

The skin in seven layers, the deepest last

Epidermis I (stratum corneum)

The faint blotches on the surface of Sylvia Griffin's *Second Skin* paintings look a lot like bruises. *Fresh bruises on the skin are often red or purple. Older bruises may turn green and then yellow or brown...* their changing colour serves as a sign of healing. In material terms, both colour and texture are the result of mixing pigments – powdered rock and earth – with marble 'dust'. Chalky in its raw state, looking a bit like ash from the crematorium, marble dust is, paradoxically, the 'worthless' by product of countless hours spent laboriously carving by hand. This 'paint' has been smoothed and pressed into the surface, also by hand, with gestures that, by suggesting care and healing, begin to soften the implications of violence.

Epidermis II (stratum lucidum)

All the works in this exhibition have this in common: the shape and weight and texture of their materials, as well as their placement – including the spaces between them – appear somehow alive with feeling. This means that however abstract these works might appear to be, abstraction is not what they are about. Collectively they are a home for painful feelings that cannot be (or prefer not to be) remembered, especially not in words. We are taught from childhood that speech itself has a healing power: faced with trauma, we need to 'talk it out'. I wonder whether, in a less talkative culture, grief could be aired in other ways, without words. With this thought in mind, Griffin's paintings, loose sheets of canvas, pale in tone, mottled and stained, would simply be airing in order to heal.

Epidermis III (stratum granulosum)

I think about the underlying affinity of organic and inorganic in this work, how easily one slides into another. In the studio, I saw a trail of powdered charcoal issue from between two solid lumps of marble; plaster remnants of past works huddle together; a rock slowly smother inside a thick overcoat of plaster. It occurred to me later – of the sculptural pieces in particular – how much their expressiveness owes to their incompleteness, their seeming willingness to be reconfigured again and again.

Epidermis IV (stratum spinosum)

Surely there's a place in our culture for a memorial that doesn't burden the events it recalls or close them off, but holds them lightly. Unlike public monuments and memorials that celebrate victories or honour the dead, this memorial might honour anyone and everyone with no special claim, and maybe no desire, to be remembered. It would honour those fleeting impressions, inconsequential encounters and passing thoughts that constitute our lives. In this context something as insignificant as a collection of beads strung on a

necklace could feel like a fitting memorial, each bead standing in for a fleeting moment of time, the necklace growing a little every day.

Epidermis V (stratum basale)

When Griffin takes a material like marble, prized for its crystalline purity and durability, and grinds it to dust, coats it in plaster, mixes it with other materials, the hybrid objects she creates – part organic, part inorganic, part abstract, part figurative – become the things that mixed feelings can fly to and lodge in. An alert viewer, hearing the sound of plaster shards hitting a marble slab, might also consider tuning in to traces of the other conversations these hybrid works are having, both individually and between one another. Such uses of materials are both referential (they evoke monumental sculpture), and reverential, a form of homage to the natural world. By now those materials (rocks, plaster, textiles) have formed a sedimentary underlay to Griffin's practice, a bit like the soft, muddy bottom of a shallow lake that she can reach down into and bring up something unseen and unexpected.

Dermis

Any artist who practises in this area needs a 'good' memory, meaning one that's supple, creative, imaginative, embracing. Not fixed or solid or inclined in any way towards the monumental. The artist is responsible for raising material from the past into the present without changing it in any crucial way, that is to say *without colonising it*. Depending on the nature of the past being explored, she must also take care to present the suffering of others without injuring herself or her audience. None of this is easily done.

Hypodermis

Belatedly, it occurs to me that the *second skin* evoked by the exhibition title can take a variety of forms, more than I first thought. It exists in the fragile outer layer of plaster that's destined to flake away from its marble support. Elsewhere it lies folded – like a lining – beneath the outer skin that an individual presents to the world. In both manifestations, something is missing or wrong, yet each is beautiful in its way. Griffin has described these works as 'experiments with materials', but by making this flawed beauty available to others, they have amounted to much more.

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