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#CDNART

an anthology of interviews with artists in canada



GROTESQUE,
SEDUCTIVE,
AND
PRISTINE
SARAH
ALLEN
EAGEN





Hungry Ghost 1
(Decadent Decay Series), 2013, 20" x 10" x 10", Mixed Media + Rhinestones

SARAH ALLEN EAGEN

TORONTO/NEW YORK

CF: *OK: disfigured bodies, rearranged, obfuscated and distorted bodies. Describe, if you would, how this over-arching theme developed for you, and what draws you to the especially mutable aspects of the human form.*

SAE: The over-arching theme of fragmented bodies in my work grew out of my interest in the depiction of women in contemporary society. I use fragmented forms to explore the relationship between isolation, intimacy and violence. Part human, part flesh, and part fantasy, these hybrid figures blend distinctions between parts and whole, face and limb, and interior and exterior. These composite bodies are an attempt to defy easy categorization and to portray individuals through their incompleteness.

I think that in many ways, our deepest desires and worst fears get projected onto women's bodies. Using collage to cut and slice figures infuses the work with a certain kind of violence—literally rearranging depictions of human bodies in order to tear apart social constructions. These composite bodies can be at once alluring and unnerving. I think these mutated figures suggest the potential to

move beyond these artificial distinctions. Even as their fragmented bodies seem marked by violence, they are an invitation for the viewer to confront real world contradictions.

CF: *While we're at it, because we're all thinking it anyway: about how many people think your "Blink (Crease of Eyelid)" is a picture of something a little less innocuous than an eyelid? In a similar vein to my previous question, could you describe the role of obfuscation and rearrangement in your work? Is this what you mean by "body architecture"?*

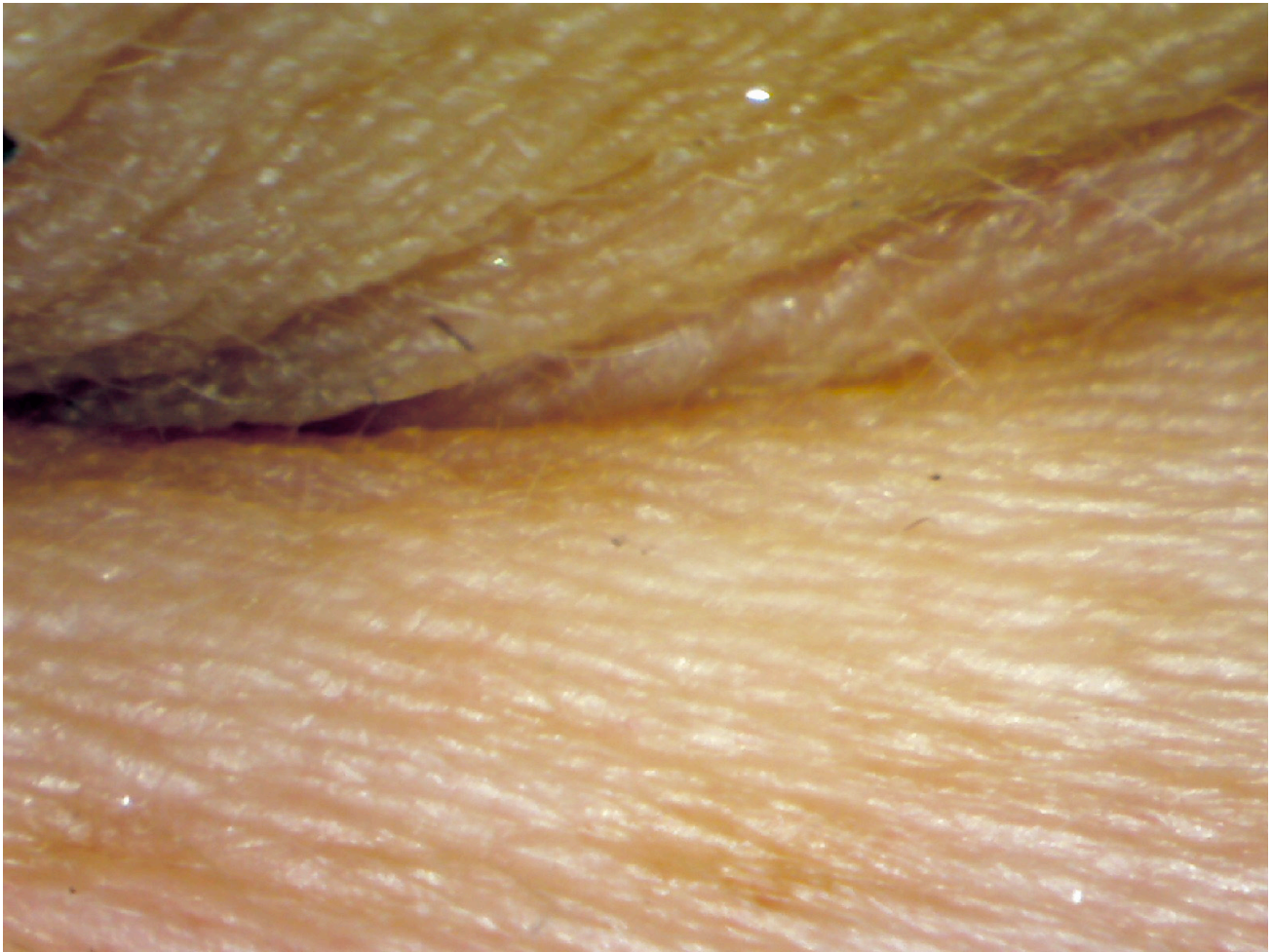
SAE: I love playing with boundaries and assumptions, and I enjoy that a photograph of something so common and innocuous, when shown up close, can look scandalous! At first glance, many people find the photograph off-putting. Although the title reveals exactly what the image is of, it doesn't necessarily make the photograph any more comfortable. Ambiguity and rearrangement are often employed in my work, to create a moment of confusion in the viewer.

My work isn't formally considered "body architecture", but it is something that informs my practice. The term was developed by artist Lucy McRae to describe her work, which explores how technology can transform the human silhouette. McRae uses the human body as a canvas by using everyday materials—like balloons, nylons, thumbtacks and pom poms—to modify its appearance. Although I work with images of people, I have yet to use them as my canvas.

CF: *You started out as a painter, but you boast works in a variety of media: do you feel like you bring a painter's sensibility to your other projects, or do you prefer a contextual approach? Is it, once a painter, always a painter?*

SAE: This is something that I have given a lot of thought to over the years, because I defined myself as a painter for a long time (even when my work was primarily sculptural). Honestly, I don't think that I have ever really been "a painter" because I





have always approached painting in a sculptural way. The ideas that I wanted to explore were difficult to communicate through painting alone. Being able to move beyond the confines of the canvas was very liberating, but painting will always be ground my practice.

CF: *So BioArt? How did you get involved with this field, how do you feel it ties in with your other work, and what doors does it open not just for you, but for the art world in general?*

SAE: BioArt or Biological Art is an emerging field which generally refers to the intersection of biological arts and the plastic sciences—including working directly with biological materials and incorporating living processes into art making. Ultimately it invites artists to work in laboratories, collaborating with scientists other artists and the DIY biology community. I had been using synthetic materials to resemble organic ones and BioArt introduced me to

new ways of working: Instead of just depicting flesh, I could work with flesh. Instead of creating sculptures that look like crystals growing on skulls, I could actually grow crystals on animal bones.

Bio Art also draws awareness to the ways in which biomedical sciences alter social, ethical and cultural values in society. But I think that eroding the boundaries between art and science opens up opportunities not only for artists but also scientists: there are a number of Bio- and Eco-artists that have made scientific discoveries that resulted from their art practices.

CF: *Your CV is pretty intimidating for 26, and it includes a few of things normally outside the realm of typical extra-curriculars for artists. How do you strike a balance between your practice, your work with ArtFile, for example, and, oh, I don't know, theorizing on the "Misuse and Proliferation of Small Arms/Firearms"?*





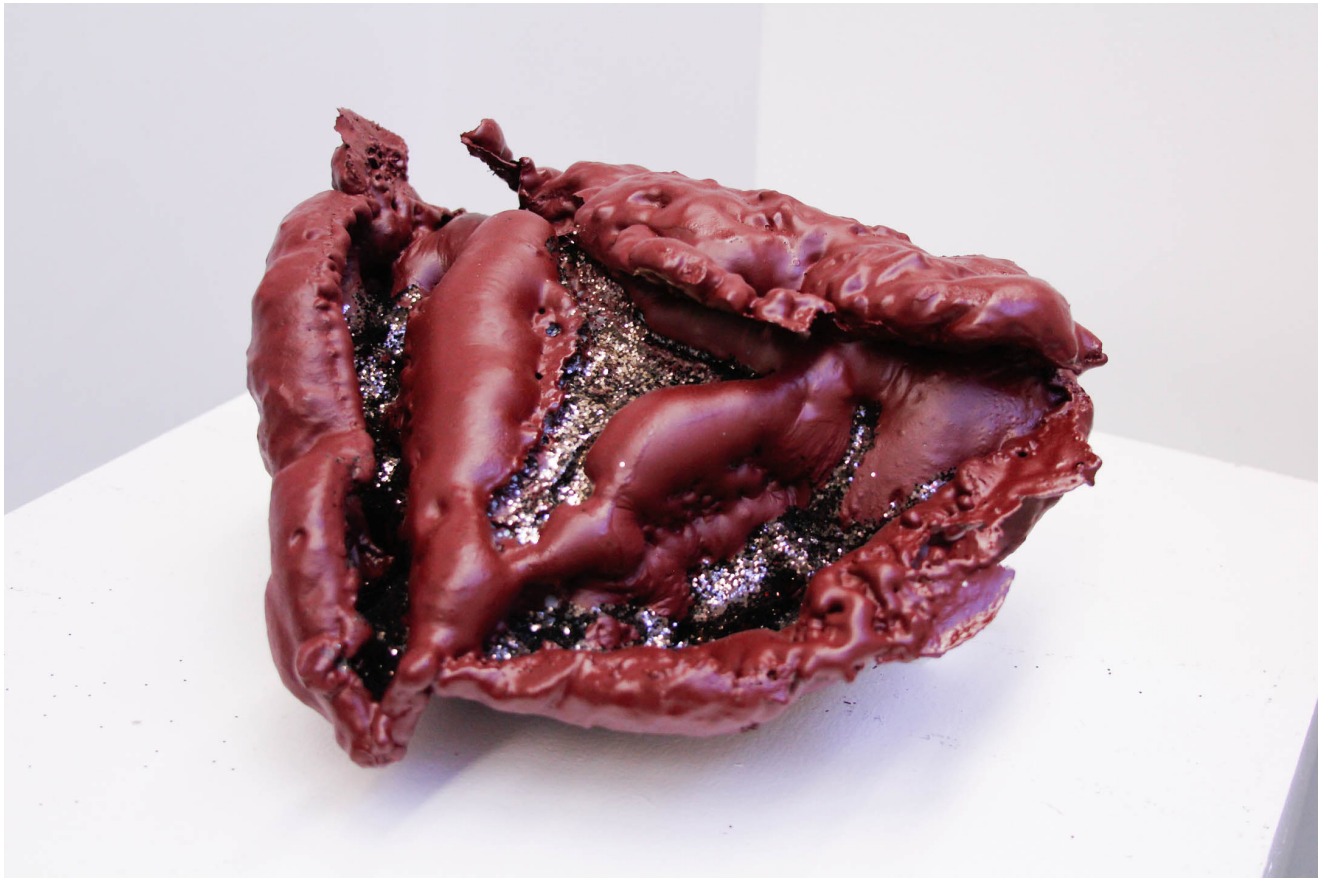
SAE: For me, these different ways of working are interrelated: I try to work materially through things that I can't work through conceptually. I think that a lot of the ideas featured in my academic writing and interviews for ArtFile are also explored through my artwork. These different projects definitely compete for time, but while Academic writing and painting are solitary activities, but presenting at conferences, volunteering and working with artist for ArtFile allow me to be part of various communities.

CF: *I think it's pretty fair for me to say that exploring the possibilities for, as you put it, "the tension between the artificial and real, comfort and discomfort and beauty and the grotesque" is what we might call a totally sustainable resource. I'm wondering, though, where these explorations are taking you now, and where you think they'll take you moving forward.*

SAE: I am fascinated with the many ways in which the human body can be modified: Technological skins mediate between users and products in the digital realm. The human body is at once strong and vulnerable – it is the locus of collapse and recovery and is in many ways self-repairing. Skin has always been the body part most easily altered by human beings, from scarification to cosmetics. And it has become a viable medical product that is grown in laboratories. Skin is at once vulnerable and erotic.

My work is continuing to evolve and moving away from sculptures and paintings and moving in the more collaborative directions of BioArt and Body Architecture.





CF: *Could you elaborate on the idea you present in your artist statement, that your “work is ultimately driven by empathy and a commitment to accessibility”? I’m particularly curious about how you treat these issues in concert with your desire to “communicate using the vocabularies of art and science.”*

SAE: The ultimate goal of my artwork is to inspire an emotional response or visceral reaction in the viewer. People don’t need particular background to be confused, grossed out or curious. To achieve this effect, I combine the visual vocabularies of art and science: the vitrines that store my fake organs are as familiar as the glitter that covers them. The sculptures and images that are made of in glitter, rubber, and wax, render sensual forms clinical. I think it is their unexpected combination of grotesque qualities with seductive and pristine materials that makes the work at once familiar and strange.

CF: *You’ve been in New York for almost three years now. What was it like making the shift in terms of getting involved with a new (and obviously larger) art community? Are you going to be sticking around New York for a while?*

SAE: What is really amazing about New York is not only the scale of the arts community, but that it is composed of diverse communities. I found that being a part of the grad school micro-community and working with Artists through ArtFile Magazine has helped me be a part of many different communities at once.

As for my future plans: I have fallen in love with New York & am planning to stay as long as the city will keep me.

