

Ariana Page Russell

Artist: 'I Use My Skin as a Canvas' by Tracie Hunte | posted March 14th, 2008

Dermatographia Causes Welt-like Hives When Skin Is Scratched

A blush, at once ephemeral and timeless, is what led Ariana Page Russell to start photographing her skin. Her skin disorder, dermatographia, is what turned photographing her skin into an artistic obsession.

"People have said, you know, for me, skin turns into a canvas. I use my skin as a canvas," Russell said.

Dermatographia, which literally means "writing on the skin," is a disorder that produces hive-like welts on the skin when scratched. Russell, 29, always blushed easily while growing up, but it wasn't until her teens that she noticed she could draw designs and patterns on her skin.

Art Imitating Life

"I just thought there's something really powerful in that because I have no control over it. It just happens," Russell said. "And I wanted to kind of capture that feeling of vulnerability and just that kind of fleeting thing that happens in the blush."

Using the blunt end of a knitting needle, Russell traces designs found on ancient Etruscan vases, the patterns in clothing and the wallpaper in her dad's dining room onto her skin. She even connects the dots of her freckles. It doesn't hurt or itch, and the reaction lasts about 30 minutes.

Taking the wallpaper theme one step further, she has turned her skin into wallpaper by taking photographs of her skin, blowing them up, cutting designs out and hanging it.



"When my dad and I would take the wallpaper off the wall, it kind of has a skinlike quality to it because it's just this covering over the wall ... an adornment. So I noticed that it was peeling off; it kind of took on this kind of feeling. It's like skin peeling off," Russell said.

From far away, it looks pretty and pink, but up close the hairs, freckles and blemishes that make up her skin come into focus. Russell earned her master's of fine arts degree in photography from the University of Washington in Seattle. She said she was drawn to photography because she sees the world in a different way when it's in a still image.

"I can focus my attention on whatever's contained in that frame, and so I pay more attention to what's there," Russell said.

Skin 'Keeps Us Alive'

She calls skin an index of passing time; a history of what's going on at the surface and deep below.

"Skin in general, I think, is really fascinating because of what it is," Russell said. "It's our largest organ. It's permeable, but it's really strong, but it's also really vulnerable. It keeps us alive."

Russell has gotten all sorts of reactions to her art. People either think it's weird and disgusting or beautiful. Russell also received a rave review in *Art in America*.

"Together, all of Russell's pinks resonate the nakedness of emotion and the body's vulnerability to it," Joanna Frueh wrote about Russell's 2006-2007 show at Magnan Projects. More importantly, people are starting to buy Russell's work. Her art has gone for almost \$4,500 at shows in Reno, Nev., Seattle and in New York at the Magnan Projects gallery.

Dara Metz, co-owner of Magnan Projects, said her gallery is really attracted to unique uses of material, so an artist who uses her skin as her canvas was definitely interesting.

"But really it's beautiful to me. She's creating something really beautiful out of something that is probably an unattractive or seen as an unattractive skin condition," Metz said.

And that's the key to Russell's art. She has taken a bothersome and embarrassing medical condition, discovered the beauty in it and made it a work of art.