

Ed Atkins at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery

Dagmara Genda

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ED ATKINS AT THE SEPTENTINE



Among the many layers of Ed Atkins's installation titled *Ribbons*, the one that concerns me most is its surface, or rather, its many surfaces held together through the theme and metaphor of skin. Entering the gallery one is confronted with, in addition to the wall of cinematic sound, images of computer generated human hides printed onto wooden sheets cut exactly to shape. Affixed to panels and walls, they clinically feature a stretch of chest, a splayed perineum, a flattened penis or some other such spread. The panels themselves are pages from Atkins's opaque poetry printed to a 4 x 8' size. Times New Roman text is intermixed with graphic drawings of squiggles, lines and body parts, such as noses, fingers, intestines and other sorts of squishy protrusions. Moving further along the corridor of the Serpentine Sackler Gallery one sees the first of four projections starring the naked avatar, Dave, who is presumably the embodiment of the splayed skin. Dave himself is something of a melancholic skinhead, shaved and toned, his body parchment for scrawled slogans like "FML," "TROLL," and "ASSHOLE." But Dave seems unaware of, or perhaps simply indifferent to, his embellishments, and proceeds to smoke, drink, sing operatic arias and recite a histrionic, if often nonsensical, soliloquy, until he himself deflates like a balloon, his eyelashes falling off as he loses form. The videos cycle through various references to and metaphors for skin, from a limp penis with drooping foreskin sadly poised at a glory hole to the various televisual textual tropes applied like the ready-made

digital skins we use to adjust the appearance of our webmail or video game character. There is a sense that the surface is all there is, and yet this surface folds, spreads and is layered to create a complexity that defies being dismissed as skin-deep superficiality.

James Joyce's assertion that "modern man has an epidermis rather than a soul,"¹ highlights the importance of surface in the mediated experience of modernity. While Joyce meant to say that the senses are developed "to the detriment of the spiritual faculty,"² it seems that Atkins does not eschew depth as such, but takes a very focused and concentrated look at surface itself. The ability of the surface to stand in for the whole, gives mere appearances a power and meaning beyond themselves. While *Ribbons* does not project a vision of what that meaning might be, it does graft together a sort of Frankenstein from many types of

skin to produce something simultaneously familiar and alienating.

Stock televisual footage and audio is one strategy Atkins uses to produce this sort of intimate anonymity. As empty forms, they are surfaces that have come to be associated with primetime game shows or mid-afternoon evangelical call-ins, amongst other such TV tropes. Each has its own graphic vocabulary that Atkins combines with text ranging from gibberish to lines from his poems like "I'll hurt you 'til you need me. We had it coming sweetheart." These decontextualized phrases are fit into menus beneath Dave's face as if by means of introduction, or captioning, while words like "ENFEEBLED" are animated as graphic transitions in a television crime show. Various cinematic techniques are also effortlessly cycled through as a sequence of empty gestures made to demonstrate the unlimited vocabulary of digital technology. Other scenes include smoke shifting in and out of focus, and various liquids, including piss and blood, poured into a cut crystal whiskey glass during a series of light changes. These motifs are interspersed with Dave's monologues at a bar, or under a round table where he wraps around the centre leg which, in close-up, might be mistaken for a stripper's pole. Occasionally a skull, a noose, a painting, or a lemon appears. Reminiscent of Dutch still lifes, each element carries with it a heavy dose of symbolism while also referring to another important aspect of still life painting: a means of showcasing painterly virtuosity.

Even as the surface is manufactured to near flawlessness, Atkins does produce cracks that allow for the mixing of interior and exterior. Each corridor of the Sackler Gallery ends with a video projected floor to ceiling on a board mounted to a wooden framework in emulation of stretched canvas. These boards lean against the walls at odd angles to produce keystoning in the video. The light bleeds beyond the screen to create a sculptural effect. This very calculated emphasis on artifice, in combination with the long rectangular spaces, remind me of first-person shooter games from the early 2000s. Set against a backdrop of ambient cinematic sound, occasionally a glitch would make the walls, on either side of the raised avatar's hand, appear substanceless and two-dimensional. Part of the protagonist's body would move through the wall, and one could catch a glimpse of an enemy force standing dumbly in an adjacent room. Despite its storyline and cinematic suspense, the game would reveal itself as pure artifice. The multiple glory holes in the show also contribute to this effect. While Dave looks and inserts body parts through holes in the videos, they also appear on the text panels, partially obscuring type and image. Another hole pierces a canvas-like screen just at groin level. While watching the video, the attentive viewer will occasionally notice people from the other side peeping through the hole or inserting a searching hand, but usually nothing more. While surface might not have a great deal of depth, it certainly has an expansive area, of which I've only scratched a tiny portion. But perhaps this is what makes Atkins's *Ribbons* so absolutely compelling. His surfaces create an environment of increasing complexity that is nevertheless intuitively absorbed through its uncanny familiarity. It is perhaps the inherent contradictions of the nature of skin that make it so apt a metaphor for Atkins's explorations of the body, subjectivity, alienation and experience. As a part of the body, but also encompassing its whole, as Steven Connor writes in *The Book of Skin*, it is always in excess of itself, "part immaterial, ideal, ecstatic, a skin that walks."³

Dagmara Genda

Dagmara Genda is an artist and freelance writer. She has published with *Border Crossings*, *esse* and *BlackFlash*, where she served on the editorial committee between 2008-2011. Genda graduated with an MA from the London Consortium, Birkbeck College and with an MFA from Western University. She has had solo exhibitions at the Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff and the Esker Foundation, Calgary, and group exhibitions in numerous public galleries, the most recent of which was the nationally touring *Ecotopia*.

1 Joyce, James. *James Joyce in Padua*. Ed. & Trans. Louis Berrone. New York: Random House Publishing, 1977. 21.

2 *Ibid.*

3 Connor, Steven. *The Book of Skin*. London: Reaktion Books, 2004. 29.