Alison Bennett:
Shifting Skin

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Introduction

It gives me great pleasure to introduce the exhibition *Alison Bennett: Shifting Skin*. Each year the Deakin University Art Gallery displays an exhibition showcasing the work of staff, students or alumni. In 2012 the Deakin University Art Gallery held a call for expressions of interest from practicing artists who have previously completed or are currently enrolled in postgraduate study at Deakin University. Artists from various disciplinary backgrounds such as painting, printmaking, sculpture, photography, multimedia, film, animation, creative writing and performance were encouraged to submit their work or practice for consideration to exhibit in 2013.

Alison Bennett was chosen as the successful artist from a strong field of applicants. Alison is a current PhD candidate at Deakin University.

The theme of the exhibition followed on from the Gallery's first postgraduate exhibition, *Discovery*, in 2011, which considered the relationship between practice and exegesis in recent honours and postgraduate work, thus hoping to provide further insights into practice-led research through understandings of 'creative practice as the production of knowledge'.

Over the past decade Alison's work has explored questions of negotiated inhabitation of space, place and embodiment through the medium of photography. Acknowledging that space and surface are indivisible and co-operative, this new body of work focuses more explicitly on a closer examination of surface and a deeper consideration of embodiment via digital encounter. The photographs on display are detailed scans of human skin marked by tattoos and scars, there is also an overlaid augmented reality component which adds an additional element to the works.

The Call for Expression of Interest process began in late 2012 and was very ably managed by Deakin University Museum Studies student Michelle Mountain. Each year the Art Collection and Galleries Unit hosts a student from the Museums Studies program as an intern, to work on a particular project, and I would like to thank Jonathan Sweet from Deakin University for his support of this ongoing internship. I would like to congratulate Michelle Mountain for successfully completing the internship and thank her for her hard work whilst acknowledging her contribution towards this project. I would also like to thank Jason Smith, Director and CEO of Heide Museum of Modern Art for his contribution as the external expert who helped to select the successful exhibiting artist.

Within this catalogue we are pleased to present the catalogue essay by Kate Warren and thank her for the extra insight it gives us into Alison's work. I would like to also thank Jasmin Tulk for her catalogue design. On behalf of Alison I would like to acknowledge the staff of the Motion Capture Studio who were instrumental in the development of her work for this exhibition.

And finally, I would like to thank Alison for her assistance in progressing the exhibition and related catalogue and offer her my congratulations. Her work is fascinating and the augmented reality adds a dimension to the works that visitors to the Deakin University Art Gallery have not previously experienced.

Leanne Willis
Manager Art Collection and Galleries

Interfacing images:
Alison Bennett's Shifting Skin

Through her most recent series of works, *Shifting Skin*, Alison Bennett presents a dense unpacking of the rapidly expanding and changing relationships between the body and technology. While the trajectory of this new body of work marks a shift in context and content, it continues the broader conceptual concerns of her creative and critical investigations. Bennett's practice is not one preoccupied uniquely with the problematic of photographic representation, or as Jeff Wall terms it, *depiction*[i]. Rather, Bennett's is an analytic and inquisitive enquiry, fundamentally concerned with interrogating the very nature and possibilities of the medium.

A core concern for Bennett's investigation is the changing nature of photographic surfaces, which links her practice to characteristics and tensions internal to the medium itself. Light, which is reflected from the surface of an object, strikes and imprints upon a second surface (traditionally, film). This inscription, subsequently transposed onto a printed surface, imbues the medium with an assumed immediacy of representation—the photograph as 'document'. Yet as Bennett so concisely acknowledges, any kind of surface is co-constitutive with its opposite: depth.[ii] One cannot exist without the other. Thus such prior assumptions are complicated by the distance, or depth, between the apparatus of the camera and the object of its gaze—depth of field, to use a medium-specific term. Depth allows for the subjective to be revealed from within the technical possibilities of the medium—framing, focus, exposure time, zooming—inscribing photography as a multi-faceted tool of communication, used by and between individuals. As Tom Gunning writes, the apparatus 'can neither lie nor tell the truth […] a photograph relies on people to say things about it or for it.'[iii]

Undeniably, digital technologies are transforming and challenging how we view, consume and relate to the photographic image. This is evident in photography's nature as a tool of communication and its related 'material' qualities that Geoffrey Batchen recognises, stating that '[this] kind of photograph is meant primarily as a means of communication, the images being sent are almost as ephemeral as speech, so rarely are they printed and made physical.'[iv] With digital technologies 'shifting' and re-asserting photography in new guises, Bennett has developed works that engage with such cycles and evolutions. *Shifting Skin* is fundamentally concerned with the changing nature of the 'surface' in contemporary photographic practices, in light of digital processes and what Bennett terms the 'dematerialisation of the photographic image'.[v] Indeed, German media theorist

Friedrich Kittler was an early commentator to identify the implications that digital technologies would have on the nature of autonomous 'mediums', observing in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1986) that:

> The general digitization of channels and information erases the differences among individual media. Sound and image, voice and text are reduced to surface effects. […] And once optical fiber networks turn formally distinct data flows into a standardized series of digitized numbers, any medium can be translated into any other. […] Modulation, transformation, synchronization; delay, storage, transposition; scrambling, scanning, mapping—a total media link on a digital base will erase the very concept of medium.[iv]

Pure difference (binary code) erases difference entirely. For Kittler, the digital engenders a sense of the 'medium -less', endlessly transposable and transformable into different 'surface effects'.

Bennett's *Shifting Skin* confronts and destabilises these complex sets of relations between surface and depth, digital imaging and communicative practices. To this end, it is ambiguous as to whether her large-scale digital photographic prints are even to be considered 'photographs', at least in a traditional sense, for they are not made with a camera at all. Instead, she has used a re-fashioned flatbed scanner in order to directly capture her subjects. By appropriating this technology, Bennett stretches to the extreme the relationship between surface and depth. She also introduces a crucial, *corporeal* element to the work that complicates the 'pure' dematerialisation of digital images. Rather than her subjects being at a remove from the apparatus, they are literally touched by it, as the scanner is painstakingly rolled around their bodies to capture their image. In fact, Bennett's models become more than simple subjects, posed for a camera's gaze; they become tangible participants in the process of imaging. To produce the images, Bennett and her subjects engage in a performative and tactile 'choreography of capture', moving and interacting together in order to manoeuvre the scanner around the shapes and contours of the body.

There is an ironic edge that accompanies this process; the flatbed scanner that Bennett uses was originally manufactured to make digital scans of photographic film and prints. Extricating the apparatus from its designed functionality of creating simulacra-like reproductions, Bennett puts it to work at capturing that most purely individual of entities; human skin. When printed at more

than life scale, her prints confront the viewer with a visceral and exceptionally detailed portrayal of the skin's creases, hairs, freckles, pores and other uniquely distinguishing features. These reveal a sense of embodied repetition, not purely mechanical or digital reproduction, but one that relies on and is constituted through difference; or as Gilles Deleuze articulated, difference that '*lies between two repetitions*.'[vii] We see this exemplified in the hairs on Bennett's subject's skin, hairs which (for all intents and purposes) appear to be perfectly equivalent and interchangeable, but which nonetheless exist in a differential relationship to each other, and which each respond to the flattening effects of the scanner in subtly different ways.

Skin has inherent qualities that make it a marker of individuality and subjectivity—our fingerprints being the perfect example. However, humans also routinely interrupt and disturb the 'unity' of their skin, and thus Bennett's work in fact focuses not predominantly on the biological details and imperfections, but rather the scars and tattoos of her subjects. Whether unintended disruptions or deliberate inscriptions, these features become markers of individual history and personal expression. Scars and tattoos manifest depth on an individual surface. Scars are traces of a rupture—the exposure of depth and bodily strata—as well as the evidence the wound's resealing. While scars can be the result of accidental or intentional actions, tattoos elude explicitly to a conscious piercing of the skin, creating a surface image that intimately reflects an act of self-expression and embodies a sense of emotional depth.

By scanning these marks, Bennett is literally flattening them, removing them of depth, not only through the physicality of the scanner but also through its imaging qualities. Unlike traditional photography where light is reflected and refracted unevenly according to the textures and shapes of the subjects, Bennett's scanner creates an even distribution of light across the skin's surface. There are no shadows in Bennett's prints, no *chiaroscuro*, and this produces an effect of negation that viewers are not accustomed to seeing, whether in art or in real-life. This gives her prints an otherworldly effect, instantly removing them from the realm of pure 'representation' and transforming them into examples of a 'digital uncanny'. The distinct 'humanness' of the subject is still clearly visible, yet it becomes altered and extended by technology and digital imaging.

By appropriating and transforming the functionality of the scanner, Bennett pushes her apparatus to its limit and consequently, at times it buckles under the strain. In the process of capturing her subjects' cutaneous inscriptions, the scanner would inevitably glitch, skip, and malfunction ever so slightly, thus creating visual glitches within the scanned images themselves. These glitches do not destroy the image, but they do continue to destabilise the surfaces of Bennett's images, extending and shifting them further into a realm of digital aesthetics and interfaces. The glitches themselves become digital scars, evidence of a disruption. They stretch the images, creating ripples, gaps and waves within the scanned prints. They split and refract the colours of the skin and tattoos, evoking a sense of colour 'bleeding' and seeping from digital fissures— at times visually reminiscent of projects such as Cory

Arcangel's *Colors* (2005), or Gerhard Richter's *Strip* series, (2011–12), examples that both engage in vast processes of stretching digitised images. All these layered elements point to the fact that Bennett is not simply 'representing' these inscriptions. She is reconstituting and unfolding these surfaces into a digital existence, creating virtual entities that nonetheless bear the trace of their former physicality.

Given the complex interrelations between skin, surface, materiality and the virtual that the project evokes, Bennett has not limited her investigation to her larger-than-life photographic prints, but has also incorporated into the installation an element of augmented reality, which visitors encounter in the gallery through the interface of a smartphone or tablet screen. Bennett has reconstituted her flattened, unfolded scans as novel 3-dimensional entities. These digital objects do not recreate or mimic the physical or representation contours of the subject. Rather, they are constructed through the information embodied within the image, the data, pixels and binary code that themselves allow for a form of reconstitution. Dark tones of the scans recede sharply, while light areas are thrust forward, creating uneven and undulating digital 'topologies'.[viii]

These dematerialised (or perhaps, *re*materialised) images are overlaid on top of the physical prints, projected outwards for the viewer to observe and navigate around through the screen-based interface. This is the crucial element of the nature of augmented reality; unlike 'virtual reality', it is not entirely immersive. It is a superimposition, in which the 'real' world remains perceivable and palpably present, but is engaged in a differential relationship with the virtual. Bennett does not replace one surface with another, rather she reveals and emphasises their interconnectedness. This underscores her consideration of the skin as not only an interface for experiencing our physical surroundings, but also as providing a visceral connection to the virtual. The physical prints are extended through, but also constitutive of, the element of augmented reality. Rather than embracing a totalising form of the virtual, Bennett envisions a virtual that is reliant upon, and an extension of, personal subjectivity and individual realities. As Deleuze articulates, it is a virtual realm constituted through the perpetual interplay between difference and repetition, where the latter 'is like a skin which unravels, the external husk of a kernel of difference and more complicated internal repetitions.'[ix]

Kate Warren
June 2013

i   Jeff Wall, 'Depiction–Object–Event', *Hermes Lecture* (2006), http://www. hermeslezing.nl/hermeslezing2006_eng.pdf (accessed 13 June 2013).
ii   Discussion with the artist, May 2013.
iii   Tom Gunning, 'What's the Point of an Index? Or, Faking Photographs', in *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, eds. Karen Beckman and Jean Ma (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 28.
iv   Geoffrey Batchen, 'Observing by Watching: Joachim Schmid and the Art of Exchange', *Aperture* 210 (Spring) (2013), http://www.aperture.org/ blog/observing-by-watching-joachim-schmid-and-the-art-of-exchange/ (accessed 6 June 2013).
v   Discussion with the artist, May 2013.
vi   Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999 [1986]), 1–2.
vii   Gilles Deleuze, Difference and Repetition, trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, 2004 [1968]), 76.
viii Discussion with the artist, May 2013.
ix   Deleuze, 76.
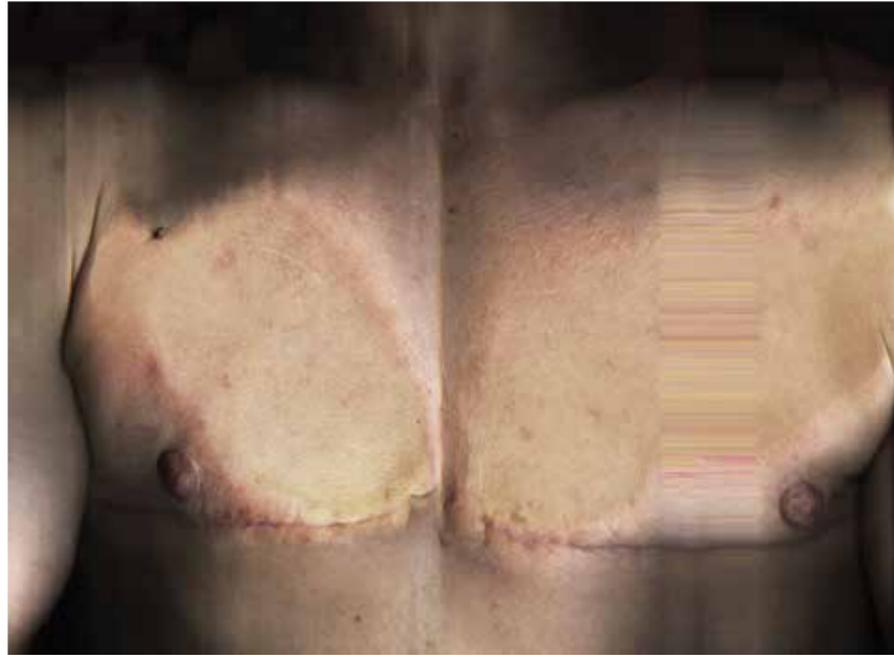
untitled (chest scars) 2013
photograph, 111 x 145 cm
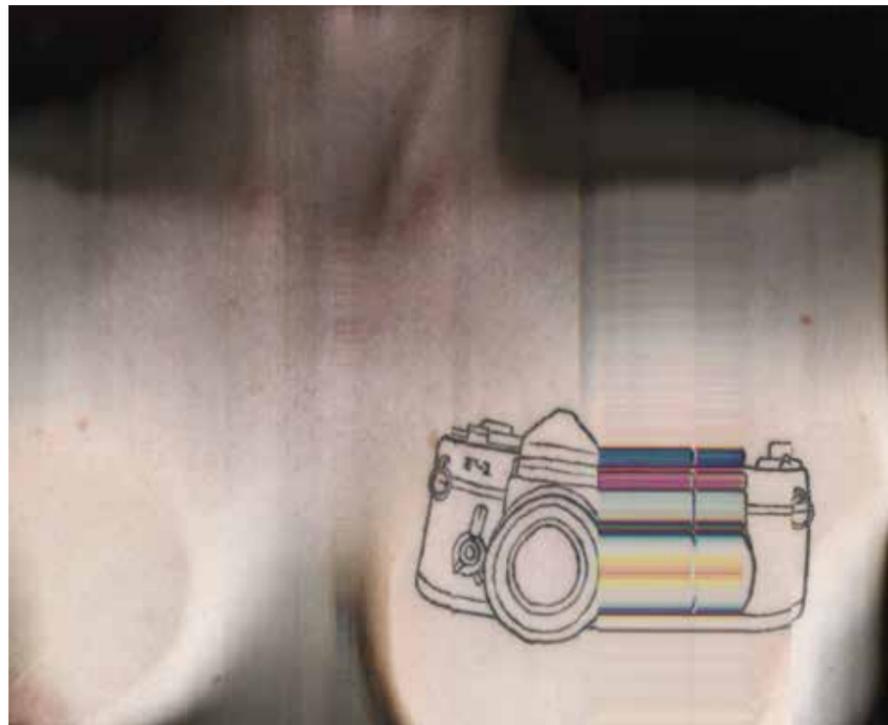

untitled (totem) 2013
photograph, 111 x 145 cm

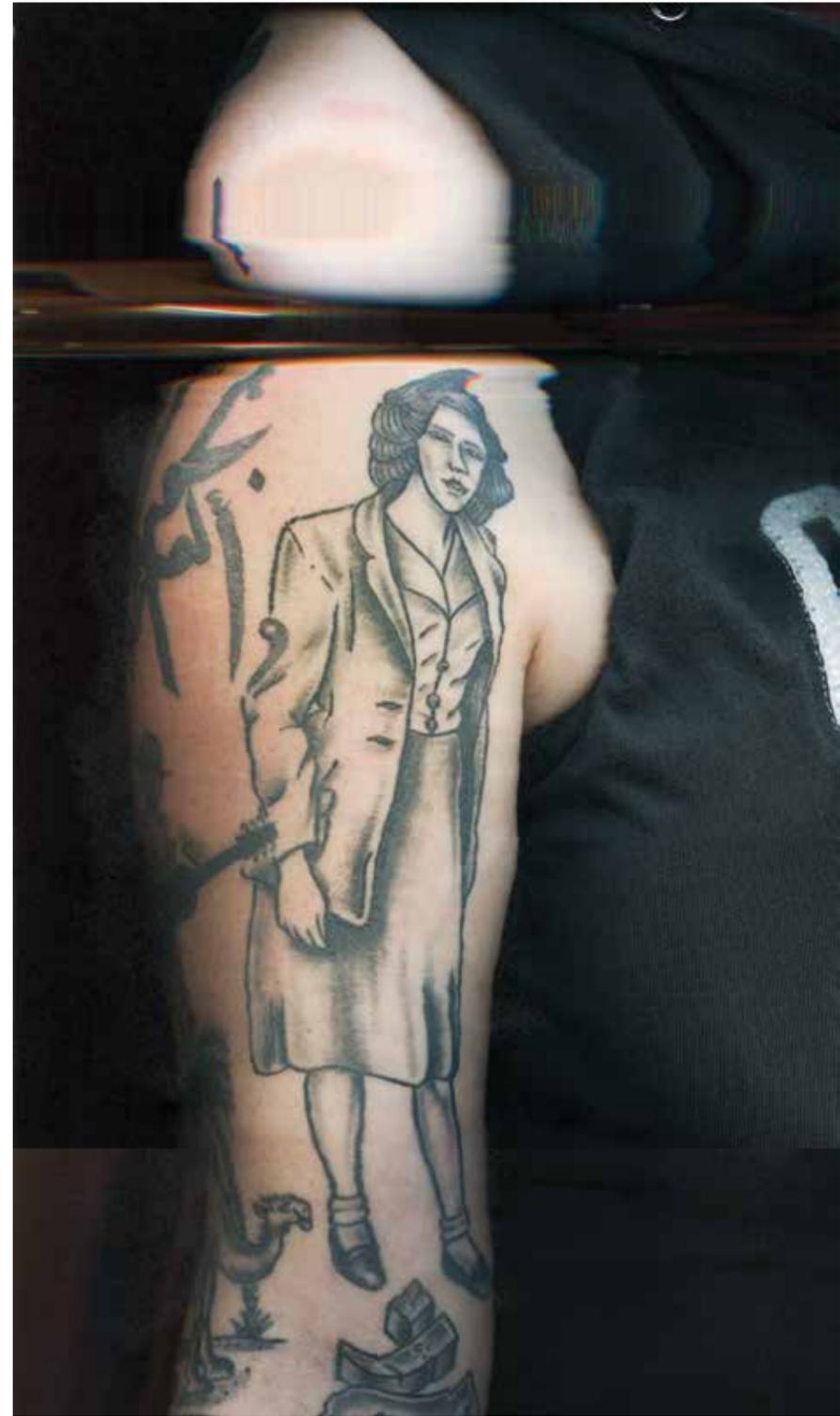untitled (Duchamp) 2013
photograph, 111 x 145 cm

untitled (temptation) 2013
photograph, 111 x 145 cm

untitled (velvet) 2013
photograph, 111 x 148 cm

untitled (camera) 2013
photograph, 111 x 132 cm

untitled (mother) 2013
photograph, 174 x 111 cm

untitled (monkey) 2013
photograph, 111 x 145 cm

untitled (ankh) 2012
photograph, 111 x 145 cm

untitled (paper doll) 2013
photograph, 145 x 111 cm

Shifting Skin

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Alison Bennett: Biography

Alison Bennett is a visual artist investigating the theme of 'negotiated inhabitation'.

Bennett holds a BA (visual arts) majoring in photography from the UNSW College of Fine Arts and a research Master of Fine Arts from Monash University. She is currently undertaking a PhD creative practice research project on the topic of the shifting surface in digital photography at Deakin University as a member of the Motion Capture Lab.

Solo exhibitions include 'Shifting Skin: transforming fabric', a moving image projection work commissioned by www.whitestreetproject.org with the support of Frankston Arts Centre and Arts Victoria in 2013; 'Cavity', also supported by the Victorian Government through Arts Victoria, which toured to a number of regional galleries 2009-2010 and was discussed by Robert Nelson in *The Age* 22 July 2009; the 'to occupy' series exhibited at the Vivid National Photography Festival in Canberra August 2008, featured in the November 2008 issue of Indesign magazine and reviewed in issue 2.2 of *Un* magazine; 'Verticalism: gothic ceilings' reviewed in issue#24 of *Artichoke* magazine; 'In Ruins' exhibited at Platform2 featured on the cover of *Arena* magazine #78 and ANTIthesis journal #17; 'Woolsheds and Shearers' Quarters' reviewed by Philip Drew in *Indesign* #24; and 'Inside Hill End' reviewed by Charles Rice in *Architecture Australia* July 2004. Robert Nelson, reviewing 'Making Hay' in *The Age* 15 Nov 2006, compared her work to that of Walker Evans. She curated the group exhibition 'Frames of Reference' for Bathurst Regional Art Gallery 2005 and has works in the collections of the National Museum of Australia, the Historic Houses Trust of NSW and the City of Geelong.

In addition to her visual arts practice, Alison teaches photography at Deakin University. She worked as a scene photographer documenting the Melbourne queer performance and party scene for several years and her editorial and fashion photography has been published in magazines such as *Treadlie* and *Cherrie* magazine.

www.alisonbennett.com.au

Augmenting Reality

The *Shifting Skin* work includes an augmented reality component that overlays the physical prints.

The augmented reality component may be accessed via a mobile device such as a smartphone or tablet via the Aurasma app. Note that you will need a Wifi signal to access the content.

On your mobile device, go to http://auras.ma/s/PqXXt and download the app. Alternatively, you can download Aurasma from itunes or googleplay.

Within the app interface, touch the Aurasma A icon to open the menu. Navigate to the search function (the magnifying glass icon) and search for the 'Shifting Skin' channel. If you 'follow' my channel, your device will be receptive to my content.

Return to the viewing window (the four corner brackets icon) and point your camera at the trigger image. You will see a swirling icon as the app downloads the 3D content.

You can now look around the 3D content by moving the screen across the surface of the 3d virtual object projecting out of the physical print. You will need to keep the trigger image within the view of the camera to hold onto the content.