

# Sculpture

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## Within Without: Elisabeth Weissensteiner

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"Appearances are a glimpse of the obscure." \*

Elisabeth Weissensteiner's sculpture describes the body's seemingly parallel universes of inside and outside. The very act of viewing her sculpted skins is a process that describes the forms' oscillation between fragile beauty and something more sinister. A hermeneutic of suspicion may assist us to glimpse the obscure, and we may find that these beings, which embody both beauty and ugliness, shed new light on our aesthetic codes.



*Spiked Egg*, 2003. Transparent paper, packing tape, and pins. 25 cm. long.

Giant Skin has a burnished surface that draws viewer in, like children attracted to an insect whose back is reflecting the sunlight. Weissensteiner's recent exhibition was inhabited solely by these hybrids of possible and actual elements. Their forms are part of this world (pig, husk, tortoise, maggot) and also part of another. Disconcerting, their ambiguity also makes them strangely attractive, especially in a society where purity is both impossible and undesirable.

The skin-like surfaces of Weissensteiner's works act as an interface on which our perceptions play themselves out. We are seduced and rebuked, allured by delicate craft and horrified by serrated (barbed and rusted) edges. Initially drawn in by an organic strength, we begin to see life; yet, on second glance, the museum-of-medicine-like exhibits aestheticize death and scientifically enhanced life. The closer we observe the actual materiality of the object, the more unsure we are of the Gestalt, of the body as a coherent signifier. The detail in Weissensteiner's works reveals a set of ambiguities that unnerve reality and imagined possibilities.

The self-reflexivity with which Weissensteiner manipulates her machine-made materials highlights the polysemy of her works—she doesn't envisage artificial and natural as a dichotomy; rather, she sees them as symbiotic aspects of contemporary life. When we consider the fact that an individual mind has constructed these life forms, we realize that the artist is taking the same liberties as genetic science. While Weissensteiner refers to the controversy surrounding cloning and genetic engineering, her focus is on an aesthetic crisis of meaning. We can no longer draw a boundary between real and unreal on the level of synthetic and organic, beautiful and ugly, actual and virtual formations of self. This potential artificiality and power to construct selves presents a dilemma: If I am a product of both nature and nurture, then who am I? With a PhD in philosophy and a background in fiber art, Weissensteiner is conceptually and technically equipped to have her fictive characters voice these questions. She does this by designing only their raiment, which allows us to imagine how they inhabit these indistinguishable boundaries.

Round pin heads line the interior of Spiked Egg like eyes or larva; piercing the skin, they become an army of legs, carrying the arthropod along. Spiked Egg is suspended in the tension between exterior and interior. It represents the interplay between stereotypical notions of the smooth cornucopia and the harshness of nature. This recurs in Giant Leaf, a contortion of delicate means. It supermagnifies the space left by a spider that conceals itself from prey by wrapping up foliage. The careful intervention in the organic state of a leaf recalls the metamorphic extent of manmade designs, from the seaweed around sushi to the tobacco leaf of "beadies." While each of these have the distinct aesthetic of Japanese and Indian craft, respectively, Weissensteiner's style is reminiscent of the animist Secession, postmodernized with the mixed media of our everyday. It takes the enchantment of an outsider, on residency in Melbourne from Vienna, to subtract the hardness from the Australian bush and reduce it to the whispering Tendril. Weissensteiner's semi-transparent layers of handmade paper are taped and exposed to a blow drier. The tape shrinks, leaving the effect of certain Australian seedpods that will only explode and germinate in extreme heat.

Becoming containers of beings, Weissensteiner's sculptures fossilize the skin, the organ that guides our feeling for density, thickness, smoothness, softness, hardness. She intimates that the surface is a metaphor: the wall of a building is its skin, an image the renegade modern architect Otto Wagner explored in his Viennese projects. Yet skin can also be the membrane of an insect wing, the very flesh in practice of a simultaneous inside and outside. If the skin can be defined as vulnerability, then it is Weissensteiner's departure point in provoking a redefinition of the outside as mutually exclusive from the inside, which is always weak while the outside is strong. Tortoise Skin dwells on the experience of outer layers being softened and pulled to the realm of the inner, reflecting that the surface we present the world does not always have to be protective of a fragile interior.

When we speak of such boundaries we may use figures of speech that refer back to the experience of our own bodies. A suspicion of this inside that we are so conditioned to express turned the body into a site of re-zoning in recent thought. Art such as Weissensteiner's belongs to those who have begun exploring the delicious ambiguity in the modern self, and not the disembodied aesthetic of the Cartesian mind-body split. When Paul Valéry wrote that "there is nothing deeper than skin," he was reacting to Descartes with a similar vision: without and within can be the same and central part of a self we are permanently sculpting.

\* Anaxagoras, cited in Wilhelm Capelle (trans.), *Die Vorsokratiker* (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1968), p. 280. Anaxagoras was possibly the first to perceive a figure's inner and outer as a duality.

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