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Palimpsest

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Palimpsest

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

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Abstract

Palimpsest explores the various ways in which the models, individuals who have gained and/or lost a large amount of weight, feel empowered and vulnerable. The skin is marked and each discoloration or indentation telling a story of loss, gain, and removal. The photographs mark these changes.

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I want to express undying gratitude to the models who made this work possible. The bravery and investment each of you gave to the project is immeasurable.

Dedication

Palimpsest is dedicated to Marijean Levering, Ph.D.

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I. Introduction

In 2010, I lost 100 pounds. After a lifetime of an erratic and confusing relationship with both food and my weight, I chose to have the Gastric Sleeve Surgery. In my naive way of viewing body dysmorphia, I believed this surgery would resolve my complicated interaction with weight. I am not alone, the relationship between an individual and the ways in which they see their physical appearance, has been thoroughly examined by numerous professionals.

In the time leading up the surgery, as well as the years that followed, I found that I was often hiding of my body. Regardless of weight—too fat or too thin—I had planned that surgery would allow me to be comfortable with my body. And a healthy weight would be achieved. I truly believed that *this time* it would be real and the great covering could end.

After the surgery in January, 2010, The weight came off and it came off quickly. By that September, I had already lost 100 pounds and was pleased. The weight loss experience is not what stuck with me, it came and went. However, the residue of flesh that was left over after the weight astounded my naivety. Where did all this *skin* come from? Skin, skin is everywhere in its voluminous excess! None of the images I found during my research showed the reality of loss. I felt like I was ensconced in an unfamiliar and alien coat of flesh. I was left with the question: What am I supposed to do with this lax sack of skin, the excess which now drooped, folded, hung and was unmanageable. Even though the weight is gone its residue remains. This skin, which I can grab, stretch, and grip moving it in space. Intellectually, I know it is part of me, but, simultaneously it feels foreign even with its familiar scars, stretch marks and moles.

II. PushPull

During my early photography project, “PushPull,” I was able to explore my frustration through a close examination of my extra skin. In the work, I began to physically handle the remaining flesh--aggressively pushing and pulling to its limits. Through my attempt to shove the flesh into an acceptable form, I was able to create photographs which often resembled the landscape in their ghost-like sculptural topography. Through my curiosity for discovering the true nature of flesh, I was left concurrently expanding and tightening my scope. I began to ask questions such as: What was really left? How does the skin present? What is the acceptable form of this flesh?

Edward Weston’s nudes and Alfred Stieglitz’s landscapes became my guide. I dissected and drilled down into what the skin could become when its color is removed and it becomes abstracted or highly contrasted. During this time, the relationship with my own body mirrored the abstraction. I could not see myself as a whole body, instead I would often break my body into pieces in order to make it palpable to me. The medical community told me that surgery is the only correction. Surgery at this point in my path was distasteful and honestly quite frightening. Abstraction allowed me to swallow this new way of existing in my own body. Much of my life had been spent covering or hiding my body, my weight. Unexpectedly, after the weight loss, I still found myself hiding my body in my daily life and my work. I was ignoring the reality of my flesh by abstracting it into images of skinscape. This was my attempt to abstract a problem and help myself accept every detail of my new coat of flesh. What I came to realize was the practice of concealing my body was unsustainable. My body deserved to be whole—to be seen as whole and powerful in its entirety. I see others as whole, why not myself? My body is a record of its past—a palimpsest where each mark and lump make up the whole.

IV. Skinscape

As my perspective changed from distaste to acceptance, I no longer photographed myself in sections, instead shooting myself in its entirety. Looking at the figure as whole, images of weight loss and subsequent residue, are not portrayed accurately in the media. The representations do not address the body's story—they are airbrushed, smoothed, and sanitized. Our society has a biased and abusive relationship with body image, which is proven by the myriad of weight loss options pushed by the media: Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, Slimfast, weight loss supplements, diet plans, diet experts, obesity doctors, low fat food, pharmaceutical weight loss, numerous gyms, and the diet book industry. An individual is not seen as 'having fat', but rather *being* fat. Our society raises the following question: What is wrong with 'these' people? The judgement associated with excess begins to question an individual's ability to adequately manage his/her own life. This moral judgement is met with sundry methods of "correction."

The idealized female form permeates our culture. According to U.S. News, the weight loss industry alone accounts for 60 billion dollars per year.¹ Both the television and film industry are flooded with weight loss programs or weight-related issues. Culturally pervasive images of residual skinscapes—the marks and the flesh left after weight loss and gain—often feature headless or somber humans in a documentary and clinical display. Along with these promoted methods of weight loss, the map of how to lose weight and obtain the accepted body is shoved into our consciousness with a multiplicity of television programs and documentaries. *The Biggest Loser* and *My 600 Pound Life*, are just two out of the twenty on television right now. This list is

¹ <https://money.usnews.com/money/personal.../01/.../the-heavy-price-of-losing-weight>

exhausting and the cultural messages are overwhelming. The need to “discipline” a woman’s “unruly body” feel evident.² These messages create an inherent struggle between what could be seen as one’s view of self and how individuals look at one another. However, the messages come with the judgement that a fat body is a diseased body—obesity a *death sentence*.³ Palimpsest explores the various ways in which the models, individuals who have gained and/or lost a large amount of weight, feel empowered and vulnerable. The skin is marked and each mark tells a story of loss, gain, and removal. This subset of individuals exist within our society, yet they are rarely represented in the media. In most cases, these individuals may only be represented in medical photos which are typically meant to act as a diagram for preparing a body for surgery. Twenty-one percent of weight loss surgery patients and twenty-one of bariatric surgery patients undergo at least one kind of body contouring procedure and about 100,000 bariatric procedures are performed each year in the United States.⁴ Examining the flesh’s essence rather than the cultural baggage assigned to weight loss or obesity—extraneous flesh which some choose to remove and incinerate—is my goal. To many of us who have experienced a significant loss of weight, the body becomes a palimpsest that is simultaneously familiar and alien, yet has a story of its own. The addition and subtraction of parts and pieces and the resultant residue creates a new concept of self, a new portrait.

² Gay, Roxane. *Hunger: A Memoir of (my) Body*. First edition. New York, NY: Harper, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 2017, page 18.

³ Ibid, 12

⁴ <https://money.usnews.com/money/personal.../01/.../the-heavy-price-of-losing-weight>

V. Palimpsest

Palimpsest examines the whole. The layers of what a body has been are written in the skin. I began photographing full bodies of women, and myself, who at one point had lost at least 60 pounds. They could have gained weight and lost weight, but the 60 pound marker was my only requirement. It was at 60 pounds when I saw the weight loss in my own skin. Looking at both myself and other humans, it seemed that the 60 pound mark left the viewer a map to read. There is a current cultural trend of exposing larger bodies to the public with *Dove's Real Beauty Campaign* or their *My Beauty My Say* campaign, JCPenney's *Here I Am Campaign*, Aerie's *AerieReal* no airbrushing, campaign.⁵ Even these bodies are softened. Shown in *good* light, these representations do not address the body's story—they are smoothed, sanitized. These images do not address the story written in the body after the weight is lost and gained. These bodies are still “manageable” their reality is not shown. Palimpsest had to be different; I did not want Thomas Huxley photos documenting specimens. John Pultz states that “Such photographs reproduced the hierarchical structures of domination and subordination inherent in the institutions of colonialism.”⁶ In parallel, I did not want to represent our bodies as something to be catalogued and put away—documented and swept under the rug. Bodies assigned meaning of worth because of measurements, numbers and comparisons to others did not interest me, the body in its whole representation did.

⁵<https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/after-huge-weight-loss-sagging-skin-remains-n44481>

⁶ Pultz, John. *The Body and the Lens: Photography from 1839 to the Present*. Harry N Abrams, Inc. New York, NY. 1995. page 25.

Photography and the body first melded in the creation of portraits. As a photographer, it is necessary for me to establish a relationship based on trust and understanding with each of my models. There is an exchange of power and possible invasion. As Susan Sontag notes: “All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt.”⁷ I allow each sitter to guide poses and set boundaries regarding each photo shoot. Each of my sitters desire anonymity. Obscuring the face allows each photograph to focus on the changes of model’s body and skin, as well as giving voice to an underrepresented population. Many of my models are unable to look at their portraits. The institutionalized shame of weight and its trappings often keep them in a bubble of shame. They do not want to read the story in their skin. They are working on being proud of their journey. As John Pultz has convincingly argued, “The body, represented in its purely material physicality, gains a power of its own.”⁸ These portraits nullify quick answers of facial recognition by focusing solely on this residue. The women in *Palimpsest* own space by virtue of their physical representation and there isn’t a face for the viewer to draw conclusions about the model. The story remains in the physicality of the body and skin. Anonymity combats the need to categorize—this portrait is a 47-year old white woman, of course her skin looks stretched and mapped. Anonymity denies an easy assignment of value and gives each sitter the freedom to be in their own body. Identity is indeterminate; the body and its presence is enough. Its existence establishes proof of life. Each model allows us to see her story. Instead of

⁷ Sontag, Susan, 1933-2004. *On Photography*. New York :Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977, page 20.

⁸ Pultz, John. *The Body and the Lens: Photography from 1839 to the Present*. Harry N Abrams, Inc. New York, NY. 1995. page 6.

deriding bodies, these women present their own skin experience. Reading this map is dependent on the viewers' experience. Some viewers can read the lines, marks, puckers in reference to their own body experience. Others are exposed to a body that is marginalized but is still immense in its statement of existence. These portraits demand to be seen. Each grouping presents a snapshot of an individual's ongoing journey of loss and, in some cases, accumulation. Palimpsest shows a slice of each person's ever-changing flesh. Each portrait is its own proof.

I am interested in the way a photograph merges this altered appearance after weight loss, the internal negotiations of this loss, and the shadow of accumulation. I am using color photography to nullify the ambiguity and distance that can be caused by my previous black and white residual landscapes. The cultural push for weight loss ignores each woman's negotiation of the weight and the residue that remains after a weight loss or gain. These images allowed the viewer into the pattern of excess skin without having to confront the individual experience. The black and white treatment allowed the viewer even more distance from the storied flesh. Unlike the ideas presented at the beginning of this project these portraits demanded color photography to nullify the ambiguity and distance that can be caused by my previous black and white residual landscapes. of abstracted skin. The individual experience became foremost. Instead of easing the viewer into images minus identity or giving the ease to the viewer of looking at abstractions instead of the reality of a woman's body that has experienced the changes of weight loss or gain, the images address the whole figure.

As John Pultz notes, "Photography has been the most widespread means of visual communication of the past century and a half, and has done more than any other medium to

shape our notions of the body in modern times.”⁹ Beginning with daguerreotypes, moving to Hill and Adamson’s calotypes, Frederik Scott Archer’s collodion and the carte-de-viste, portraits become the currency. Pultz continues “Conventional histories suggest that photography was invented to meet the demands of a growing middle class for cheap portraits...Collections of portraits became substitutes for collections of real people.”¹⁰ Within photography the image becomes the assumed truth. Palimpsest attempts to show the truth of these underserved bodies. Bodies that only become socially manageable through surgical removal and incineration of the remains after weight loss. There is a different truth than the media portrays. These women and their bodies have functioned within the fluidity of life. There is not final perfection, a finishing point. There is only living in the body, having these bodies own space, and representing these bodies without judgement.

John Pultz discusses identity and gaze and our responsibility as viewer and maker:

It is noticeable that artists have always tended to allegorize female sitters more frequently than males. The Reynolds himself produced some of his most noted works in this genre, suggesting that he, among many other artists, viewed the female body as more open than the male to this act of appropriation...With this look (or “gaze”) men deny the female body any meaning of its own. Women are thus forced into the role of “other” to the male, which allows for the identity of the latter to be concretized as such.¹¹

The women in my portraits are the “other” because their bodies are not represented in the media except when they refer to them as a problem that must be fixed. They are also “other” because of the lack of identifiers of the face. Extra weight, extra skin, bodies of excess need social

⁹ Pultz, John. *The Body and the Lens: Photography from 1839 to the Present*. Harry N Abrams, Inc. New York, NY. 1995. page 6.

¹⁰ Ibid, 17.

¹¹ Ibid, 30.

control so they can be corrected, managed—made not “other.” Instead, I did not make these portraits to colonize their bodies, the photographs do not categorize and document bodies, the models are not shown as mistakes to be corrected. My goal was to create an image that merges the changed outward appearance after weight loss and the internal acceptance of this loss or the looming shadow of accumulation. These portraits give weight to the sitter and value in presence. These images do not make the female model an erotic object. They are simply representations of the model’s truth in that moment in time. The female body is not “redefined and reordered, both scientifically and pictorially, by forces and powers external to itself” as Pultz says.¹² These portraits function as unaltered fact. The mass of each body creating its own definition. For example, the pictorialists continued “an aesthetic discourse of women’s and children’s bodies.”¹³ These portraits do not portray women and domesticity, they do not display class or women as a mythologized ideal, they are not about women’s place in society. The portraits grew from the American Formalism of Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Weston. Weston and Stieglitz “removed the physical bodies from the psychological beings he photographed. For Weston the female body was no more erotic an object than the peppers and halved cabbages that he also photographed at this time.”¹⁴ My photographs began in the abstracted body and they developed into something different. Instead of a male gaze, these portraits follow Imogen Cunningham “a free spirit and feminist, who consistently challenged social conventions.”¹⁵ These portraits,

¹² Pultz, John. *The Body and the Lens: Photography from 1839 to the Present*. Harry N Abrams, Inc. New York, NY. 1995. page , 39.

¹³ Ibid, 43.

¹⁴ Ibid, 67.

¹⁵ Pultz, John. *The Body and the Lens: Photography from 1839 to the Present*. Harry N Abrams, Inc. New York, NY. 1995. page, 71.

because they were shot in collaboration with each model, become a representation of their bodies' changes. Their value is not determined by the viewer. These women's now own their own image. These women have chosen to tell you their story. As author William Ewing clarifies:

Conventional ideas about beauty, gender, sexuality and personal identity are questioned by a number of contemporary photographers. Some resist or subvert the power of ubiquitous advertising and commercial photography, which they see as a dangerously persuasive force; others mock society's unwillingness to look directly at *real* bodies, its insistence on seeing them 'dressed up' in the clothing of social class or economic status.¹⁶

The residue of change is not mute. Each mark or fold tells diverse stories in which an individual's experience can be seen and understood. There is a language for viewers who have an insight into the story of the body. Some viewers see each stretch mark, surgery scar, curve and sag in comparison to their own body story. But even without the same language understanding these portraits unabashedly scream the story of the body's journey. As someone who has experienced significant weight loss, I have the opportunity to participate in the portraits and represent these individual skin stories with the eyes of acceptance and proof of existence. I am examining the skin's essence rather than the cultural baggage assigned to weight loss or obesity. With weight loss and gain the reconditioned self is presented to the world and the reconditioned self is also negotiated internally. William Ewing continues the morphing of body concept and its presentation: "We are beginning to think of the bodies we inhabit in much the same way as we do the clothes we wear—as changeable according to climate, task, fashion and

¹⁶ Ewing, William. *The Century of the Body*. Thames and Hudson. New York, NY. pg 25.

whim. We are allowing our bodies to be transformed not just for reasons of health and longevity, but for reasons of vanity, as the rapid growth of cosmetic surgery attests.”¹⁷

VI. Conclusion

Each woman in *Palimpsest* fought unique battles to share their story. The acceptance of my story has transformed from wanting aggressive change in *PushPull* to breaking apart the body and closely investigating the skin and flesh in *Residue*. The latter work focused on both the loss of the body (as a whole) and the loss of humanity. The pure humanity of Lisette Model’s *Coney Island Bather* directed *Palimpsest*’s attempts to view bodies as whole and human; a story that can be read and images that deserve proof of existence. The humans in my work are whole and mapped. Their past and current relationships are written in their skin. Our bodies are a part of our whole and worthy to be represented and seen.

¹⁷ Ewing, William. *The Century of the Body*. Thames and Hudson. New York, NY. pg, 7.

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Appendix: Figures



Fig. 1. PushPull 1

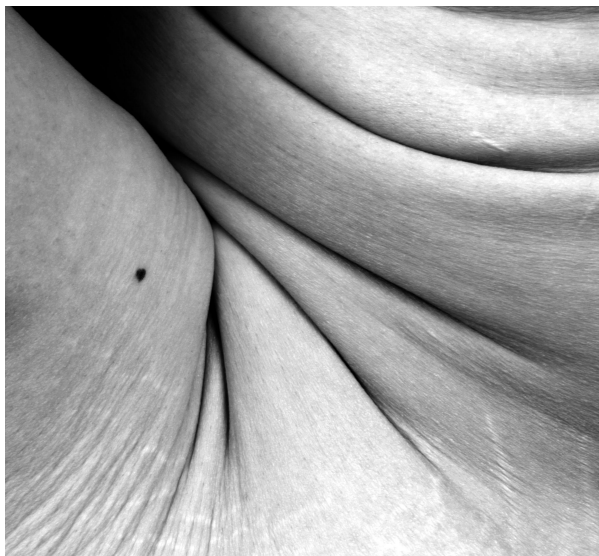


Fig. 2. Skinscape 1



Fig. 3 *Skinscape 2*

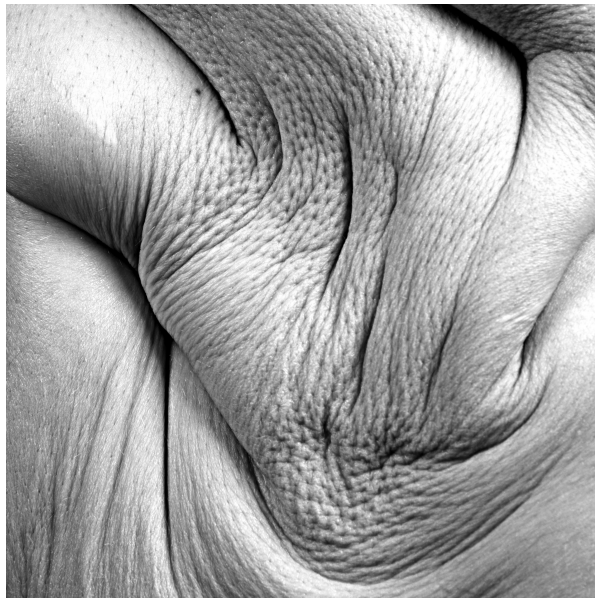


Fig. 4 *Skinscape 3*

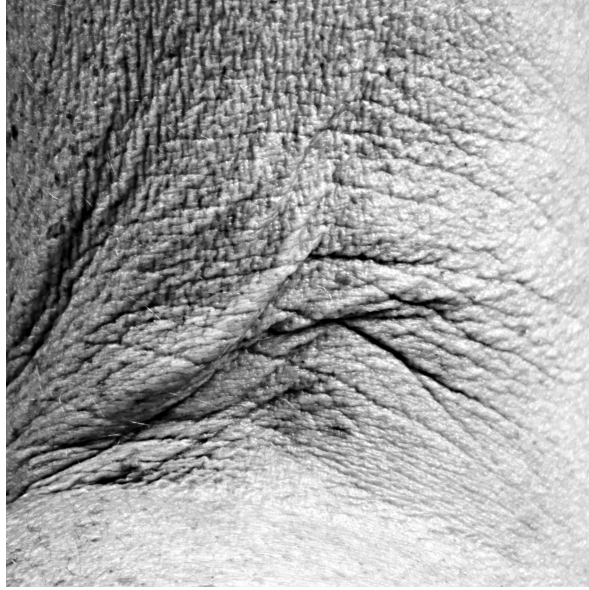


Fig. 5 *Skinscape 4*



Fig. 6 *Skinscape 5*

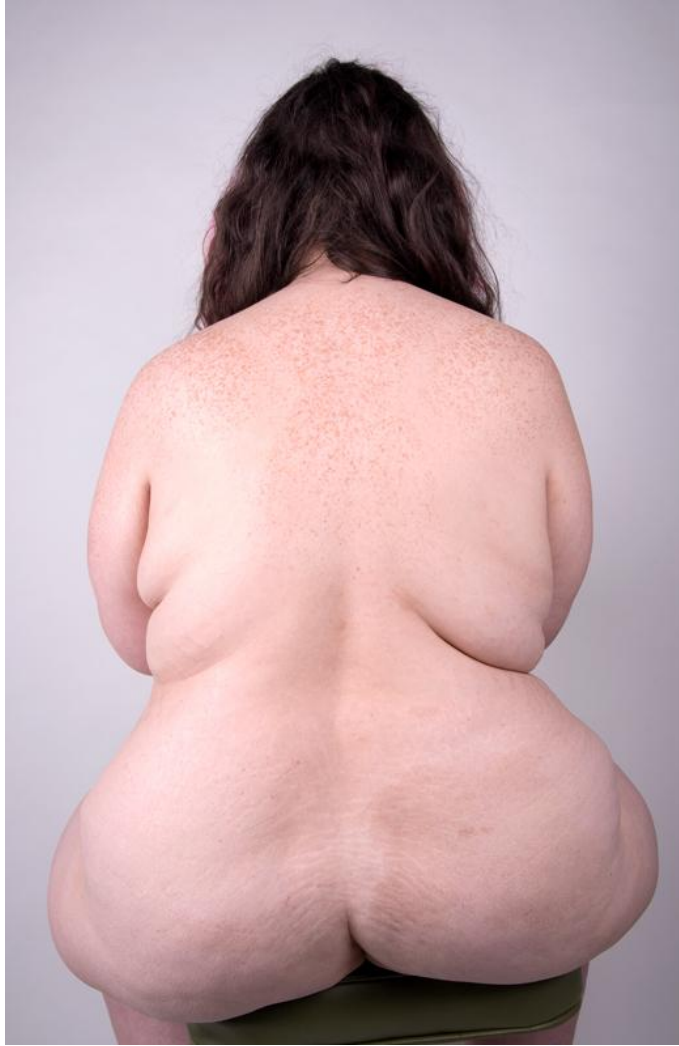


Fig. 7 *H*



Fig. 8 *Kinski*

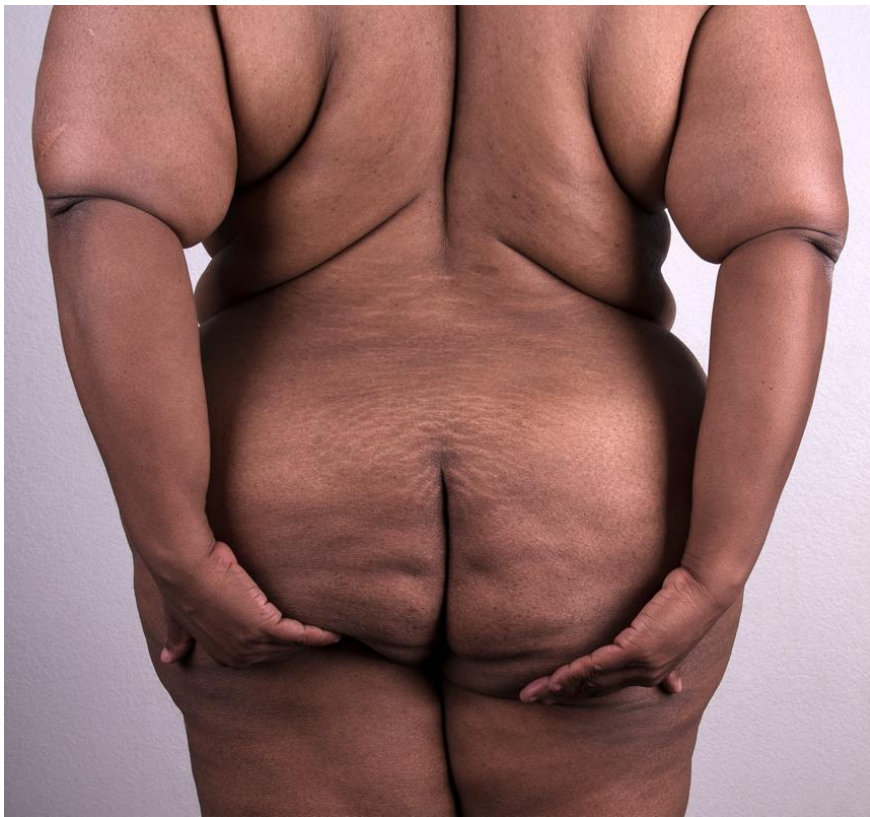


Fig. 9 *Cup*



Fig. 10 *Tower*



Fig. 11 *Hold*



Fig. 12 AAWE Skinscape

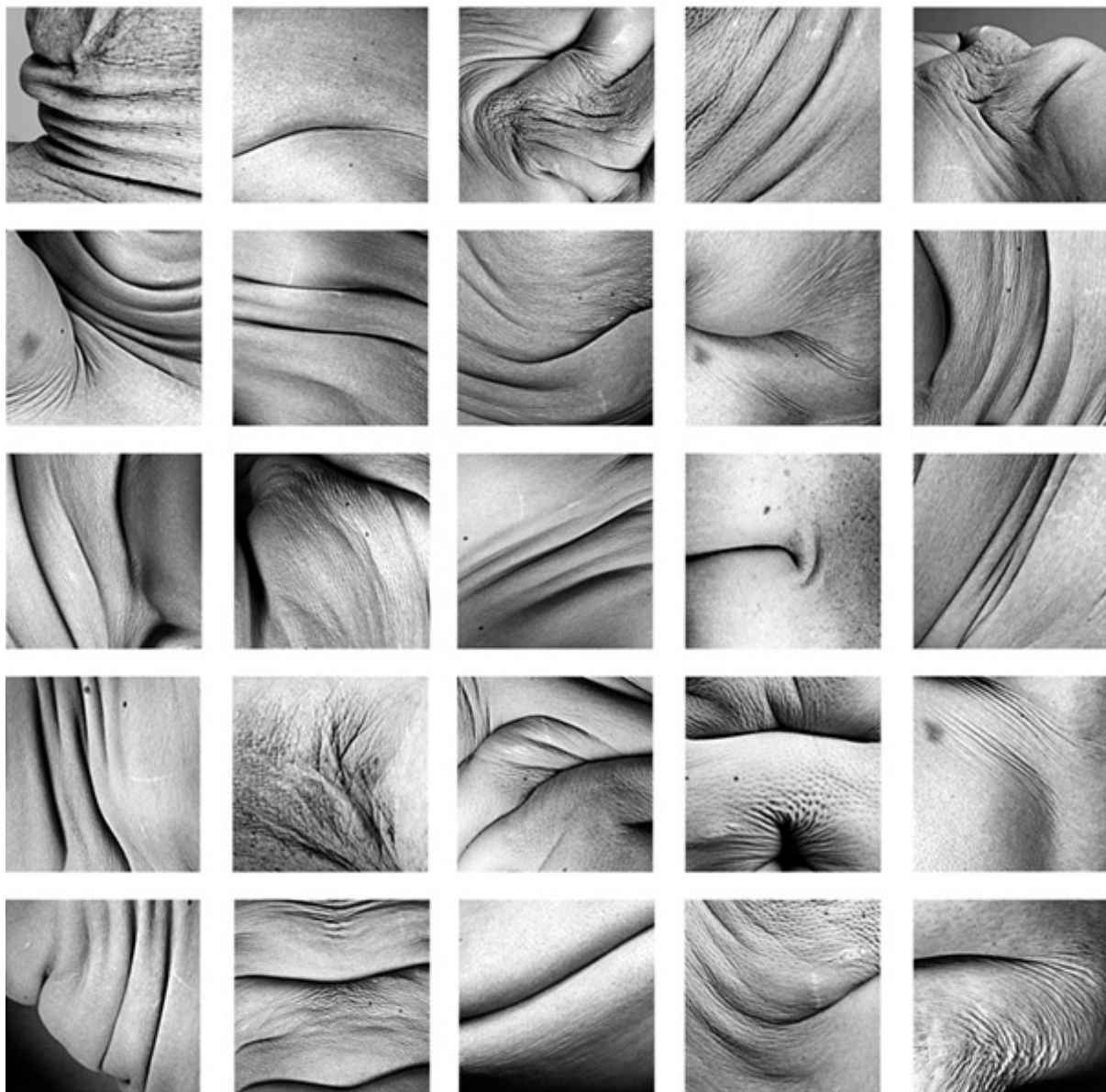


Fig. 13 *Crush*



Fig. 13 *Palimpsest* Install

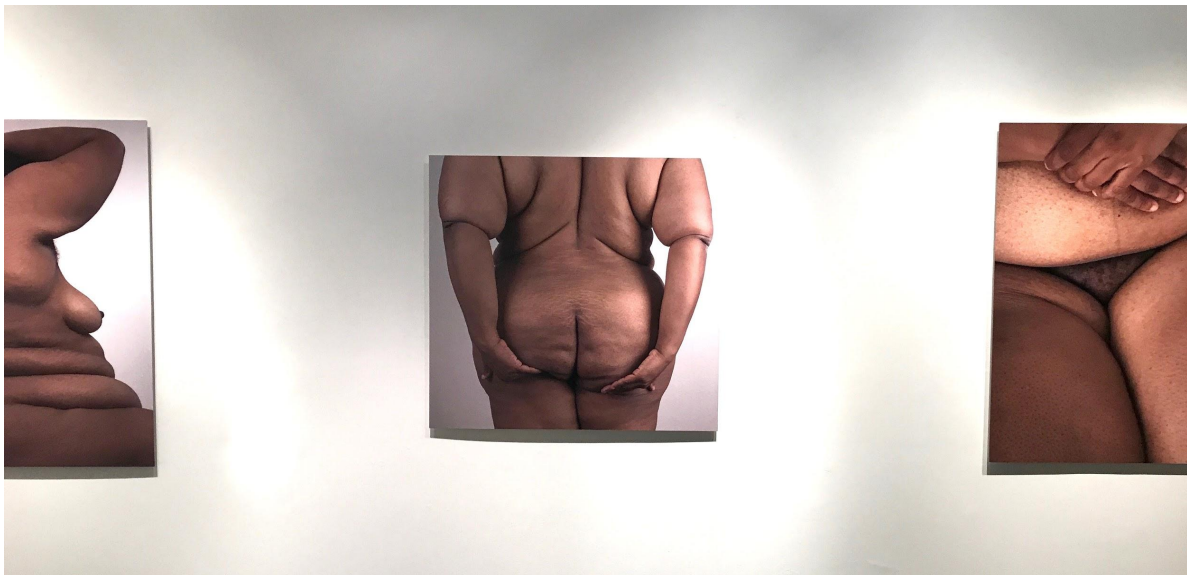


Fig. 14 *Palimpsest* Install