

Elizabeth Ingraham
Artist's Statement
the Skins Series

My subject is skin: flexible and emotive, superficial but essential, protective but vulnerable. A boundary. A border. A membrane. An organ. A commodity. A pelt.

Through a series of life-size, dimensional female skins, I am exploring how expectation, desire and convention—our own and others—form casings which shape our deepest selves and which become so familiar they seem like our own skin.

My skins are physical, emotional, cultural. Their fabric is a social structure as well as a textile, and their fabrication requires translation and invention as well as construction.

Made of materials as diverse as velvet, linen burlap, neoprene rubber and cotton chintz, and with titles like “desire,” “regret,” “comfort” and “denial,” my skins are garments—not clothing for the body, but clothing as the body. They costume and camouflage the self, conceal and reveal identity, contain and control sexuality, embody states of longing and desire. These skins are like a closet full of familiar assumptions we pull out and put on—out of habit or convention or necessity—and which we also can discard.

All the skins are made from the same pattern. This pattern, 44 pieces, was shaped from stiff tarlatan by feeling or remembering the distance on my body from clavicle to pelvis, from knee to ankle, making a dart, then another, adding on a piece to get the girth. The resulting form, made without measuring, is almost exactly to my dimensions.

These skins are constructed with dressmaking techniques—darts, gussets, tucks and gathers—and their openings fasten with snaps and zippers. Although accurately sized and scaled, their decorativeness—the shape of the throat, the way the breasts and knee caps are appliquéd, how the hands and ears are suggested by quilting—comes from conventions of sewing, not anatomy.

How my work is made is an essential part of what it is. My skins embody, in a literal way, certain qualities of mind and heart: patience, effort, close attention, care, concern and the primacy of touch. I trace a contour, I make a fold, I stitch a seam, lining and interlining, basting and overcasting. I attach a thousand hooks, or bells or bones or buttons, so that my skins are invested with the labor of their making.

My skins are tactile as well as visual. Like biological skins, they are permeable. They can be invaded by the viewer—unzipped, unbuttoned, entered, rattled or read—and they invite the viewer's touch. This touch is both pleasure and transgression: we are not usually able to penetrate another's body at our will or whim.

The viewer is enticed by the intricacy and ingenuity of the skins into an encounter with something which is not just object but body. The viewer's touch, the contact with the viewer's own skin, then completes the work.

More details about my working process and my materials are at <http://www.culturalterrain.com/gallery>

*... for me ideology is a kind of vast membrane enveloping everything.
We have to know that this skin exists
even if it encloses us like a net or like closed eyelids.*

—Helene Cixous