with less power for the benefit of the former. As applied to this piece in a sexualized way, the woman is objectified and her needs, wants, and life are only secondary to the non-depicted one with power. In Carol Adams' book *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, she brings up this same idea of an animal traded for its hide. She calls this the "absent referent." She says:

Through butchering, animal become absent referents. Animals in name and body are made absent *as animals* for meat to exist. Animals' lives precede and enable the existence of meat... Without animals there would be no meat eating, yet they are absent from the act of eating meat because they have been transformed into food.⁴²

In *Saddle*, the animal has been traded for its rawhide to create the piece and in the same way as Adams describes the absence of the animal in meat, here the cow as living creature ceases to exist. Only with the animal, and its subsequent death, can the hide, and by extension the sculpture, exist.

The translucency of the work highlights its emptiness while also drawing attention to the thinness of its walls and perceived fragility, similar to the use of animal fiber in Salcedo's work. The figure's head hangs down and is pointed away from the viewer insinuating a melancholy or sadness about the piece. The work also suggests a consumability of the cow as its hide is now called "saddle" as though instead of seeing a living creature when looking at the cow, it is only viewed for the utilitarian products its body parts have the potential of becoming.

Antoni left the edges in their raw state so that the rawhide retains its blanket or sheet-like quality of being draped over something as if to hide or conceal what is underneath. This attempt

⁴² Carol J. Adams *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, (Continuum Intl Pub Group: New York, 1999), 51.

to conceal is juxtaposed by the contours of Antoni's body which reveals what is, or was, under the veil. While the veil does not completely hide the figure, it does distort and alter it.

While Antoni says she wants the viewer to see the absence of her and the cow, they are both very much still a part of the sculpture. As skin is the largest organ and takes in the most information of all the senses, many of the cow's experiences are encapsulated within the sculpture. In contrast to the lifetime of experiences felt by the cow in the rawhide, the form it now takes captures only a moment of Antoni's life while she posed for the mold to be made.

By Antoni's usage of a material that was once living, it incites an emotional response from the viewer that is not evoked through traditional art mediums. It is also interesting that the raw hide was once the skin of a cow serving as not only a mode of communication from the outside to the inside but also served as a boundary, border, and material to keep the inside contained and separated from the outside. Although Antoni does not keep its function as stimulus transmitter, she does continue to use it as boundary. By placing her body in the position of the cow, Antoni brings attention to the cow's experience and death for the benefit of the consumer. By placing a human figure in the cow's stead it draws on the viewers' pathos inciting sympathy for the animal while also making a comparison between the animal and the woman as objects for consumption.

In light of the food industry in the United States, cattle are seen as consumables. Cows are no longer seen as animals but are looked at as how companies can get the most meat or milk in the quickest amount of time from them. This way of manufacturing is not concerned with the animal being consumed, but only for the bottom line of the individual companies. In much the same way, *Saddle* talks about the sexual relationship between the viewer and the sculpture. The concept of woman is only cattle to supply a need and profit for the man. When speaking on the titling of her piece *2038*, she says that naming it the cow's ear tag number, "epitomized our

relationship to the cow, it was hardly an animal anymore but a biological machine. I wanted that to contrast the kind of tenderness of the image.”⁴³ Her statement on the idea of a “biological machine” can also be applied to *Saddle* as it suggests that the woman, mimicking the cow, is also like the cow in how they can both be viewed as consumable for the purpose of someone else’s gain or personal pleasure. By using the cow itself to speak about the violence done to the cow, she creates a work that epitomizes the relationship of the cow to the powerful slaughterer figure. Through this and the trace, she incorporates the themes of fragility, mortality, and emptiness.

⁴³ “Loss and Desire”

CHAPTER IV

HIDDEN NOTIONS: SONYA KELLIHER-COMBS' COMMON THREAD

In the work of native Alaskan artist, Sonya Kelliher-Combs (Native Alaskan, b. 1969), the imagery, materials, and techniques from both Iñupiaq⁴⁴ and Athabaskan traditions are interwoven together within a contemporary framework. As discussed in Chapter I, skin has played a variety of roles over time and in different locations, based on each culture's unique identity and history. Native Alaskan groups provide an example of how a material and the relationship of the people to that material can be passed down for generations. These groups feel such a tie to their heritage and their land that continuing the relationship with the material is important. Alaska is home to seven different Native cultures grouped by the language spoken with subgroups and tribes. While there are similarities and commonalities among the groups, they are each markedly different. In this chapter, I will look at the work of Kelliher-Combs and how her use of animal parts, among other culturally inspired mediums, in her work draws on Native traditions while it also accentuates the violence that happens in her community of Nome, and in

⁴⁴ Iñupiaq speakers are a part of the Eskimo family, which is broken down into eight groups based on their individually spoken languages.

such devastating numbers. Her works cohesively address issues of violence directed at others and the self, which are issues that plague her community.

In Kelliher-Combs' work *Common Thread* (2008-10) she creates phallus shaped pockets out of reindeer and sheep rawhide and nylon thread that she calls "secrets" (Figure 5). According to Kelliher-Combs, they are intended to mimic the shape of walrus tusks, which are a common motif in her Iñupiaq culture.⁴⁵ Because of the use of rawhide, the "secrets" are translucent and interact with light while also hiding and distorting what could be placed inside them. The ninety-three animal fiber tusks are arranged in three parallel rows of all different shapes and sizes and vary in tonality. Through her use of repetition and contemporary display practices, paired with traditional Native Alaskan materials, she merges contemporary aesthetic with craft influenced by her heritage.

Despite Kelliher-Combs' claims that the pouches are intended to mimic the forms of walrus tusks, they are actually much more closely related to a human phallus through their dimensions and ratios. The shape of a tusk is an elongated cylindrical form that curves and tapers to a point. These pockets are only approximately two to three times as long as they are wide and are rounded at the end instead of coming to a point. Because of this, and the skin tone of the sacks, they easily read as rows of phalluses, or a second skin to the phallus in the form of a contraceptive sheath.

Another way they function is through their verticality and space between each one, they seem to represent abstracted individuals. This tied with the above reference, represents the idea of "secrets" in a highly sexualized way. Although, this grouping could also represent the multiplicity of people that make up her community and through this, she seems to equalize all members

⁴⁵ Kathleen E. Ash-Milby, *Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor*, (Washington D.C.: NMAI Editions, National Museum of the American Indian, 2009), 45.

through the ownership of secrets. This reading suggests that perhaps all members of her society are concealing secrets. The contradiction between what the artist says of the work and what the work says for itself leaves room for a multitude of interpretations and personal definition of “secret.”

Regardless of what the “secrets” actually are, walrus tusk or phallus, through their material and tie to both Athabaskan and Iñupiaq traditions, they hold perceived fragility, translucency, and emptiness that aim to both draw attention to and conceal violence. Using animal materials is a practice that dates back as far as the Native Alaskan people who use them. By using seal and walrus parts to construct Kelliher-Combs’ work, she is creating a direct connection to her heritage and the historical practice of processing the animal fibers. In both Iñupiaq and Athabaskan traditions, it takes a community to hunt, process the material, and create functional objects from the animal fibers. So, by creating these “secrets” out of these materials, she is engaging with the same communal process to get from animal to art.

The tusk shape that Kelliher-Combs employs mimics the motif found in Iñupiaq traditions. While many Alaskan tribes use animal tusk and bones for decorative carving and to make tools, the Iñupiaq are unique in how they use this motif to decorate items such as in clothing.⁴⁶ Parkas are often worn to protect from the elements but could also be used to show identification through adornment. Around the neck holes of the garment there is often fur to keep the wearer warm and jutting out from this are two tusk-like shapes that are created through the weaving of the material. Kelliher-Combs’ use of this motif along with the chosen material incorporates elements of her history into a contemporary work of art.

While *Common Thread* does not contain beads or human hair, many of Kelliher-Combs’ other works of “secrets” include these elements. This use of glass beads is influenced by her

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Athabaskan history as the bead trade was introduced to the tribe in the 19th century.⁴⁷ Nearly all objects created by Athabaskan people included highly detailed and colorful beadwork. Though the main work in this discussion does not use beads, this example of Kelliher-Combs engaging in these historical customs further supports the interweaving of her diverse background.

While Kelliher-Combs draws on these traditions, she places her artwork outside of the environment it comes from and shows her work in a contemporary art context. By doing this, she removes her work from the sphere of native craft and placing it in front of an audience that is not accustomed to viewing objects made of animal fibers in a rawhide state. Kelliher-Combs intentionally does this to evoke notions of repulsion and disgust to further accentuate feeling of violence and sadness. This object-out-of-placeness draws on Kristeva's use of the abject that causes the viewer to simultaneously be repulsed by the grotesqueness of the animal material but also the placement of animal material in a gallery. In contemporary art, while there are plenty of disgusting materials brought into the gallery such as urine and feces to name a few, the viewer still has expectations of paintings on canvas or sculptures of a certain type of material. Much like the history of the "found object" or "ready made" sculptures of the early twentieth century, at first appalling and then later accepted, animal fibers and other once living materials still fall within the unexpected and unaccepted category. While the material of her sculptures are integrated into the lifestyle of Native Alaskan people, when these materials are placed in a contemporary art facility, they conjure feelings of confusion and repulsion from their being placed in an out of place location.

By doing this, Kelliher-Combs places her work outside of her cultural space while simultaneously tying it directly back to the culture that she emerged from through her use of material and motifs. In this way, she creates art in a vein of contemporary art training as she

⁴⁷ Aron L. Crowell, *Living Our Cultures Sharing Our Heritage*, (Smithsonian Institution: Washington, 2010), 190.

graduated with her MFA from Arizona State University, Tempe,⁴⁸ which situates her work in an arena segregated from native craft providing her work with a different audience. While she is working under the category of contemporary art, as stated in an interview, she still feels very much a part of her native culture and does not want that to be removed from her work.⁴⁹ This is important because she is not working as a craftsman which would make the community she comes from the audience of the work, but uses craftsmen techniques such as preparing the animal fiber, sewing, and beading, to put her work in front of an audience outside of her own community. By keeping this cultural aspect heavily integrated in her work, the sculptures function in a way that bridges gaps between her diverse audience and her identity with her own diverse yet unique background. In doing this, she is bringing her culture, through her work, into spaces that are not predominantly Alaskan natives, as it would be in her town of Nome. Because her work combines both contemporary art approaches and culturally relevant materials, it somehow belongs in an abstracted existence between both. It is rejected by her community because it is not craft and is seen as repulsive by the art viewing community because of its material. This non-acceptance by either group creates a tension, not dissimilar from her own adolescent experience of confusion of her native and Angelo background.

Sonya Kelliher-Combs has a mixed background of Inupiaq, Athabaskan, Irish, and German. This diversity caused her to feel unsure of her heritage though adolescence.⁵⁰ She embraces her Alaskan heritage and is very tied to her sense of place there. In her sculptures she addresses issues that are less than fully embraced by her people such as high suicide rates and

⁴⁸ Ash-Milby, 108.

⁴⁹ Ken DeRoux, "Sonya Kelliher-Combs Interview." *Alaska State Museum*. 12 Mar. 2001. Accessed 15 Sept. 2013.

http://museums.alaska.gov/TemporaryExhibits/Sonya/Sonya_Interview.htm.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

abuse⁵¹. Because of this, there is a push away from some people in here community, but Kelliher-Combs is constant and persistent to push back and keep ties to her upbringing.

In Kelliher-Combs' work *Goodbye* (2007) and *Idiot Strings* (2005) she uses the repetitive symbol of a mitten to metaphorically wave goodbye to those in her family and community that have committed suicide (Figures 6 and 7). In the former, she uses the actual mittens of lost community members to create a memorial of sorts while also raising awareness of this devastating problem in Alaska. In *Idiot Strings*, the title refers to the string that connects two mittens so one does not get lost, but is similar to *Common Thread* in materials. The mittens in this work are sewn together using animal fibers, instead of ready-made mittens. Kelliher-Combs addresses the self-aimed violence.

Kelliher-Combs says on the content of her work, "Many of the works... are difficult to make. Some I have spent years digesting before creation- in particular, those addressing issues like suicide and abuse. I do not know a single person who has not been affected by either."⁵² While she goes on to explain that many people in her community do not embrace her work because of these sensitive topics, which Kelliher-Combs says it goes against the Native Alaskan cultural standards to even speak of them, she feels compelled to bring the topics to light. In doing so, she gives a disclaimer that she cannot speak for the whole community and will only speak for herself and her own experiences.⁵³ While Kelliher-Combs says she cannot speak for the community, it is clear in her work that she is referring to her experiences in such a way to bring attention to the experiences shared by all.

In Native communities youth suicide rates are two to three higher than the United States national average, and Native communities in the neighboring country of Canada are four to five

⁵¹ Ash-Milby, 46.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ash-Milby, 44-45.

times higher.⁵⁴ There are several contributing causes to these statistics that have compounded over the last few generations. All sources point to the Russian colonization of Alaska dating back to 1741 as the beginning of the downward turn. With the introduction of outsiders came alcohol and westernized schools, both of which contributed to overall unhappiness. It is noted that in the early to mid nineteenth century “alcohol was a way of life” and it was estimated in 1829 that the average laborer drank at least four ounces of distilled spirits daily⁵⁵. This use of alcohol was passed down and carried to present day where now reports show that 97% of Native youths have consumed alcohol by their eleventh grade of school and 12% drink regularly before reaching nine years of age. These staggering numbers have been identified as a prime connection between alcoholism and youth suicides.⁵⁶

Another factor that has been attributed to suicide rates is the erosion of cultural identity from non-native influence. This loss includes languages, economies, kinship structures, educational structures, spiritual practices, community cohesion, and creative expression. As youth were sent to boarding schools, they were punished for using their native languages causing them to feel alienated from their past.⁵⁷

Another type of violence Kelliher-Combs addresses in her body of work is sexual abuse and neglect towards children. In her work *She Was Only Ten* (2002), Kelliher-Combs stretches a child’s set of undergarments across a canvas with layers of muddy paint and other materials (Figure 8). This piece is part of a series of works of the same title. While they vary in the garments used and include slight tonal variations, the repetition of the content alludes to a reoccurrence of these issues, and not an isolated event. Naming these pieces with a past tense

⁵⁴ C. June Strickland, “Suicide Among American Indian, Alaskan Native, and Canadian Aboriginal Youth: Advancing the Research Agenda.” *International Journal of Mental Health*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Winter 1996-97), 11-12.

⁵⁵ Libby Roderick, *Alaska Native Cultures and Issues*, (University of Alaska Press: Fairbanks, 2010), 68.

⁵⁶ Strickland, 15.

⁵⁷ Roderick, 69.

usage, she intends them to be transformatory acts of healing similar to the works *Goodbye* and *Idiot Strings*.⁵⁸

By looking at these other works by the artist, *Common Thread* is seen in a new light. Based off the context of these other works, her title of “common thread” seems to suggest that there is a communal unity in the shared experience of violence. By not directly stating what secrets Kelliher-Combs is referring to in this work, it seems as though the pockets are left empty and ambiguous for the viewer to fill them with their own secrets. While her work is rooted in these traditions, it also, in the same way as Doris Salcedo, incites thoughts of violence as the needle penetrates the fibers leaving unresealable holes. This violence on the pouches metaphorically represents the violence, domestic and self-inflicted, that Kelliher-Combs states is prevalent in her native community. By combining these allusions to violence with the humanness they resemble, it reads as though each form represents an individual with their individualized secret pain.

In the exhibition catalogue published in conjunction with *Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor*, Kelliher-Combs included the following poem with her biography:

Untitled
wearing trim
a crest, a clan, an identifier,
who you are

a pore
sifting, shifting
catching releasing
pouring

secrets
hiding, guarding
gathering
scraps

⁵⁸ Heather Igloliorte, “Sonya Kelliher-Combs,” *Museum of Contemporary Native Arts*. Accessed 15 Sept. 2013. <http://www.iaia.edu/museum/vision-project/artists/sonya-kelliher-combs>.

the stuff one does not talk about

the three that got away
cords of regret
a tie that cannot be cut
idiot strings

tattoo
marking, seaming
wearing, waiting
passage⁵⁹

By publishing a poem instead of a traditional artist statement, she intentionally remains ambiguous about the content of her work keeping consistent with “the stuff one does not talk about.” Kelliher-Combs cannot explicitly say that her work is about violence in the form of abuse and suicide, but through the lines of her poem we can discern the content of her work. For example, in the first stanza she mentions “wearing trim” as “an identifier.” In addition to the fur trims and tusk motifs, parkas also have geometric designs on the bottom edge that are common in Inupiaq wears. The reference to this decorative motif indicates her experience as being identified with her community by her clothing.

The third stanza begins with the word “secrets” that we already know she uses to describe her pockets. The next line of “hiding, guarding” spells out for us the purpose of the secrets: something to conceal because it is, as the last line of the stanza says, “the stuff one does not talk about.” The lines “gathering, scraps” perhaps provides new insight into the pouches. Upon close inspection, the sheaths are made up of two small pieces of hide that have been sewn together. This piecing together metaphorically speaks to the aftermath of a tragic event when the need to pick up the pieces and recreate a sense of normalcy is present. The following stanza includes the number three, which is the first time Kelliher-Combs mentions a number. Since the following lines refers back to her work *Idiot Strings*, which we know is about suicide, it is possible that this number represents people close to her that “got away.” While this poem warrants a closer analysis than I can provide here, I chose to include it because of the appropriateness and cohesiveness it

⁵⁹ Ash-Milby, 108.

has with the visual art she has produced on the topics of tragedy and loss, as well as her dedication to ambiguity.

Just as in the work of Doris Salcedo and Janine Antoni, Sonya Kelliher-Combs' work is fully integrated with the specific geographical location and cultural influence from which the work was inspired. While Kelliher-Combs' work addresses universal tragedies, her work cannot be separated from the Iñupiaq and Athabaskan issues of high rates of suicide and abuse. Though all three artists are using similar materials, Antoni and Kelliher-Combs are alike in their direct relationship they have with the animals they are working with, though they differ in how they use these animals to convey their ideas. Where Antoni is clearly advocating for the animals through a feminist lens, Kelliher-Combs uses the animal products to make a distinct connection with her Iñupiaq and Athabaskan heritage.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen in the work by Doris Salcedo, Janine Antoni, and Sonya Kelliher-Combs, animal fiber as a sculptural medium is significant in the connotations and associations that it brings to the artwork. By using a material that was once living, the trace of the animal's life, and by extension the element of death, becomes inherent in the work. Because of these factors, these artists, crossing cultural and geographical boundaries, are using this medium to discuss very similar issues of fragility, mortality, and violence through the translucency and enclosed emptiness of the medium. It is important to distinguish these related topics because although they can be very interrelated, there are areas that do not overlap and looking at these separately covers the span without misleading. For example, not all violent acts lead to death and not all deaths stem from violence. All three of these can be viewed with this same formula.

Although animal fibers are in actuality durable materials that when put through processes, such as to make it leather or dried in its rawhide state, can have a lasting lifespan, in these works, that element cannot be read. Instead the medium appears quite fragile in its

translucency and its uneven edges. The translucency and our ability to see on the other side of the barrier makes it seem able to be penetrated, and almost invitingly so.

For example, in Janine Antoni's *Saddle*, while the title suggests the work could support a potential rider, it is not actually a functional saddle and would probably be crushed if someone were to sit on it. The work is composed of a single layer of rawhide, instead of many layers covering supports and stitched together. Compared to the saddle and female body it simultaneously represents, it is a fragile stand-in or a mere shell of what it metaphors. Further, the crispy raw edges appear as though they could chip or break off if bumped or stepped on.

In Doris Salcedo's *Atrabiliarios*, the sheet of rawhide covering the openings appears to be more of a tainted window that could be broken than a true barrier protecting what it encloses. While the barrier still functions visually to distort and separate the viewer from the shoes held within, it seems only a few degrees removed from a polite "do not pass" sign that, of course, is easy to penetrate. The thinness of the sheet of rawhide, which is notable from the edges where it is sewn to the wall, betrays the actual strength of the material.

Both *Saddle*'s uneven edges and *Atrabiliarios*' apparent thinness can be seen in Sonya Kelliher Combs' work *Common Thread*. In the smaller and individual pouches, the circular opening exposes the edges that dually show the thinness of the walls of the vessel as well as contains the fragile characteristic of the edges. Further, in this piece, the individual pieces take on a new vein of fragility through scale. Because they are small and in handheld sizes, they naturally ask to be handled gently.

Each of these pieces are engaging with a use of emptiness that expands this assertion of fragility. Objects that are solid, have more weight visually even if not physically. This lightness of the works through their emptiness suggests, as insinuated before, that they are all just a membrane or thin covering to the emptiness inside that can be easily permeated.

Breaking the membrane or skin leads to my next point of violence. While the emptiness and perceived fragility of the works suggests a possible violence to the material, which has not yet commenced, in both Kelliher-Combs' and Salcedo's works, the material has already been violated through the creation of the works. By using stitching in these works, the artists are creating permanent holes in the rawhide that are irreversible. This scarring of the material suggests a violence that is intentionally taking place necessarily for the final product. In both of these works, the stitches work in two ways: first, as just mentioned, the act of the artist performing a violence for the creation process, and second, at the completion of the process, where the stitches still remain, they then are the remains of the act, the evidence that violence had taken place. In this second vein, the act of stitching is a metaphor for the respective violences represented by the pieces, domestic violence or suicide and manslaughter, and the completed stitches metaphor the messy remains of the violences.

Saddle also speaks to violence but in a less direct way. While they all speak to the violence towards the animal that was slaughtered to gain the materials to create the sculptures, Antoni focuses on this aspect of the violence. In doing so, she leaves the material in a more raw state that likens the sculpture to the form of the cow itself. While both Salcedo and Kelliher-Combs use the material in a cleaner fashion creating geometric shapes and forms with the rawhide, Antoni emphasizes the relation to the cow it came from by not cutting the material down, and instead leaves its edges and contour unaltered. Since her work speaks primarily to the treatment of animals for products to be consumed by humans and her link of this to women, this is a logical way to show this violence.

Working in tandem with both ideas of fragility and violence, mortality is another concept at work in these pieces. All three of these works, as discussed in previous chapters, are tied to very specific acts of violence: disappeared people, domestic violence, suicide, and animal slaughtering. In these acts, there is a slaughtering, extinguishing, and erasing that can be wrapped

up in thoughts of mortality. With deaths of others we are forced to reflect on mortality and what it means to die.

What is curious about these works is how very similar they are despite a first impression that may lead one to think otherwise. All three artists are using animal fibers, discussing identical themes, working to bring awareness to a specific violence, rooted in a very specific culture. A question to be raised here is that what is it about rawhide and other animal fibers that has drawn these artists to choose this medium, which has had the effect of connecting these disconnected artists? As mentioned in the introduction, skin, rawhide, and other animal fibers are not a traditional medium for artists outside of craft. Why then, are these artists choosing to use it?

As this paper argues, because of the trace of the animals inherent in the use of rawhide, it makes a unique material that has the end of a life captured inside of it. This characteristic of death, allusion to human skin, and the eerie quality it possesses, make it appropriate to discuss these issues of fragility, mortality, and violence. Also, because of this allusion to human skin, it raises the question of would these artists be using human skin if it were an option? In the case of Janine Antoni, I would say no. Her dialogue is directly connected to the way cows are mistreated and thoughtlessly consumed. In Kelliher-Combs work, although the use of animal parts is how she ties the work back to her community, since the topic is addressing violence towards humans, adding human skin to the variety of animal skins already in the work, would do work to further push the idea of violence to people. For Salcedo, I think it could be argued that animal products are working as a stand in or substitute for something else, for the human flesh. Especially with her visual parallels to the holocaust and the rumors of human skin lampshades that circulated, it seems as though perhaps, aside from obvious ethical issues, the use of human skin would actually serve her content well.

Despite the material these artists are using, which has animal origins, it successfully alludes to human skin and our relationship we have to our own skin. Through our lens of culturally constructed understandings of skin, its meaning, functions, and history, these concepts of fragility, mortality, and emptiness are able to cross the barrier from animal to human in order to convey the violences as visualized by Doris Salcedo, Janine Antoni, and Sonya Kelliher-Combs.

REFERENCES

- Adams, Carol J. *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Continuum Intl Pub Group: New York, 1999.
- Antoni, Janine, *The Girl Made of Butter*, The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001.
- Anzieu, Didier. *The Skin Ego*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1989.
- Ash-Milby, Kathleen E. *Hide : Skin as Material and Metaphor* [in English]. Nmai Editions;. 1st ed. Washington [D.C.]: NMAI Editions, National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 2009. Government publication (gpb); National government publication (ngp).
- Bal, Mieke, *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Benthien, Claudia. "The Depth of the Surface," *Skin: on the Cultural Border Between Self and the World*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, 1-17.
- Biemel, Walter. "Art in the Light of Phenomenology," *Human Studies*, vol. 18, No. 4 (Oct., 1995), 337-350.
- Burch Jr., Ernest S. *Alliance and Conflict*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005.
- Burch Jr., Ernest S. *The Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations of Northwest Alaska*, Fairbanks University of Alaska Press, 1998.
- Cappellazzo, Amy, *Janine Antoni*, Hatji Cantz Publishers and Ink Tree: Germany, 2000.
- Cavanagh, Sheila L., Angela Failler, and Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst. "Skin, Culture and Psychoanalysis," New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Clover, Carol. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- "Compassion," *Art 21: Art in the Twenty-First Century*. PBS, Season 5, episode 1, 2009.
- Connor, Steven. *The Book of Skin*, New York: Cornell University Press, 2004.
- Crowell, Aron L. *Living Our Cultures Sharing Our Heritage*, Smithsonian Institution: Washington, 2010.
- Csordas, Thomas J. "Psychoanalysis and Phenomenology." *Ethos* 40, no. 1 (2012): 54-74.
- DeRoux, Ken. "Sonya Kelliher-Combs Interview." *Alaska State Museum*. 12 Mar. 2001. Accessed 15 Sept. 2013.
http://museums.alaska.gov/TemporaryExhibits/Sonya/Sonya_Interview.htm.
- Doris Salcedo*, exhibition catalogue, New Museum of Contemporary Art and SITE Santa Fe: 1998.

- Fairbrother, Trevor, *Family Ties, A Contemporary Perspective*, Peabody Essex Museum: Salem, 2003.
- Flanagan, Mary, and Austin Booth. *Re:Skin* [in English]. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006. Fiction (fic).
- Granata, Franseca. "Exhibition Review: Skin Tight: The Sensibility of the Flesh." *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 9, no. 3 (2005): 355-60.
- Grynsztejn, Madeleine, *About Place: Recent Art of the Americas*, Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1995.
- Igloliorte, Heather. "Sonya Kelliher-Combs." *Museum of Contemporary Native Arts*. Accessed 15 Sept. 2013. <http://www.iaia.edu/museum/vision-project/artists/sonya-kelliher-combs/>.
- Jablonski, Nina G. *Skin A Natural History*, University of California Press: Berkeley, 2006.
- Kay, Sarah, "Legible Skins: Animals and the Ethics of Medieval Reading," *postmedieval*, no. 2 (2011): 13-32.
- Kay, Sarah, "Original Skin: Flaying, Reading, and Thinking in the Legend of Saint Batholomew and Other Works," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*. Winter 2006, 35-73.
- Kristeva, Julia. "Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection," Translated by Leon S Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Lappe, Marc. *The Body's Edge: Our Cultural Obsession with Skin*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996.
- List, Larry and Martha Wilson, *Skin Trade*, exhibition catalogue, Brooklyn: PPOW, 2013.
- "Loss and Desire." *Art 21: Art in the Twenty-First Century*. PBS, Season 2, 2003.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Uniform Title: *Phénoménologie De La Perception*. English [in English]. International Library of Philosophy and Scientific Method; Variation: International Library of Philosophy and Scientific Method. New York: Humanities Press, 1962.
- Nambudiri, Navya S. "Anthropodermic Bibliopegy: Lessons From a Different Sort of Dermatologic Text." *JAMA Network*. JAMA Dermatology, Jan. 2014. Web. 21 Feb. 2014.
- Princenthal, Nancy, "Janine Antoni: Mother's Milk." *Art in America* (September 2001): 124-29.
- Roderick, Libby. *Alaska Native Cultures and Issues*, Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2010.
- Salcedo, Doris, Bal, Anjos, Carlos, *Plegaria Muda*, 2011.
- Simeone, William E., "The Northern Athabaska Potlatch: The Objectification of Grief." *Coping with the Final Tragedy: Cultural Variation in Dying and Grieving*, Baywood Publishing Company, Inc.: Amityville, New York, 1991.
- Skin: An Artistic Atlas*, exhibition catalog, Royal Hibernian Academy and Irish Skin Foundation: Dublin, 2013.
- Szajnberg, Nathan. "The Aesthetic Aspects of Psychoanalysis," *Journal of American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, 25, 189-210.
- The Killings in Colombia*, Washington DC: Americas Watch Committee, 1989.

IMAGES

Figure	Page
1. Doris Salcedo, <i>Atrabiliarios</i> (1992-7)	60
2. Doris Salcedo, <i>Atrabiliarios</i> (1992-7), detail	61
3. Janine Antoni, <i>Saddle</i> (2000).....	62
4. Janine Antoni, <i>2038</i> (2000).....	63
5. Sonya Kelliher-Combs, <i>Common Thread</i> (2010)	64
6. Sonya Kelliher-Combs, <i>Goodbye</i> (2007).....	65
7. Sonya Kelliher-Combs, <i>Idiot Strings</i> (2005)	65
8. Sonya Kelliher-Combs, <i>She Was Only Ten</i> (2002).....	66
9. Joanneke Meester, <i>Pistol</i> (2004).....	66
10. Donald Rodney, <i>My Mother. My Father. My Sister. My Brother</i> (1996-7).....	67
11. Sherin Nashat, <i>Speechless, Women of Allah</i> (1996)	67
12. Ronit Bigal, <i>Untitled</i> (2010)	68
13. Orlan, <i>Omnipresence II</i> (1993)	69
14. Hunter Reynolds, <i>Mummification Performance Skin #1</i> (2011)	69
15. Sylvia Hatzl, <i>The Visible and the Invisible</i> (2012)	70
16. Bonnie Rychlak, <i>Vanity</i> (2011).....	71
17. Robert Mapplethorpe, <i>Man in a Polyester Suit</i> (1980).....	72
18. Jeanne Silverthorne, <i>Sweat Pore</i> (1998).....	73
19. Erica Lord, <i>I Tan to Look More Native</i> (2006).....	74
20. K. C. Adams, <i>Cyborg Hybrid Yatika</i> , (2009)	75
21. Elana Katz, <i>Color Me Clear</i> (2011).....	76
22. <i>The Liberation of Bergen-Belson Concentration Camp, April 1945</i>	77



Figure 1 Doris Salcedo, *Atrabiliarios*, (1992-7)



Figure 2 Doris Salcedo, *Atrabiliarios*, (1992-7), detail



Figure 3 Janine Antoni, *Saddle*, (2000)



Figure 4 Janine Antoni, *2038*, (2000)



Figure 5 Sonya Kelliher-Combs, *Common Thread*, (2010)



Figure 6 Sonya Kelliher-Combs, *Goodbye*, 2007



Figure 7 Sonya Kelliher-Combs, *Idiot Strings*, 2005



Figure 8 Sonya Kelliher-Combs, *She Was Only Ten*, (2002)



Figure 1 Joanneke Meester, *Pistol*, (2005)



Figure 10 Donald Rodney, *My Mother. My Father. My Sister. My Brother* (1996-7)



Figure 11 Shirin Neshat, *Speechless, Women of Allah*, (1996)



Figure 12 Ronit Bigal, *Untitled*, 2010



Figure 13 Orlan, *Omnipresence II*, performance still (1993)



Figure 14 Hunter Reynolds, *Mummification Performance Skin #1*, (2011)



Figure 12 Sylvia Hatzl, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 2012



Figure 16 Bonnie Rychlak, *Vanity*, (2011)



Figure 17 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Man in a Polyester Suit*, (1980)



Figure 18 Jeanne Silverthorne, *Sweat Pore*, (1998)



Figure 19 Erica Lord, *I Tan to Look More Native*, (2002)



Figure 20 K. C. Adams, *Cyborg Hybrid Yatika*, 2009



Figure 21 Elena Katz, *Color Me Clear*, performance still, 2011



Figure 22 The Liberation of Bergen-Belson Concentration Camp, April 1945

VITA

Krystle Kaye Brewer

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: FRAGILITY, MORTALITY, AND EMPTINESS: ANIMAL FIBER AS
SCULPTURAL MATERIAL IN CONTEMPORARY ART

Major Field: Art History

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts in art history at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May, 2014.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Fine Arts in studio art at Oklahoma City University, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma in 2009.

Experience:

2012-2014 Oklahoma State University Museum of Art/Gardiner Gallery

2012-2012 Cultural Development Corporation of Central Oklahoma

2011-2012 Oklahoma Visual Arts Coalition, intern

2009-2009 Oklahoma City Museum of Art, intern

2005-2012 Oklahoma City Community College, Outreach and Education

Professional Memberships:

American Alliance of Museums

FRINGE: Woman's Art Organization

Oklahoma Visual Arts Coalition