

Tiffany Parbs: Cosmetic

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Surgical augmentation of the body presupposes a plastic surface conducive to design: the skin as subject to the cut and suture of composition. But this 'clinical' approach to cosmetic surgery would belie the severity of the intervention. There remains in contemporary culture a gap, a time-lag between the constitution of identity and the choice of the scalpel.

Tiffany Parbs' *cosmetic* explores just such a gap utilising the medium of jewellery. This new body of work problematises the surgical processes that would purport to erase dermatological traces of time and history. Parbs uses her own body to stretch the boundaries of what we know and understand as 'jewellery' as well as 'skin'. In the title piece "*cosmetic*", a series of small stainless steel pins line the periphery of the eye and the mouth, recalling the preparatory cutting lines of the surgeon. These sombre signposts map the face as an aggregation of 'flaws' ripe for excision. 'Jewellery' in this scenario draws dangerously close to an unravelling of the skin – not because there is an antagonism inherent in these tiny implements but because figure and ground, before and after are here undecidable. Are these markings a precursor to an incision that will follow or are they already the result of a cosmetic embellishment? Fixed under the seal of photography, "*cosmetic*" suggests a topology of the skin akin to the endless, enfolded surface of the Möbius band.¹ The skin and its adornment become inter-implicated, challenging the 'before/after' chronology of invasive surgery.

This understanding of the skin as a complex enfolding of time and space is further reiterated in "*bake*", where the word "RAW" has been burnt into the delicate region of the décolletage.² "*bake*" appropriates the body as if it were a flat surface, using the skin as a photographic membrane and deliberately exposing it to the stain of the sun. Here adornment figures as a crafting of the self; 'jewellery' fashioned from the biological matter of the very skin which is its ground. Again it is the secondary mediation of the photograph (itself a type of 'skin'³), which so effectively re-marks the seamlessness of cosmetic processes. With "*bake*" we are forced to reconsider the permanency of surgery, the cultural impulse to nullify the complexity of time.

Rendered photographically, the work developed as part of *cosmetic* imbricates the conventions of jewellery with photography, marrying the material with the conceptual, the cultural with the political. Crucially, Parbs has developed a unique dialogue between craft methodologies, apt to amplify our relationship to the skin of our own bodies.

¹ Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004) 36.

² This notion of 'enfolding' is derived from Connor (2004) 36-37.

³ Connor (2004) 59.