



Lips. C-type print, from the series 'She carries it all like a map on her skin', 2005–2006. Courtesy the artist.

PETA CLANCY:

SKIN AND THE SUPPLE BOUNDARIES OF SELF

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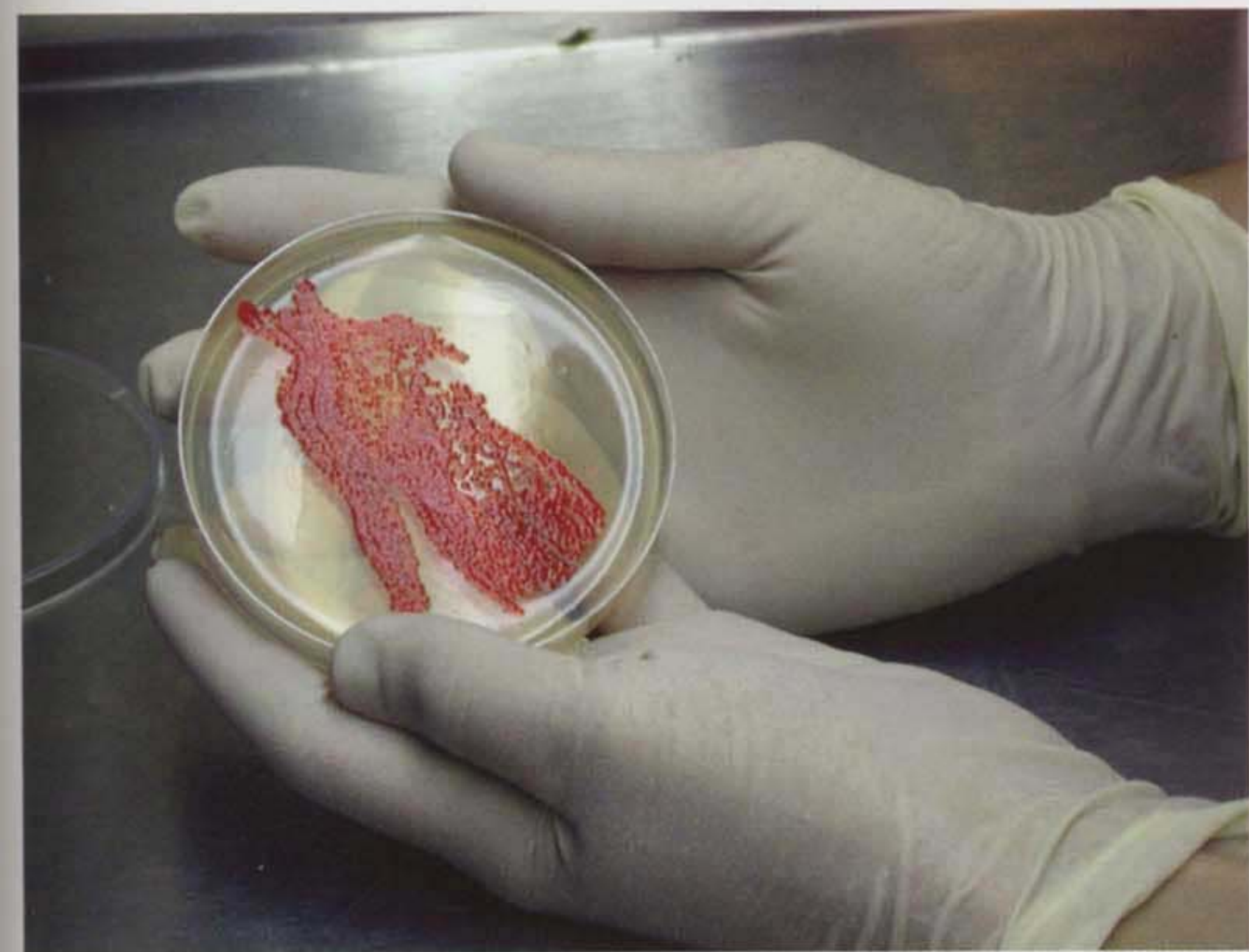
Skin has a curious relationship to the self. In her book, *Skin: On the Cultural Border Between Self and the World*, Claudia Benthien argues that we have tended to understand the self historically as both *in* the skin and *as* the skin.¹ The notion of the skin as a container for the authentic self—as a boundary between the outside world and the person within—sits alongside discourses that equate the skin with the subject whereby the skin is read as a metonym for the whole person. The result is a paradoxical arrangement in which the skin is theorised simultaneously as the self and other to the self.

These paradoxical and malleable relations between the skin and the self deeply inform the work of the Melbourne photographer, Peta Clancy. *This Skin I'm In*, 2002, Clancy's installation at the Australian Centre for Photography, contrasts images of parts of Clancy's face with small, hand-stitched pillows printed with enlarged photographs of flakes of skin that have been removed

from the artist's body. The juxtaposition of fine, pale pink prints of Clancy's face with irregularly clustered images of peeled skin questions the point at which the skin ceases to be a part of the self and becomes abject and other.

Clancy's current, ongoing series of photographs, 'she carries it all like a map on her skin', develops these earlier investigations into the relationships between skin and the self by focusing on the delicate skin of the eyelids and lips. The close cropping of these photographs denies us a full view of the face through which we would normally seek to determine the person's identity, but at the same time fosters a certain intimacy with the subject. Our cultural investments in the eyes and mouth as parts of the body through which the inner self is expressed outwardly are acknowledged only to be challenged by Clancy. Notions of the eyes as windows to the soul, or the mouth as a space through which our emotions and thoughts are conveyed, problematically maintain the binary opposition between the body's inside and outside that Clancy seeks to unsettle in her work. With the eyes closed and the mouth shut, these photographs shift our attention to the skin itself as a site in which identity is formed and assigned.

To Clancy, our sense of bodily presence is embedded in the skin. As an organ of perception and communication, the skin gathers and stores a range of emotional and corporeal sensations. 'She carries it all like a map on her skin' addresses how these sensations inscribe themselves in the skin to form a map of physical and psychological traces on the body. More than simply a visual image of the unified self (as suggested by psychoanalytic theory), the skin ego is primarily a 'sensation ego that establishes and continuously sustains itself through tactile traces'.²



clockwise from top: *This Skin I'm In*, 2002. Installation, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney; *Lashes 2*, 2006. C-type print, 55 x 42cm, from the series 'She carries it all like a map on her skin'; the artist holding artwork created for 'Visible Human Bodies' series, 2004. C-type prints, 17 x 13cm. Courtesy the artist.

even in controlled environments, the body remains vulnerable and volatile—constantly transforming itself from within in ways which are beyond our control.

Unlike much contemporary biological art, which can be more concerned with the process of engaging with ephemeral bioforms than the final product, Clancy is ultimately motivated by the desire to produce photographs. After the bacteria drawing has filled out to its optimum level, it undergoes yet another, photographic transformation. There is an interesting relationship between the bacteria and the photographs that comprise this series. Whereas the bacteria is in a constant state of change, and will dry out and die if left too long, the photograph is a tool for freezing life and fixing moments in time. A certain tension therefore pervades these photographs between our desire to control the body's inevitable processes of change, and the spontaneous, unpredictable and often devastating ways in which the body can turn on itself.

The photographs are then enlarged to (human) life size, printed on duratran, surrounded by a circular perspex lip and lit from behind in reference to the conditions of viewing cells under a microscope. The scale of these over-sized Petri dishes radically alters the viewer's relationship to the microscopic subject, and raises important questions about the limits of the scientifically fragmented body and the self. As increasingly sophisticated biotechnologies allow for the specialised investigation of organs, cells, genes and proteins, the body is continually abstracted and divided into ever more minute components. On one level, Clancy's brightly coloured, iridescent figure drawings reflect this process of abstracting the body. However, she also cleverly uses a mass of living microscopic bodies to reconstitute the body as a whole. The figures may be faceless and incomplete, but their human scale encourages us to identify with the forms and search them for signs of human gesture or expression.

Through Clancy's ongoing analyses of the often fraught relations between the fragment and the whole, the corporeal and subjective limits of the body are kept open. Like her 'Visible Human Bodies', the boundaries of the body and the self are irregular, permeable and in a constant state of change. Whether it is via her engagement with the skin or the microscopic forms that can so profoundly affect our lived experience, Clancy's photographs challenge us to consider some of the many ways that our sense of self is continually formed and reformed in a dynamic relation between culture and the body. ■

notes

1. Claudia Benthien, *Skin: On the Cultural Border Between Self and the World*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

Peta Clancy is a Melbourne based artist. Melissa Miles is based at the Faculty of Art and Design, Monash University.

There is a real challenge in using photography, a profoundly visual medium, to express these shifting relationships between the surface, sensation and the self. In 'she carries it all like a map on her skin', Clancy literally breaks through the smooth surface of the photograph to highlight the movement between the internal and the external that characterises the relations between the skin and the self. With the use of a fine needle, the creases and lines that form on the lips and around the eyes are painstakingly pinned to heighten the marks that are left by time, age and feeling in the skin. Each of the photographs is then lit from the side to accentuate the ruptured surface and rephotographed to restore that surface in the sheen of the final Type C print. The fragility and malleability of the skin is underscored in this process. As an ever-changing topography the skin ages and scars, and may be pierced, tattooed, tightened, lifted and peeled in response to an immeasurable array of cultural and physical conditions.

Clancy's long-standing interest in the malleable and fragile body finds a different form in her 2005 series, 'Visible Human Bodies'. Developed during the artist's residency with the Cell and Gene Therapy Laboratory at the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, 'Visible Human Bodies' presents us with a series of photographs of human figures drawn in Petri dishes using live bacteria. To make these figures, Clancy dots various pathogenic bacteria into nutrient agar and incubates the dish for several days to allow the figure to grow. Like the latent photographic image, the figure drawing only becomes visible after a process of development in a suitable environment. Constantly changing as it grows, the bacteria can cause the figure to mutate in unexpected ways. These 'Visible Human Bodies' consequently remind us that