

EK Interview: Ariana Page Russell By Chemo | posted April 19th, 2012



Ariana Page Russell is an artist who draws her inspiration from the distinctive qualities of her skin. She has dermatographia, which makes her flesh hypersensitive, leaving red welts wherever pressure is applied. She discusses some of the unique dynamics that arise from having her own body so intimately linked to her art.

Who are you and what do you do?

I'm an artist living and working in Brooklyn, NY. Using my sensitive skin as inspiration, I make photographs, video, collage, and wallpaper.

You are product of both the West and East coast. Has there been any interesting fusions of those two cultures in your life and work? How is living in Brooklyn different from Seattle? They're both "artsy" sorts of cities, right?

Being from the West Coast I definitely have a deep appreciation for the landscape: ocean, clear lakes, pine trees, and grand mountains. This informs the way I view New York City. I see it as a kind of parallel landscape made of concrete and buildings rather than nature. I love both coasts, but will likely stay east for awhile. In my series, *Save Face*, I directly reference my experience of seeing hundreds of faces in a day: on the train, street, at work, etc. An earlier series I did in Seattle was based on kelp and detritus I found in the Puget Sound, which then inadvertently led me to photograph my skin. Each city has offered different inspiration, but another thing I love about New York is the cultural variety. It's so exciting!

When did you start claiming your dermatographia as a medium for art? What was your life like both before and after that decision? Did the teasing go away?



I started photographing my dermatographia in 2004 and have used it as a source for my work ever since. I've always been interested in the body and skin, so my work has been about this for even longer. The teasing hasn't really gone away, but my perspective has changed—it doesn't bother me anymore. Most people know about my sensitive skin since I've put it out in the open, so I have to explain it less.

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You have a level of personal intimacy that exceeds most other artists. How does it feel to be both the artist and the art? How separate are your identities as creator and creation?

Sometimes I really don't like being the subject of my work. It's challenging to always have to face my body so intimately and intensely, but I feel compelled to continue this exploration. To me there is no separation between creator and creation, except the creation is externalized. The two are always linked though.



I've also had stalkers.

You relate your skin's unusual properties to blushing. Does being such a public artist ever cause embarrassing situations? Or have you channeled those feelings to make them irrelevant?

I've never really had anything terribly embarrassing happen. People think just because they've seen photographs of my body and skin they know me very well. That can be a good thing if they feel comfortable enough to tell me stories about their own skin, or it can be a bad thing if someone thinks they have a right to say invasive things to me. For instance, I have a large collection of stories and photographs of other people's skin, but



that other people are missing out?

You use photographs of your own skin to add a colored layer on top of your skin. I find it very odd to use photographs of yourself to change your face and identity. Do you feel any oddness or tension to this recursive disguising of yourself? Or does that reflect how you see everyone else behaving?

I see it as layers of self that build up and go away over time. We represent ourselves differently in different contexts, we have different identities and appearances to different people, but underneath it all we're the same person.

Do you have any tattoos? What do you think about them in general? How do you feel about their permanent nature? Have you ever wanted one?

Tattoos are great! I have six myself, and plan to get more. I've got lots of freckles and moles, and see tattoos as another form of decoration of skin, similar to what naturally surfaces over time. Tattoos are only as permanent as our bodies...eventually it'll all be gone anyway.

Do you wallpaper your own home with your skinpaper? Maybe this is a silly question, but do you ever get the sensation of being a stranger in your own skin? You have such an interesting relationship with your own flesh, do you ever think

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I've never papered my walls with skin, but when I was working from home I had lots of skin stuff on the wall. It's a bit too intense to see my work everyday like that. I prefer to keep a separate studio, so I can get distance from it.

Sometimes I do feel like a stranger in my own skin, as I'm always becoming more and more comfortable in it. The older I get the more at home I feel in my body though. As for people missing out, I think everyone has some uniqueness they can appreciate in themselves, so therefore each person's experience is unique in their own flesh.



If you had to choose one design to make permanent on your skin, what would it be? Or would you go “naked” and keep it blank?

I've chosen mostly abstract designs for tattoos, but they are all black—no color for me! I like tattoos that can be viewed in different ways, not so literal that the meaning is immediately clear. Each of my tattoos represent something important to me.

Are there any upcoming projects or exhibits you'd like to plug?

From Friday April 20th to Thursday April 26th I'll be featured on the online gallery Violet Strays: <http://violetstrays.com/index.html>

<http://arianapagerussell.com>