

Ariana Page Russell Turns Her Skin Condition Into Art

By Simcha Whitehill | posted November 30th, 2011



Beauty is especially skin deep if you're artist Ariana Page Russell. She has dermatographia, a condition in which lightly scratching your skin causes raised, red lines where you've scratched. It affects roughly 5 percent of the population, but Ms. Russell is the only one who has turned her puffy, ruddy, sensitive skin into elaborately patterned high art.

In her latest show, "Blouse," which is currently hanging at the Magnan Metz Gallery in New York City, she created photographs, video art, and temporary tattoos using images of her rosy body designs to make a powerful and prideful statement about being comfortable within one's own skin. She turns her body into a canvas at her studio in Brooklyn and that's where we caught up with the blonde haired, blue eyed, artful ambassador of blushing.

YB: When did you first realize you had this condition, dermatographia?

APR: I don't really know, maybe some time in high school or college. A lot of times, people don't develop it until they're a little older. I think I also didn't realize that I had it because to me, it just seemed sort of normal except for when people started to be like "Whoa! What's going on? What happened?" And then, I became more aware of it.

YB: Did you try to hide it at first?

APR: No. I mean, there's not really a way to hide it. It would just kind of happen on accident and I had no control over it.

YB: What's the amount of pressure you have to apply to get your skin to puff?

APR: I just use a knitting needle. I can just go like this. *(She draws a few lines on her arm.)* It's not much pressure at all. That's all I have to do.

YB: And that will leave a mark, huh. Is it instantaneous?

APR: It takes a few minutes, you'll see it start to come up. What I use is this *(She pulls out thin cardboard with sail shapes cut out.)* And I just went and traced it. See, I can't see what I'm doing because see I just did it *(She points to the lines she made on her arms. They are still not visible.)* and I can't see it because it takes like five minutes to show up. So I can't tell where I've been drawing. If I need a particular pattern, then I have to do a template or stencil. I just put up a video on Vimeo. I made a smaller template [of the sail design] and sped up the video so you could see the pattern go up and down [on my skin]. So you can see it happen.

YB: How long do the impressions usually last?

APR: Like a half an hour or so. I've done stuff in the past with my chest and neck, like the cover of [my book] "Dressing," and there was an imprint of those tattoos on my skin for days from just the peeling [off of the tattoos]. That's different than the drawings. But it was kind of cool to see the shapes of [the designs]. Look, you can seem them starting to come up! *(She points at her arm where she drew the lines.)*

YB: Yeah! It's so different. It seems like such a different way to make art. Do you consider yourself a photographer, or sculptor, or a performance artist?

APR: I consider myself a performative photographer. It is what I'm doing in front of the camera that I'm documenting. So, it isn't just straight photography to me.

YB: Have you always used your body as a canvas?

APR: Just since 2004. I was in grad school in Seattle at the time, that's when it started. I was playing around, just shooting things around the house. I had shorts on and I was doodling on my leg. I had my camera out and I started photographing my leg. And I got the prints and I had them in my studio and people were really responding to it. I thought this [condition] is so weird, nobody cares to see it, but then I started doing that in my MFA thesis show and then I had other shows....

YB: But your big break was on the internet?

APR: My friend Shaun Kardinal who helps me with my website, this is early 2008, he submitted my work to "It's Nice That," without telling me. And they posted an image and it got posted to Digg. It got a lot of hits and someone on "20/20" saw it and they contacted me and said we'd like to do a story on you.

YB: Do you feel like there's an online dermatographia community forming around you that wasn't there before?

APR: Yes, definitely. The response to the "20/20" piece with JuJu Chang was really good and there are pages and pages of comments on the ABC news page people who responded to it. Some people think that it's gross and

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weird and freaky. Actually, someone commented on a Huffington Post article about me and said, “My son has this but he’s a web designer he didn’t feel the need to photograph it...”

YB: Different strokes for different folks. What is the typical male reaction to your work?

APR: I don’t know how honest people are about it. I think people find it weird, both sexes, but also kind of sexy at the same time because it’s different. Some people in the subculture of body art and tattoo are into it because it looks like scarification. But also the “Dressing” series from my book, some of that is a little bit sexier and I think just because it’s like, “There’s a woman’s body!” I actually kind of had this stalker thing happen. It’s over. It’s dumb. But this guy was like, “Oh my god, you have the best body I’ve ever seen!” And it was like, you don’t even know. Photographs do lie, you know! It’s called Photoshop.

YB: What made you want to do self-portraiture?

APR: It’s something that makes me feel vulnerable, but it’s also a way to face my own flaws and get more and more comfortable with my own body and my own skin. I’ve been embarrassed about my skin in the past. I still do [get embarrassed sometimes]. If I laugh a lot or if I get embarrassed, my face gets fully red. Does that happen to you?

YB: Sure, of course.

APR: And sometimes people will be like, “Oh my god you’re so red!” It’s like, you don’t have to point that out. I know there are other people who have issues with their body and their skin too, if I do. So, if I’m working through my own stuff, I can show that. I don’t have to hide it. And I’ve had a lot of people who have told me about their skin after they see mine. If they have problems with acne, orrosacea or psoriasis—everybody has got something that they feel insecure about that has to do with their bodies. When I started doing this work, this professor of mine was telling me about his Athlete’s Foot, how it would look really pink.

YB: With people always telling you their skin secrets, did you ever think you should have just been a dermatologist?

APR: No, but I mean, I like it. I really do. It’s a good opening because if you make yourself vulnerable to somebody then they’re going to share something with you. I like having interactions with people that aren’t just small talk. Sure, tell me about your skin fungus.

YB: What’s the best skin interaction you’ve ever had?

APR: There was this kid who was like 12-years-old. He emailed me a while ago and he said, “I have the same skin condition and I wanted to interview a dermatologist or a scientist but I found your work when I was researching and I wanted to interview you. My teacher said it was okay.” So, I did this interview with him and he sent me a picture of him and it said “thanks” on his arm. That kind of thing is so meaningful to me. I love it when people email me and send pictures and stuff. And that’s part of the reason I have my email public. You can find me. I love that kind of interaction.

YB: What do hope people come away with when they see your work?

APR: More of an awareness of their own bodies and just seeing that no matter what, nothing is really that weird. It’s just how we are, human beings. We’re flawed.

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This weekend, you can catch Ariana Page Russell's work at the Magnan Metz Gallery in New York. Or, if you're lucky enough to be in Caracas, she's lecturing at The Sixth World Meeting Of Body Art. Next up for her show "Blouse," a couple pieces will be on display at Art Miami. And as Ms. Russell herself asked, she'd love you to send her your skin stories through her website or her Facebook page.