

# ANDREW KRASNOW

In Conversation with  
Susannah Bella Land and Jonathan Hutt

## **The obvious first question: how did you acquire the skin used in these works?**

I acquired the skin nearly twenty years ago through legal and simple means. It's terminology I use to protect the privacy of those who help me acquire these materials and honour the commitment I made to them. The reasons behind this are many. In the lead up to the Gulf War, when this work was first conceived and created, there was a climate of flag-waving and patriotic fervour. As a result there was pressure to withdraw my work from the first planned exhibition. The media attention this generated had a chilling effect and those who had helped me acquire the skin and had supported the work didn't want to get caught up in this controversy.

## **Can you describe the controversy and ultimately the censorship of your first work in human skin, *Flag Poll*.**

*Flag Poll* consisted of a 6' by 4' American flag made from human skin. The viewer approached a podium, they put their arm in a well, making a gesture that was reminiscent of a Nazi salute whereupon the flag would run up a I-beam and snap to attention, thereby echoing the viewer's gesture. The work was originally accepted by the Contemporary Arts Center of Cincinnati. I had already made a full scale prototype and was in the process of finishing the work when I received a call saying that the work wasn't acceptable after all. I believed that having shown Mapplethorpe and been bought up on charges of indecency, the Center was a defender of freedom of expression.

Because of their decision, *Flag Poll* in some sense lost its time window. The flag works which followed have received a lot of negative media attention over the years. When *48 Star Flag* was exhibited as part of *Old Glory*, Bob Dole, a presidential nominee, commented as did Newt Gingrich. There has been much misinformation which was picked up and published in an article by the *New York Times*. To this day I can't think of a work which defied misinterpretation more than a flag made of human skin as America was about to embark on a war. What I was asking was simple: is the viewer willing to make this gesture, to show blind allegiance to the flag? The objective of this work was to express my very real concerns about the impending war and that it would not be conducted openly and in a way that was moral and ethical. Since that question wasn't permitted in a museum acclaimed for its defense of the first amendment, the work became more complex, with all the inherent contradictions of what it means to be an American or, for that matter, to be human.

## **How did you respond to your work being censored?**

I was devastated, I didn't know what to do. I felt like I betrayed myself. But I knew I couldn't allow this set-back to deny basic freedom of expression. This work was deeply personal and I felt that warranted the removal of my own skin to add to the flag. It became the 17th star, representing the state of Ohio. It not only changed the nature of the work, it also demonstrated my commitment to ensuring that this work is never silenced. It was also a message to myself: never to let this happen again.



*Widow Maker (detail), 1999/2005*

**What was the rationale behind using only white skin in your work.**

Initially, I used white skin because *Flag Poll* was about, in large measure, Columbus coming to America, so it seemed appropriate to that piece. The colour of the skin is not the issue and my work is not a statement about race or colour. The issue is the skin history or the skin legacy of the Americas, from scalping and branding of native Americans and the dropping of the A-bomb on Japan to the use of napalm in Vietnam and phosphor bombs in Central America.

**In *Core Texts of the Mind* (1988) your inclusion of five human brains in the installation hoped to illustrate their aesthetic beauty. But is there the same beauty in skin? Or is our distaste for skin and its perceived ugliness necessary to convey your message and allow the viewer to engage with the work?**

At first I thought no. That there was no need to go there. The first works (in skin) were painted for this very reason. Just the idea of skin, I thought, was enough. My own life, my own experiences, made me very cautious, reluctant, and sad to go any further. When I first decided to show it felt fated. And yet, to answer

your question I felt compelled; that it was necessary to do so to get at the interior of skin. I decided to show it in this rougher form. Is there beauty in it? That is an assessment for others to make. Is there soul in it? I would hope so. It is my life.

**It is clear that identity is a key theme in all your work? How is this expressed in *Of the Flesh*?**

There are individual identities, by this I mean the works, merged with the greater group. When I first showed these pieces to people in the art world and they were assessing them, they always had the same response. After a discussion of the material being human skin, they'd say why are these kind of pop artefacts mixed in with these works that look romantic and figurative? What are you trying to say here? It seems like the work is at odds with itself. I tried to explain without being smart that this was exactly right, this was the whole point. There was a certain dissonance or a feeling of being ill at ease which created an effect with me and I hope with the viewer.

**In works such as *Identity Helmet* (1984), the concept of identity seems connected with the ideas of consciousness, the use of simulated brain and neural tissue challenging our perceptions of self. How have you developed this theme through the use of human skin?**

In a way there are similarities here. The skull and neural tissue are the opaque guardians of identity and thought. For many years our highest brain function, our inner most thoughts were assumed to take place deep within the brain when in fact they take place on the outer surfaces. With skin this identity relationship is, ironically, even less understood.

My desire to complete the *Identity Helmet* was prompted by my brother's death. It has elements of near-death in it. My use of ketamine was a way of trying to get at death -- or at least a sense of it, being frightened, inspired, and at one with it. This enormous burden of skin I've been under, real or imagined, is an identity issue that I assume others must also face in their own way with their own psyches. Sometimes it is helpful to look skin in the face.

**Then your works are a commentary on the line between life and death?**

Yes. I suppose that line can be considered skin; physically, literally, psychologically.

**Are the meanings you give to the skin a form of memorial and/or a monument to life?**

The answer to these questions are yes. *Soul Loss* is a work, the body of which is based on Michelangelo's self-portrait depicting himself as flayed in *The Last Judgement*. However the work is altered, the face is deliberately far less detailed. It is a memorial of sorts to the suffering of native peoples in the Americas; it is about the soul loss experienced with the dropping of A-bombs and napalm within the consciousness of all; (and by extension all of the cruelties all humans in all corners of the world inflict on one another), it is about me and my relationship to skin, my own state of mind and pathos; my feelings in the aftermath of having been censored and having my own skin removed. The work is layered like skin itself. This is what makes it extraordinarily difficult to explicate, it applies to each and every work. The layers are many. I could no more separate out these pieces and their meaning than I could myself.

**How has your own sense of loss informed these works?**

My family history might be of some interest. I am reluctant to talk about this because I see no need for

people to see the works through this filter. Even though it may inform the work, it is not necessarily what the work is about. I don't want the work to be confessional, I want viewers to approach the work with neutrality so that they can experience the works for themselves and interact with it through their own experience.

To avoid it becoming a topic of speculation I'll say this. My own skin history begins with my sister who I never met. She was severely burnt while chaperoning a bunch of kids who were going trick or treating in the late 1950s. Both my parents underwent several skin graft operations to save her, their bodies harboring irregular rectangular scars. But for all their efforts, she died six months later. My place here on this earth is probably a result of this tragedy, yet even so this is not the defining experience for me in terms of skin.

What informs me most is the time spent with my father. He suffered through three major heart attacks. We would watch television together and watch the events of the sixties on the evening news. I would listen listen to his heart and place my head on his chest criss-crossed with scars. There were peaks and valleys in his skin where the wires were protruding and the skin was taut. We would talk about Vietnam, Biafra, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and RFK. Mortality.



*Thou Shalt: Ten Commandments Abstracted, 2000*

Hidden in many of the works are messages and meanings which are notes that no one other than myself would or should recognize. And so it is with *Thou Shalt: The Ten Commandments Abstracted*, there are touchstones there. The work is wired together like the cracked sternum in my father's chest. The tablets lung-like. The strips a rib cage. Is that what it's about? No. But does that play a role in its making? Does the disembodied hand so difficult to see, its wrist arched suggest a lightning bolt or a shock of resuscitation? Who can say?

Is it about the convoluted nature of the commandments and, by extension, skin itself? Is it about its being misused and delivered to the world in an act of generosity only to have it scratched out with a big black X? Thrown to the ground and broken? Is it about its meaning being twisted by others to promote their own aims? Or is it about you and hanging your own law? Who can say?

**You have mentioned before about your reverence for the human form. Is this a way of venerating man both physical and spiritually, a way of suggesting continuation of life?**

I am not sure if I believe in the continuation of man or humanity per se, but there is reverence here for man and what once was and who once was, but with it comes great disappointment as it must be for us all who are sane. Who doesn't see the connectivity of the flesh?

There is one small piece that is always overlooked called *Tri-star*. Despite the military references, it is an homage to an Auden poem, *The More Loving One*. "Looking up at the stars, I know quite well/That, for all they care, I can go to hell/But on earth indifference is the least/We have to dread from man or beast".

**When you speak of the body transformed what do you mean? What is this process of transformation and what forms does this transformation take?**

The work is not about explication of the body. I began by incorporating human brains in the work 20 years ago. The brains were exaggerated, they were in a coloured solution of formaldehyde and distilled water, they were in glass spheres, they were exaggerated and beautiful. They were transformed -- in a way -- as an all seeing eye. *Growth* used umbilical chords, the chord now was used as precisely that, a chord with which to pull or possibly continue the process of pulling oneself up within enclosure after the fact. *Of the Flesh* is much the same in that it is not a dissection or a display of what the body is but what it can be.

Leave it to the physicists and the historians of science to detail the importance of transformation, the philosophers to explain systems both open and closed, the spiritual and the believers in forces to know where all these things go. It is not my place. I just feel that there is meaning in seeing it, at least for me.

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