

You are getting under My Skin

Koumudi Patil
6 - 28 November 2009

Mysterious Skin(1)

If you find the smell of talcum powder is more than a touch reminiscent of your childhood, then perhaps, you belong to that clique of kids who turn up pale-faced in all family photo albums. Koumudi Patil remembers feeling vampired-out, after she had endured the talcum treatment to drain away the brownness that is so inextricably her. This early encounter with colour sank straight to the hypodermis and cut really close to the bone.

Since that first exposure Koumudi has been diligently accruing evidence, but a chance reading of the Shakespearean tragedy *Macbeth*, revealed the apposite thought, "Out, damn'd spot! out, I say!"; and so critical mass was generated.

The artist appropriated the delusional lament made by Lady Macbeth and cut a video after it. In it, she employs the split screen technique to create multiple areas of interest. The action in these tiny pockets revolves around the hypnotically repetitive process of application and removal of an uneasy maquillage

E- catalogue

routine. The almost ritualistic action creates the impression that all efforts are geared towards the erasure of not a mere mark but an entire face.

Although the title to this show, *You Are Getting Under My Skin*, is a contemporary expression indicating irritation and discontentment, instead of going all out with malapropos visual rhetoric, Koumudi makes a case for loss by invoking an intuitive poetry.

Comprising three photo sequences, two videos and a suite of installations, Koumudi's debut solo is a mindful exploration of skin as a liminal entity. Skin is a spotted argument to say the least. And megalomania, often striking entire populations, has contributed greatly towards the skin suffering several hematomas.

Recently a bizarrely earnest Katie Price said, "People are scared of Botox as they think their face is going to end up frozen and blank-looking, but I don't have a very expressive face anyway so I don't worry about not being able to show emotion. It's not like I'm an actor and need to have that ability."(2) Delusional Price – a British reality television star, model and all

that jazz – is easily comparable to Lady Macbeth. Except our contemporary retelling of this 17th century character is way less nuanced and predictably more cardboard.

The complex worldviews such as the one presented by Price and her cronies, constitute one of the many streams of balderdash that emanate unceasingly from the telly and the web. Having recognised them as key problem areas, Koumudi has been actively working with NGOs to espouse awareness through media. In the video *No Marks*, Koumudi hooks up with Hindi films and advertisements among others, to decongest the context of her chosen subject with the resonant idiom of popular culture.

A professor of humanities, art and design at IIT, Kanpur, Koumudi has worked extensively in the public domain and this probably explains why she has been absent from the gallery circuit. As a citizen-artist, she has also engaged in public art projects. These hands-on endeavours, often entrenched in the grassroots, tackle crises by engendering room for awareness through guerrilla campaigns that take over malls 'n' multiplexes.

Koumudi's need to dialogue with the largest possible audience could also be seen in correlation to *You are getting under My Skin*. By virtue of being the largest organ, the skin is the most vulnerably public part of the body – human and otherwise – and hence it attracts the unflagging gaze. There is, however, a paradox clinging to the above statement and Koumudi is onto it. In *Wrap Your Skin*, the artist underlines this paradox when she plays with the idea that not only is the skin one of the most exposed organs it is also perhaps one of the most hidden. And it is the hidden that is constantly sought after by the gaze. In this photographic series, we see Koumudi draped from head to toe in a garment that simulates skin, complete with warts and all. If in *Wrap Your Skin* the machinations of gender politics come through subtly then in *Nude and the Naked* there is little doubt about what we are confronting.

However, the gaze – be it within the work or without it – is necessarily mercurial and ambiguous. We experience this equivocality in *Imprints of an Encounter*. In this photo sequence, the said imprints are not always the after effects of a brutish confrontation. Although the skin as boundary does

get breached, the slight smile on the subject's face in one photograph and the melancholic tears in another, make the intentions teasingly difficult to read. With the title itself leading the way, the installations that comprise *All Skins are Equal but some Skins are more Equal*, play the role of a concluding argument, by suggesting an overall discrimination against certain skins and all that they breed.

You Are Getting Under My Skin grows organically out of the many identity crises that get routed through the binary logic of gender, colour, race, class and caste. In our post-colonial context, Koumudi reminds us that we are still dodging colonisers who come knocking at our doors attired as hard sellers of parochialism in all its stifling permutations.

Bombay, November 2009

Gitanjali Dang

Notes

1. Scott Heim, 'Mysterious Skin' (Harper Perennial, 1996)
2. Marina Hyde, 'Katie Price's new opus' in The Guardian (16 October, 2009)

Personalization of the body is an attempt to declare its ownership or to simply differentiate the 'other'. The human tendency to guard, reveal, hide and nurture that which we think as ones own is evident in the tendency of marking and unmarking oneself. The visual manifestation of this body is encountered on the surface layer of the skin. The outermost surface is a space for visual and physical encounters. Skin marks the boundaries of bodily spaces. No wonder that the control of this outer layer has become a strategic practice to control the other.



Out damned spot! out, I say!
5minutes, Single channel, without sound

Out, damned spot! out, I say!
Macbeth Act 5, scene 1, 26–40

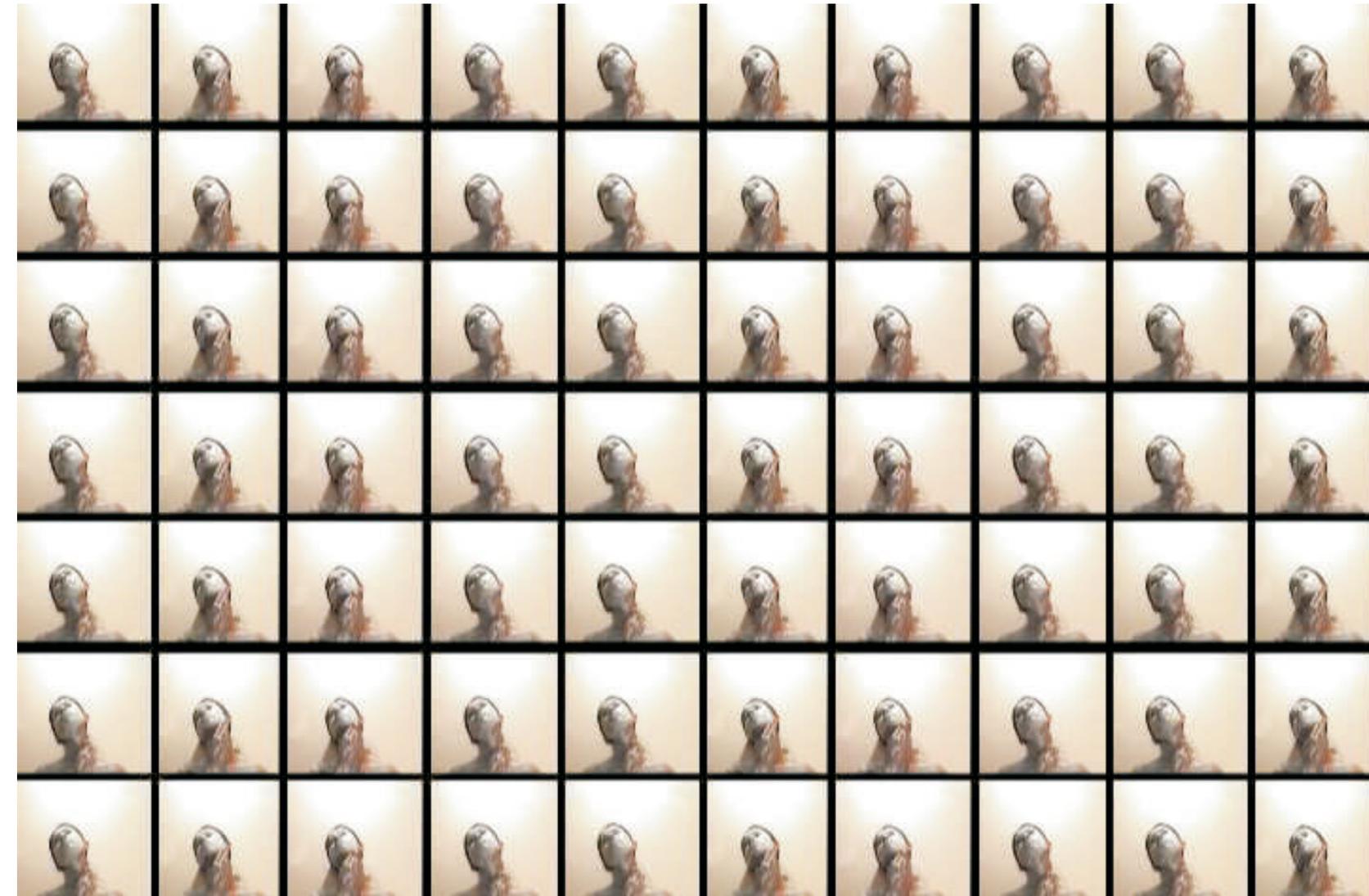
Thinking through the skin may lead us to a frenzied attempt to wash out all seen and unseen marks of Duncan's blood. Erasure is the performance of removing a memory of a mark. Lady Macbeth was trying to erase the memory of the bloodbath from her hands . But the hands were spotlessly clean. Then which spots did Lady Macbeth want to wash? Visible marks heal in time. Lady Macbeth's memory could not trace a single mark of the incidence and yet it was too recent to be forgotten. So she saw spots of blood that did not exist. No amount of obsessive cleaning could erase the spots from that spotless hand. And so in a bid to preserve her memory she makes marks on herself and says,

"Out dammed spot out I say".

'Out dammed spot out I say' is a video adaptation of the story of Lady Macbeth through the frenzied attempts of the portraits to wipe off the paint on the skin which keeps coming back. Like a Sisyphean act there is no end to these attempts. The obsessive repetition of erasing the paint is futile, as the act of erasure is also the act of painting-in one you hold the cloth in another the brush.



Out damned spot! out, I say!
5minutes, Single channel, without sound



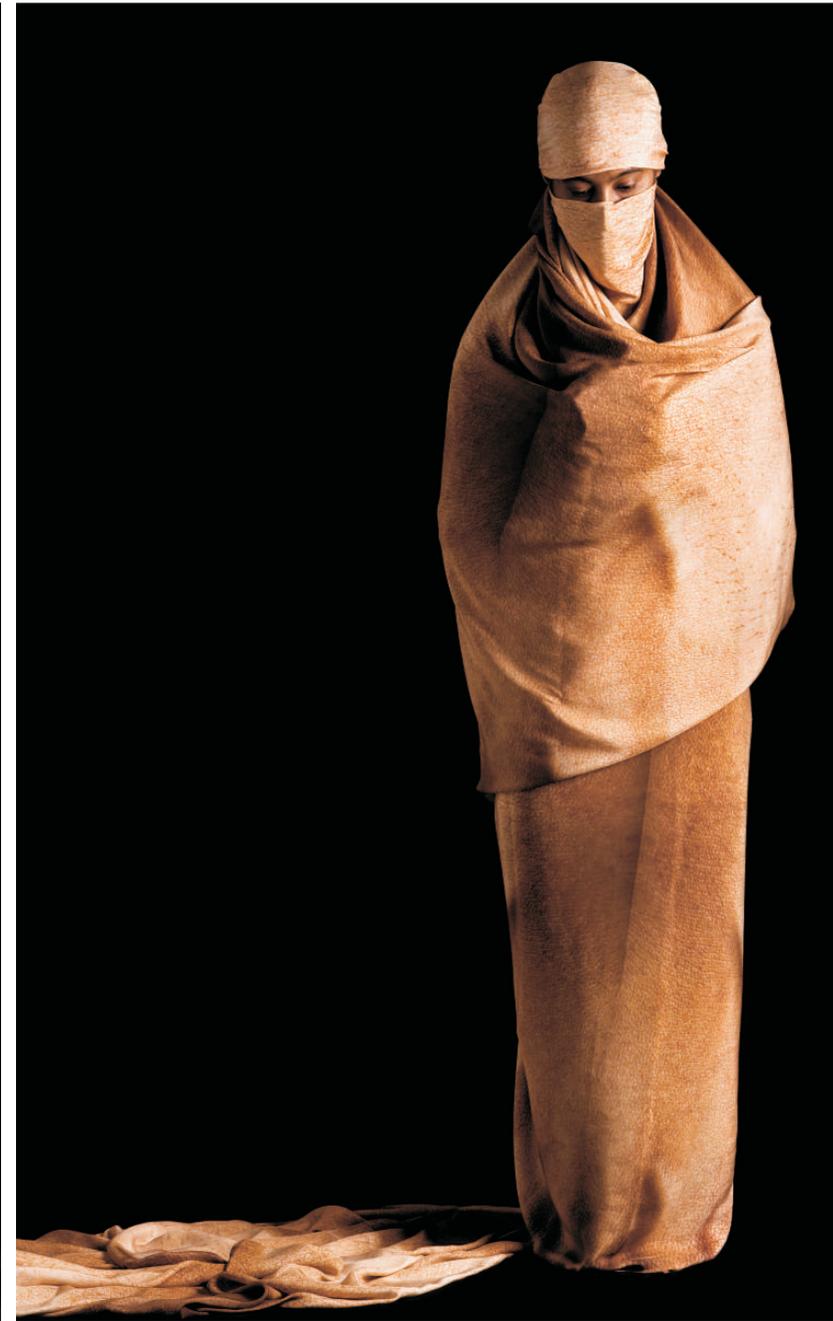
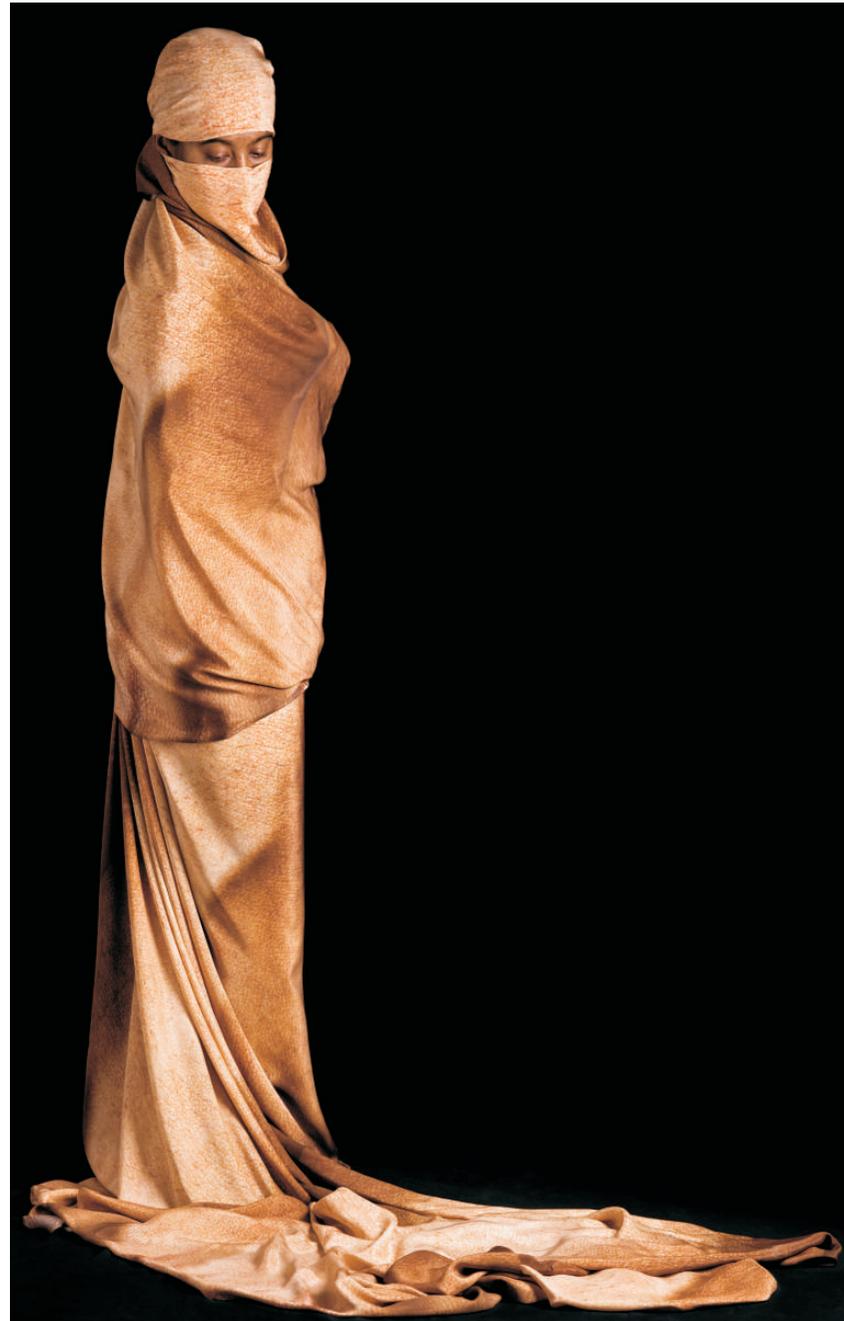
Out damned spot! out, I say!
5minutes, Single channel, without sound

You are getting under My Skin
Koumudi Patil

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You are getting under My Skin
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Wrap your skin

Clothing plays a constant game with the skin of hiding and revealing. The politics of the body and its image is played on what you can see, where you can see and when you can see it. The hidden skin is a space to conquer and subjugate for ownership as what you reveal determines your relation with the owner of the gaze and his relation with you. When you *Wrap your skin*¹ on your body you reveal the hidden object itself. The Cloth –skin is a garment that hides the skin and yet reveals it completely through blatant pores, wrinkles and body hair.

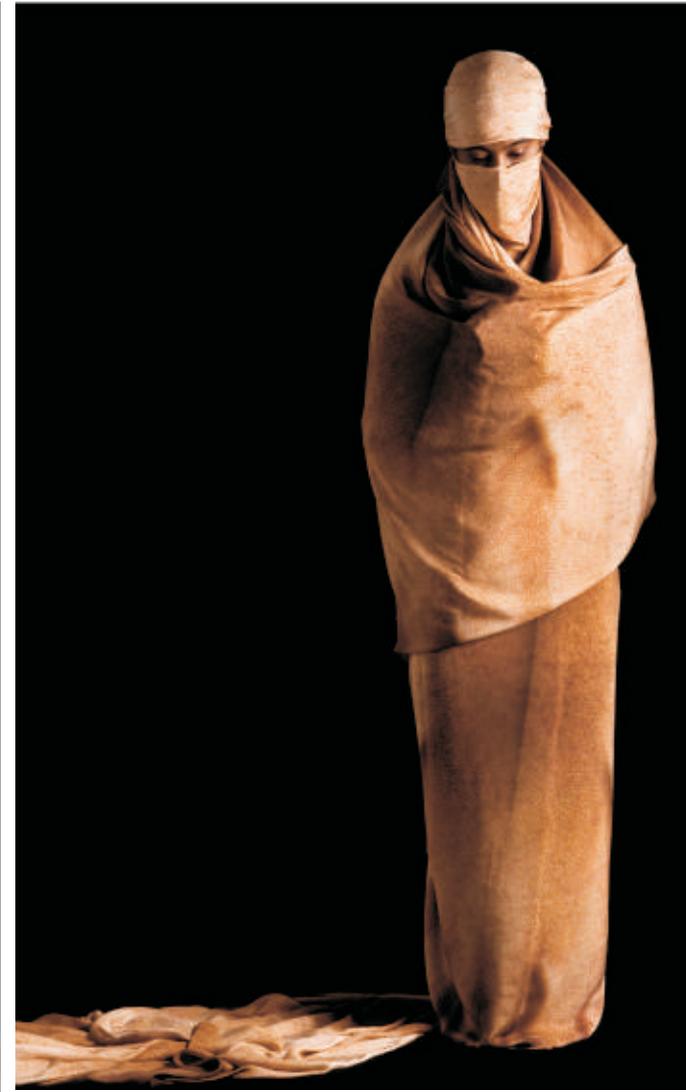
Various attempts are made to hide the skin and then reveal it on appropriate occasions to a witness of trust. Culturally permissible witnesses determine the gaze that encounters the skin. Wrapping the skin in a cloth is a social intervention to control the gaze of the witness which in centuries to unfold have become cultural signs. But what happens when the hidden becomes the revealed? What happens when the container takes the form of the content? What happens when I wrap myself with my own skin?



Wrap your skin- I
36.4 x 60"
Photograph on archival paper



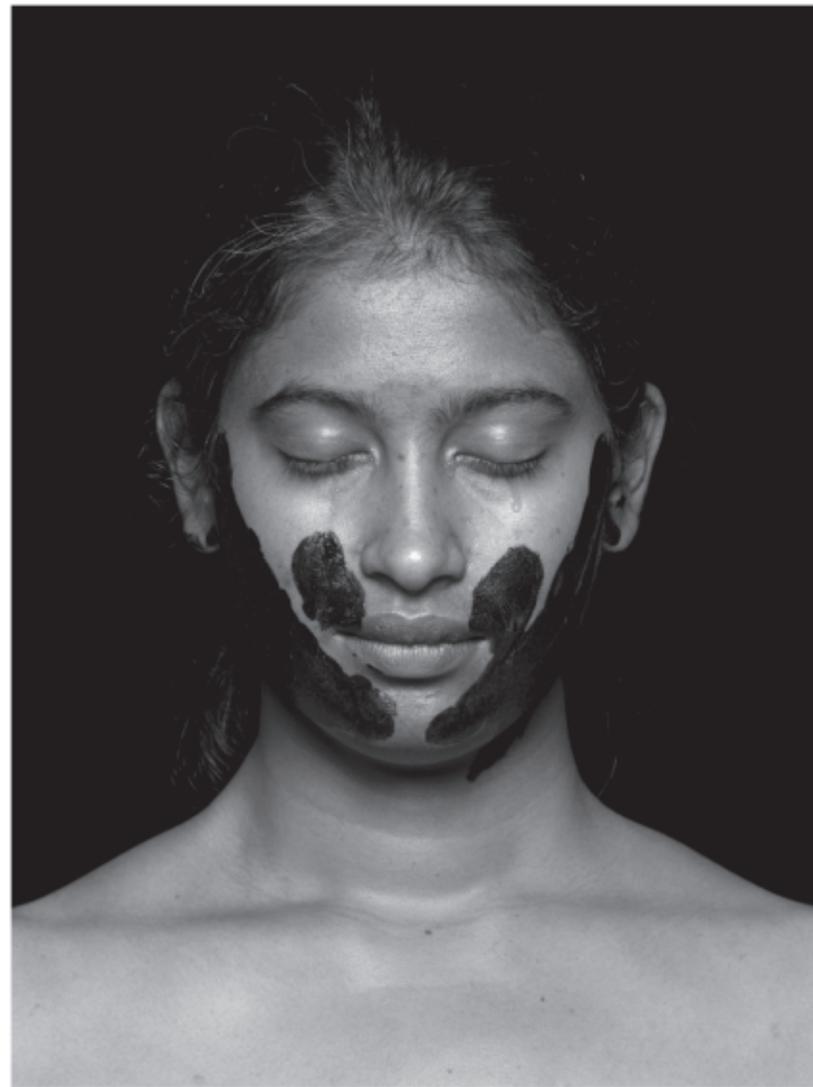
Wrap your skin- II
36.4 x 60"
Photograph on archival paper



Wrap your skin- III
36.4 x 60"
Photograph on archival paper



Details of Wrap your skin series



Imprint of an Encounter- I
48 x 34"
Photograph on archival paper

Imprints of an encounter

In the morning the skin says to all, which side of the body you slept on in the night. The mark of the pillow and the crumpled bed sheet can be seen on the lines engraved on your cheek.

The skin is the stage for a visual performance of the reaction to the advances of the *other*. Every encounter leaves an imprint. Pull, push, squeeze, pinch or fondle- each will leave a distinct mark of the act on the surface. A caress leaves as many marks as an abuse.

The skin allows us to consider how boundary formation, the marking out of the lines of a body, involves an affectivity which already crosses the line. For if skin is a border, then *it is a border that feels*. (Ahmed & Stacey, 2001) The skin is an affective opening for the body to register how it has been touched by another body. So the skin may crawl, may blush, retract, or wrinkle as its boundary is invaded by another body. The touch permeates the body space as a mark of hostility or familiarity. The encounter deforms the natural state of the skin for some given moments. The skin heals itself in time. *Imprints of an encounter*¹ freezes the marks of the bodily trespass into the boundary of the skin to be seen in a timeless frame.

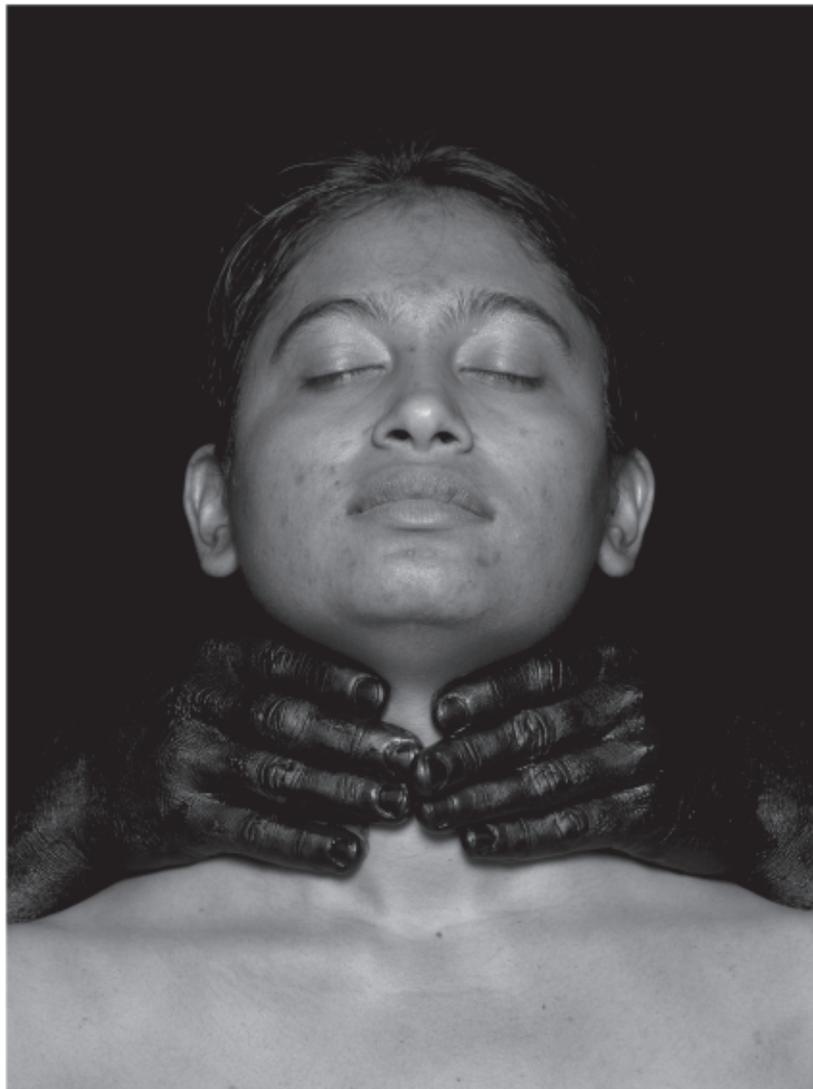


Imprint of an Encounter- II
48 x 34"
Photograph on archival paper

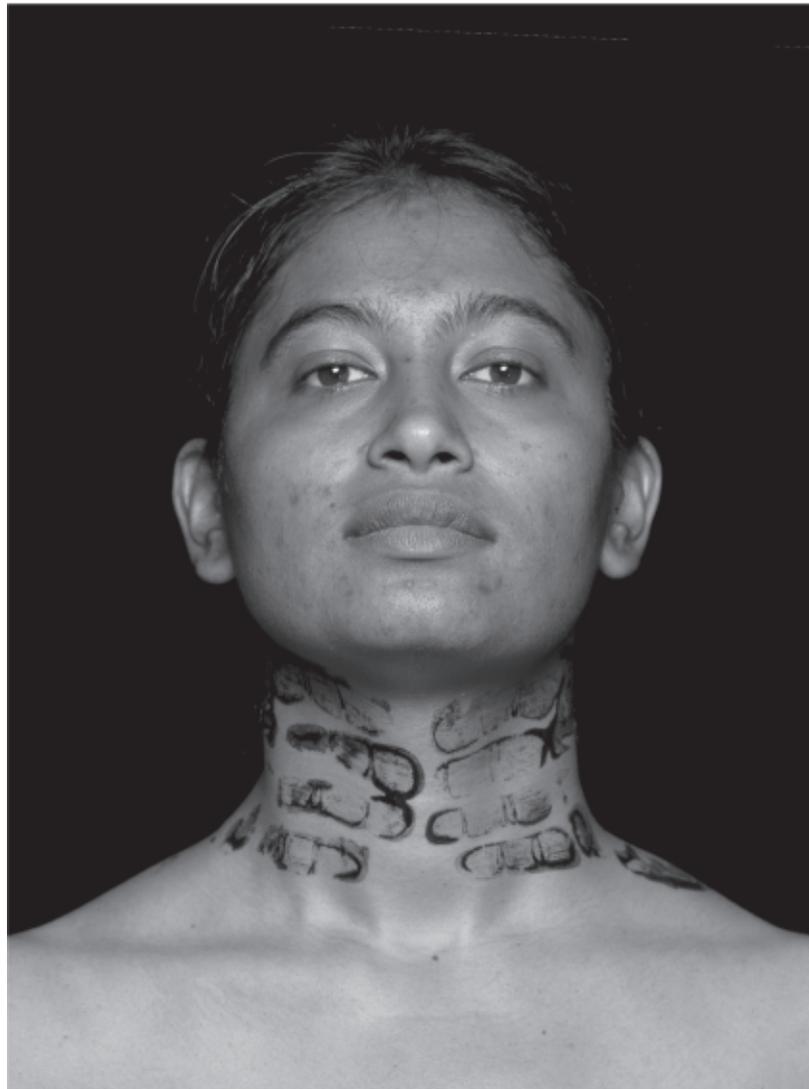


Imprint of an Encounter-III
48 x 34"
Photograph on archival paper

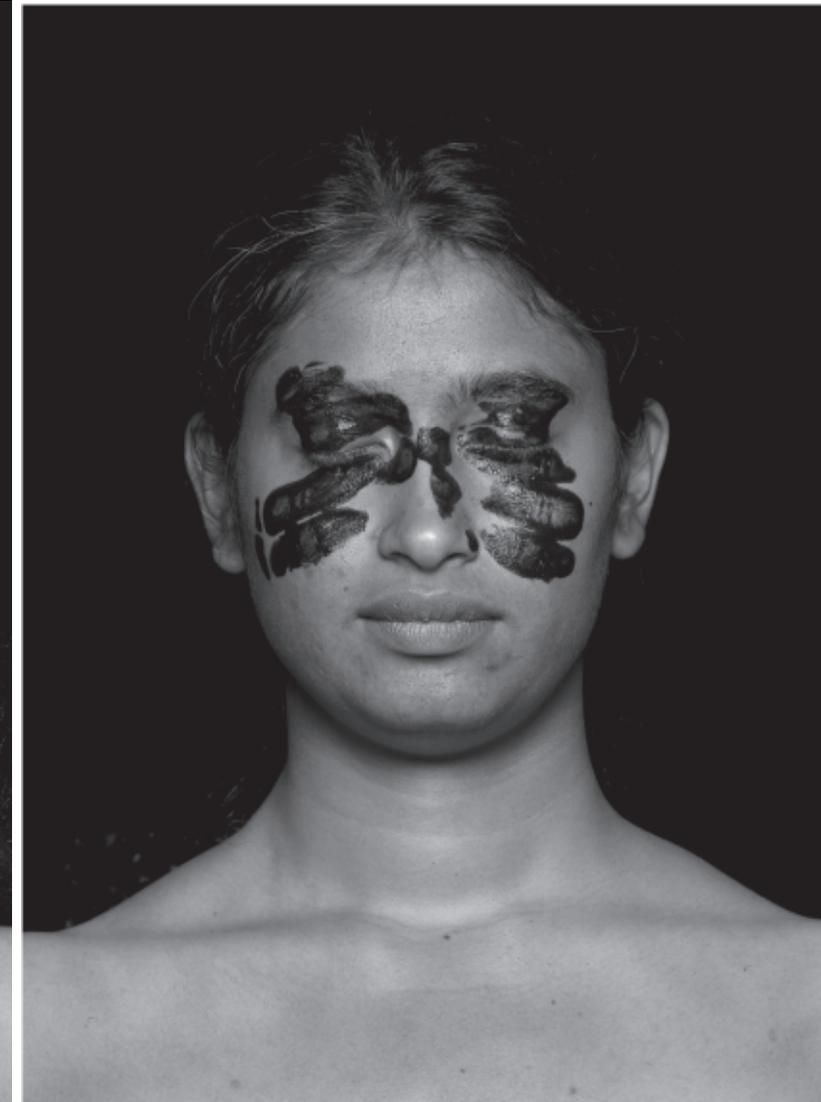




Imprint of an Encounter- IV
48 x 34"
Photograph on archival paper



Imprint of an Encounter-V
48 x 34"
Photograph on archival paper





Vase used to purify the skin of a Homosapien
All skins are Equal but some skins are more Equal than others
Leather and metal



Taxidermied torso of a Homosapien
All skins are Equal but some skins are more Equal than others
Leather, human hair and Fibre sheet

All skins are Equal but some skins are more Equal than others

Skins follow a caste system which is based on a rigid implicit hierarchy of value. Therefore some skins are more important than others though biologically they are equal- that is it is a covering of the human or any other body that is made up of multiple mesodermal tissue.

And yet some skins are purer than others. Some skins are untouchable. Some skin can be stitched into a ball others can only be sewed to be healed. Some skins can be used as a covering over other skins. Some skins can be sat upon. Some skins have a restricted entry.....

This inequality suggests a casteism of skin that projects some skins as purer and superior to those of the others.



Only Homosapien skins are permitted inside
All skins are Equal but some skins are more Equal than others
Leather on marble

You are getting under My Skin
Koumudi Patil



Footwear made up of the skin of a Homosapien
All skins are Equal but some skins are more Equal than others
Leather, human hair and cardboard

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Naked and the Nude- I
48 x 34"
Photograph on archival paper

You are getting under My Skin
Koumudi Patil

Naked and the Nude series

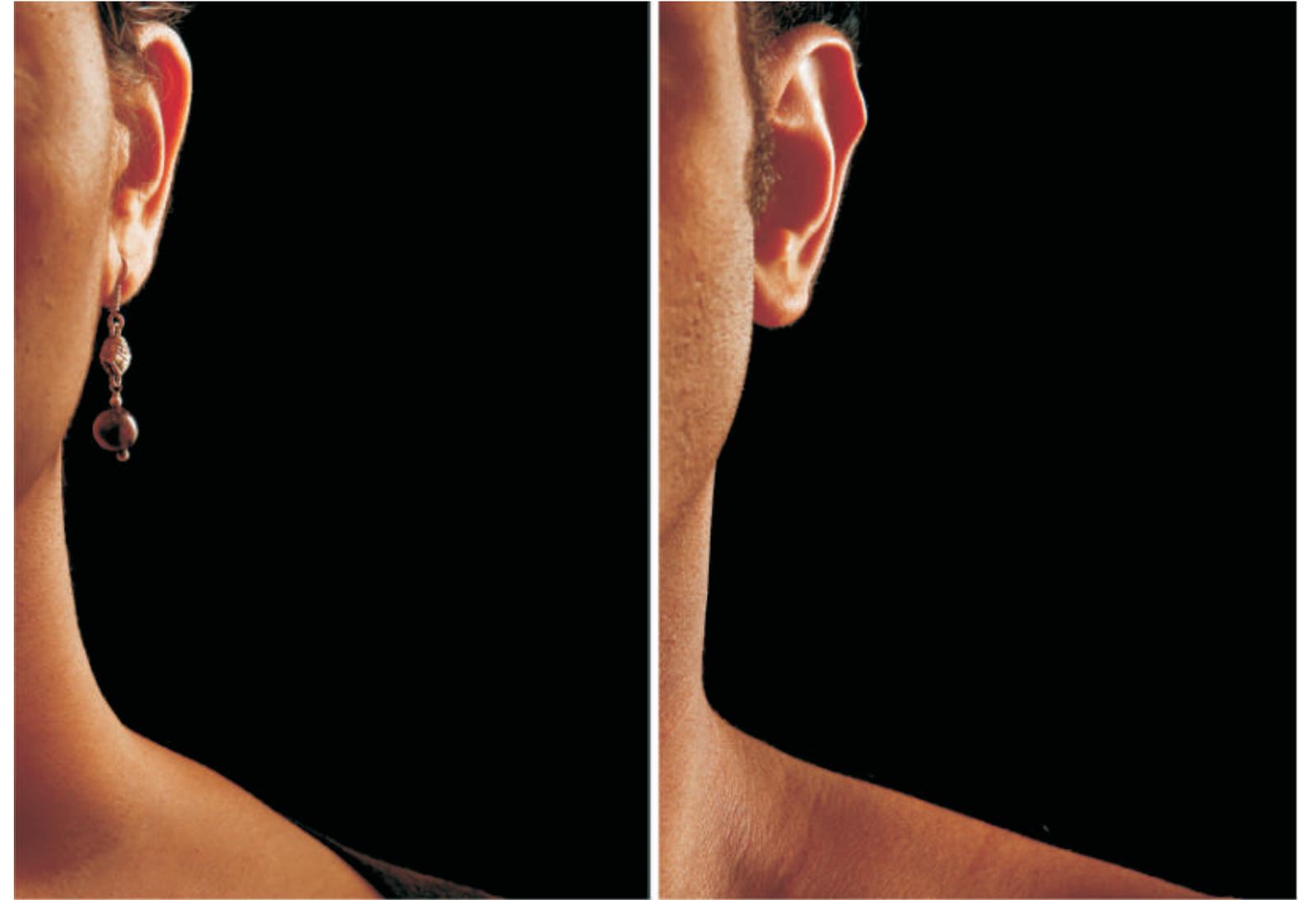
Stares, winks, ogling, wide eyes and the innumerable ones between all these, witness the bare skin, exhibited to see and to be seen. The libidinal gaze was set free from the Pandora's box as soon as the forbidden fruit was tasted. The shame of being looked at was first felt by Adam and Eve. They were the first to state the difference between the naked and the nude. They never wrote it down. But then shame is not something you write about. Its something you hide. And thus began the discourse of the revealed and the hidden. Since then many attempts have been made to sublimate this libidinal gaze, but like the 'kutte ki poonch' in the Chacha chowdhry comics, it keeps coming back to not only look but also to say 'look I am looking.'

Yesterday he was racing behind a bike. Recklessly he tracked the couple for kilometers, for one glimpse of the navel that showed through the flying pallu of the saree. The skin sets the adrenaline flowing. The ghunghott had revealed only an ear lobe but then how did the gaze manage to devour the whole body? The moral brigade controls what is seen but how do you control the unseen?



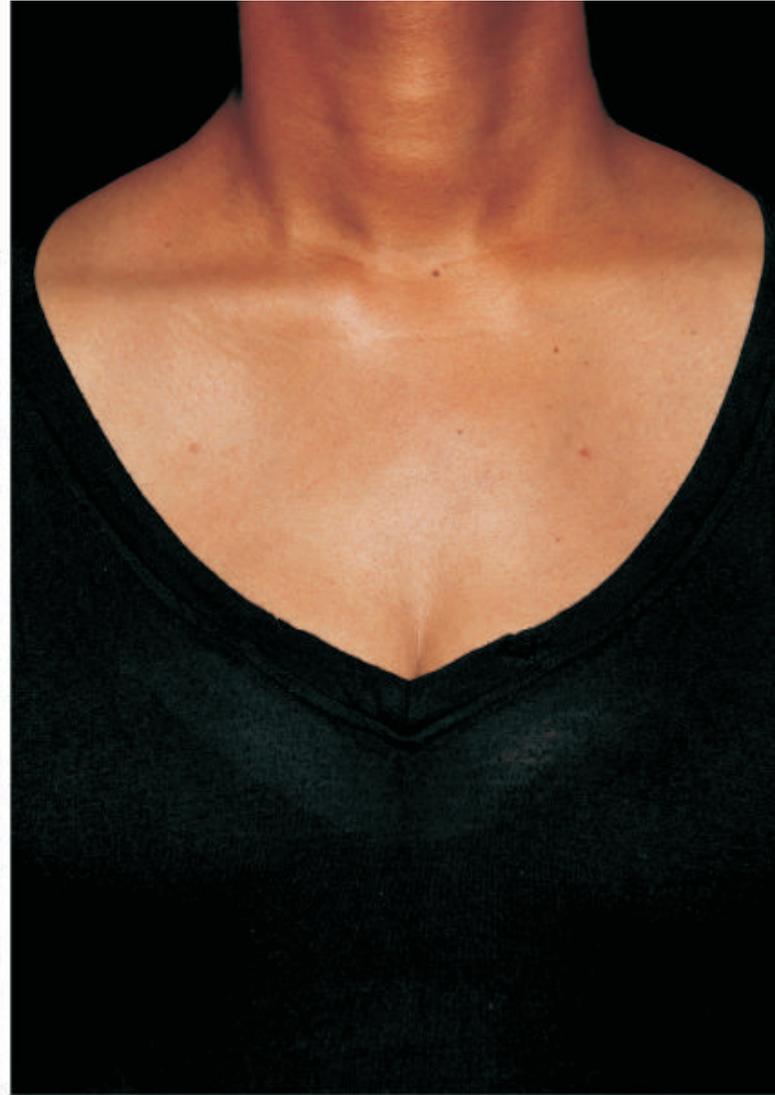
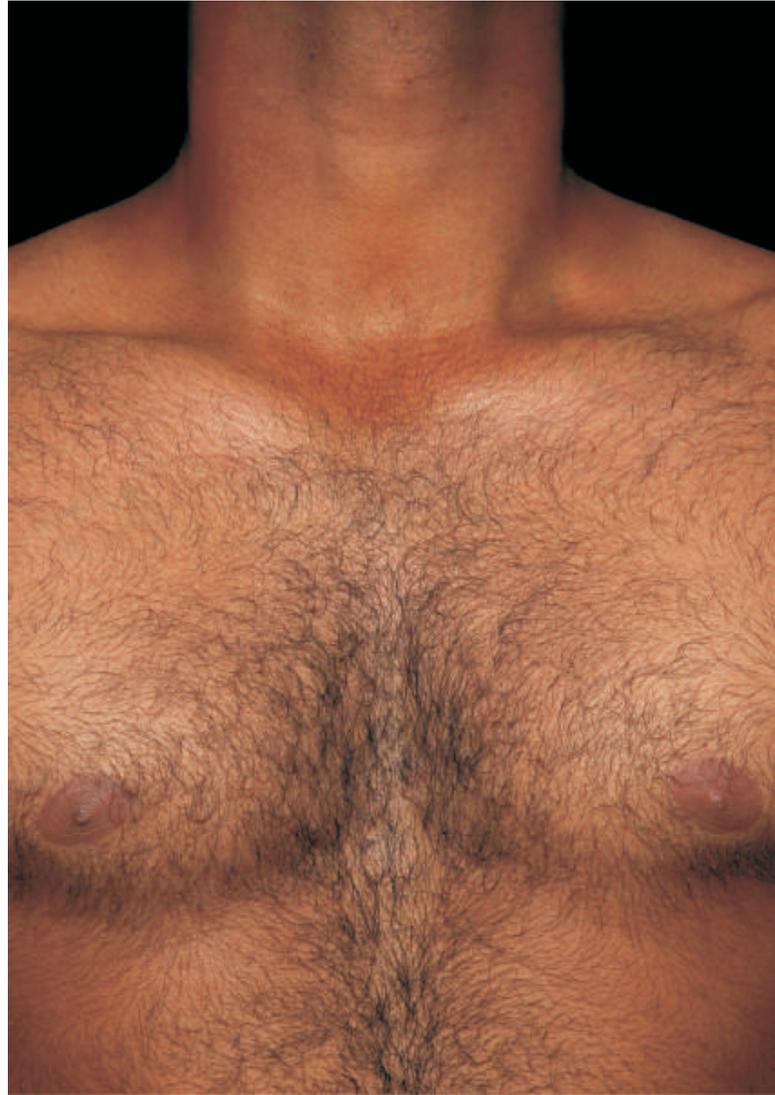
Naked and the Nude- II
48 x 34"
Photograph on archival paper

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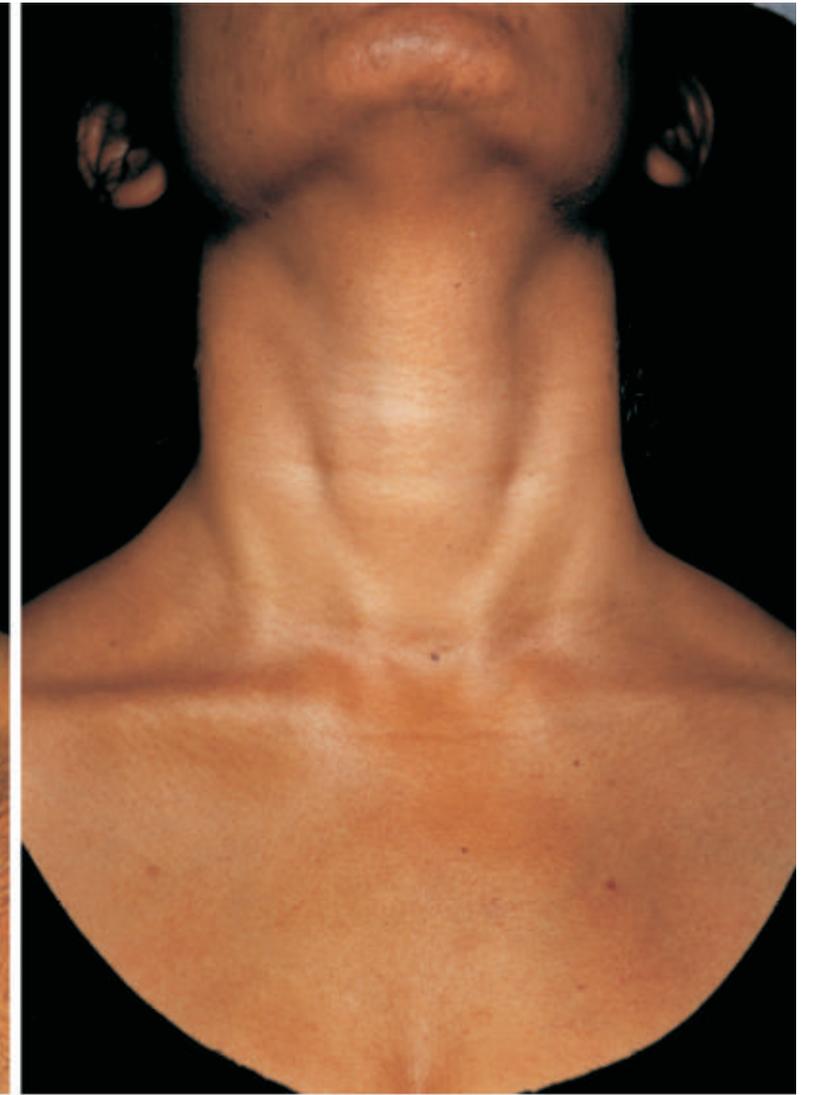
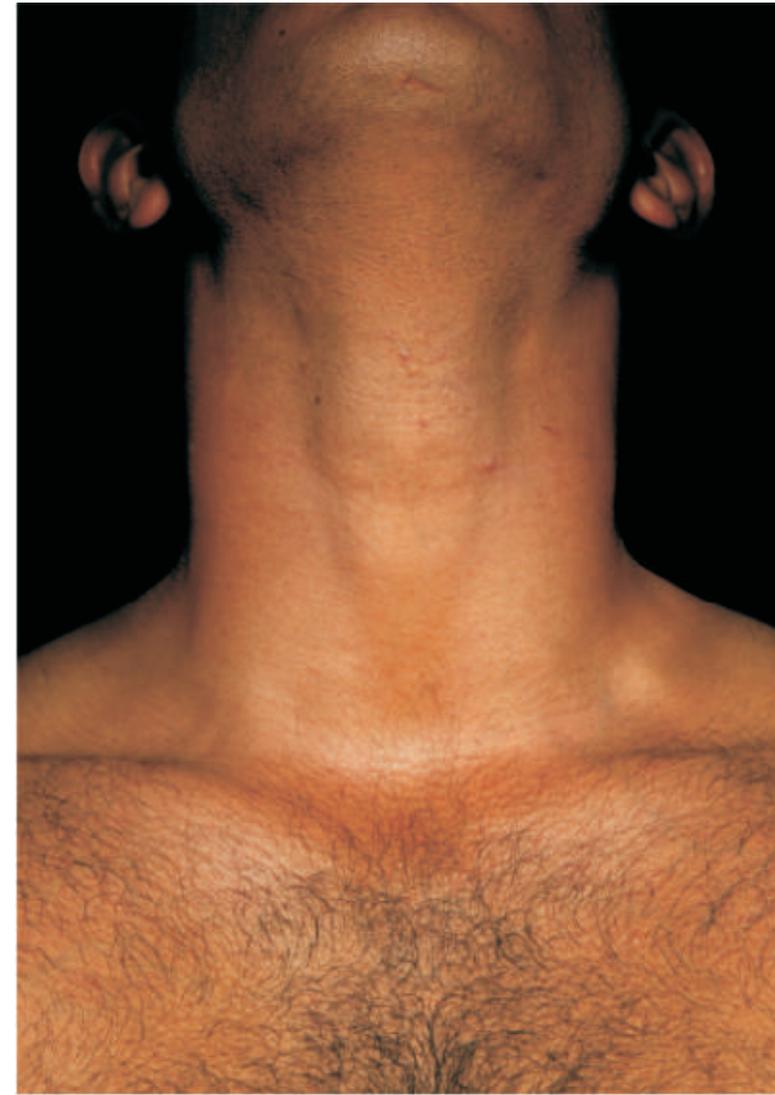


Naked and the Nude- III
48 x 34"
Photograph on archival paper

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Naked and the Nude- IV
48 x 34"
Photograph on archival paper



Naked and the Nude- V
48 x 34"
Photograph on archival paper



No Marks

One channel video, With sound
11minutes 39 seconds

No Marks

Marking and erasing is an act of self preservation. Memories are fragile. Remembrance is an act of asserting the presence of an event or an object in one's life. This frozen act of remembering is memory. Memory needs marks to constantly tell itself that what it believes is true. These marks are signifiers that stand witness to an event. Therefore Stalin erased the faces of his comrades who betrayed him from all images in Soviet Russia. The body and the mark/image of the comrade both disappeared in no time and so did his memory in the minds of the people.

No marks is an appropriation of scenes from Bollywood films in which for various reasons a women willing or unwillingly concedes to mark her own body.

A lover goes through plastic surgery to get a face she thinks her lover would love...

A women burns her hand in the guilt of not helping a burning women...

A little girl tattoos her lovers name on her hand...

Marks of such significance become a mockery in face of the cosmetic industry's claim of a No mark face. No marks here also means No identity. Therefore,

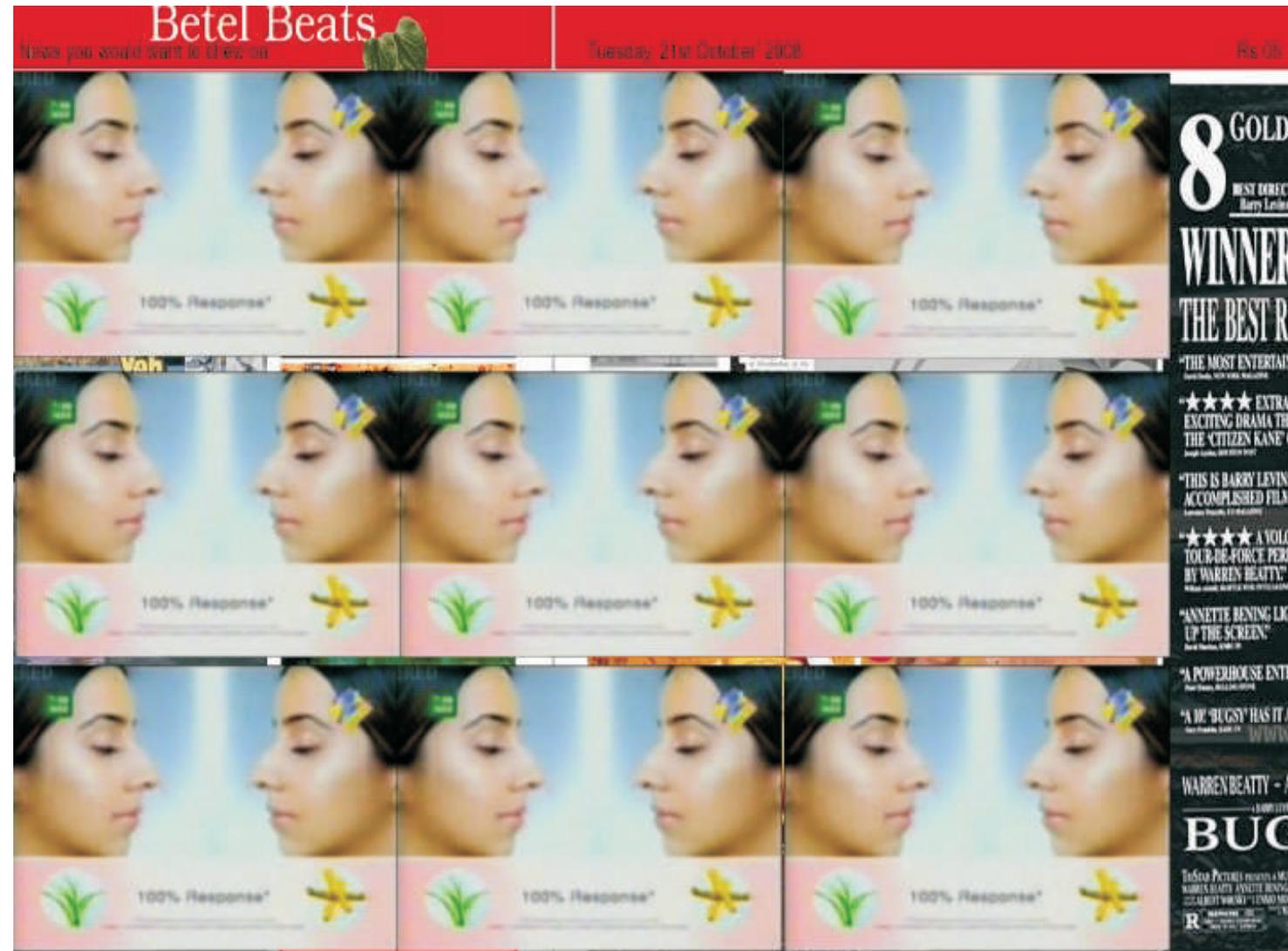
The women cries for her lost self in the mirror after the cosmetic surgery..

The little girl burns her hand to remove the name of her lover who betrayed her... and so on..



No Marks
One channel video, With sound
11minutes 39 seconds

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No Marks
One channel video, With sound
11minutes 39 seconds

Coelho says that when you really want something to happen, the whole universe conspires to help you make it happen.

With a lot of affection I thank my universe

My family
Shantamani Muddaiah
Mallikarjun Kattakol
B. Manjunath
Prof. Shobha Madan
The Guild

Koumudi Patil

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Koumudi Patil
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