

Skin



Morgan
Stokes

Exhibition
Catalogue

24 May —
10 June 2023


CURATORIAL+CO.

Curatorial+Co is delighted to present *Skin*, the third solo exhibition by Morgan Stokes with the gallery. The show presents an array of paintings and sculptures Stokes has created over the past year.

Stokes' practice explores and reinterprets the medium of painting, and more recently, sculpture. His conceptual approach dissects painting into its discrete elements, such as linen, paint and stretcher bars, to enquire into what makes a painting in the digital age. By creating formal studies into material, Stokes' works explore what he calls the 'virtual gaze', that is, how our mode of perception is shifting as our lives are increasingly mediated by the screen.

For his latest show, Stokes interprets painting as a metaphor for personhood and subsequently surface as a metaphor for skin. *Skin* is a primat response to material; rabbit skin glue, rock dust and raw linen sit beside worked fabric and metal, a conversation between matter both pre-historic and futuristic. The works are both introspective and reflective, Stokes' post-minimal sensibility and meditative process evident with the gentle working of each surface. *Skin* recalls the origins of art, the nature of creation, and the role of material in an increasingly material-free culture. Accompanying the exhibition is a ruminating essay by Stephanie Wade, editor of arts magazine *Ignant*. We encourage you to spend time reading through this beautifully crafted essay.

Morgan Stokes (b. 1990) is an artist based in Sydney. 'Skin' is his third solo show with Curatorial+Co, which follows 'Virtual Gaze' in 2022, described as a "commercial and critical success". In 2019 he completed a four-month residency in Berlin followed by a year-long practice in Germany. He holds a Master of Design from UNSW. His works can be found in private collections across Australia, the USA, Germany and around the world.



A GLITCH IN TIME

BY
STEPHANIE
WADE

We can trace the invention of some of humanity's most fundamental practices back to the prehistoric age, some 2.5 million years ago until 10,000 B.C.: language, scientific inquiry, spirituality, religion, and art. Small sculptures and cave paintings are known to modern scholars to have first emerged from these early Paleolithic humans. Among the most common subject matter was stencils and paintings of hands; feeling the fleshiness of skin to trace the outline of one's physicality.

Such paintings, at that point in history, were not merely the product of inattentive doodling, but required considerable planning to obtain the materials needed to ground up a paste resembling paint—charcoal, clay, rocks, and animal fats and blood, sometimes collected from miles away—used to depict and engrave figurative paintings on the rough, textural walls of caves.

What themes or desires do these works represent? Archaeologists have many theories, but the fact is it is anyone's guess. Perhaps part of it was about connecting with one's physical surroundings; using our skin as a starting point to be in contact with the natural world.

Or maybe it was about creating for the sake of creation. Art then, it should be said, is a primordial act; the oldest and purest mode of creative expression that exists to render our situations and experiences into something tangible.

Material helps with this. In 1969, the legendary land artist Michael Heizer had an idea for a large-scale sculpture using an obscenely heavy rock, born from his time living in the arid Nevada desert. It took many decades to realise, and was a logistical nightmare, yet in 2012, a 150 million-year-old rock weighing a whopping 340 tonnes was transported from the desert to Los Angeles to form Levitated Mass (2012), a public art installation and cultural phenomenon.

Why are we so enthralled by a rock? The fascination with this piece of art becomes clearer when you consider that researchers are still scratching their heads over how the Great Pyramids of Giza were built some four thousand years ago. Heizer's installation, like others of this calibre, has us yo-yoing with spiritual impulse from the present to the Middle Ages, and back to prehistoric times when the rock was formed. History, presence, and future coalesce.

Consider skin as a noun: the outer layer, or surface, of a body; the barrier between what is inside and outside, the ultimate emblem for embodiment. To touch the skin on your body and feel your presence in the world is to jolt yourself into the here and now.

Alberto Burri (1915–1995), a key innovator in the history of 20th-century art, pioneered a range of techniques to create his paintings and sculptures: layering, stitching, and sewing together sections of fabric, scratching, ripping, and burning holes, melting hard materials and cracking paint into patterns attributed to natural decay. This is Burri's Material Realism: the representation of the formal, physical properties of materials, nothing more. Yet there is a tactile and visceral quality to his works that seems to emphasise the ageing process.

Now consider skin as a verb: to shed, or outgrow, one's skin. A few key motifs emerge here in the inevitability of rebirth, renewal, and transformation. With this comes a metaphor in the reckoning of our current time: we know that the structural systems of the Global North—such as the enmeshment of technology with personhood and domination—can no longer hold or sustain us. They need to be shed in order for something new to emerge.



American professor Donna Haraway famously asked in her seminal 1985 essay *A Cyborg Manifesto*, “Why should our bodies end at the skin?”, a question more pertinent today than ever, when considering our messy inability to set boundaries with technological advancements. “Technology is not neutral. We’re inside of what we make, and it’s inside of us,” Haraway says.

Or in other words, the creepy link between us and the virtual world has become so entangled that we don’t even know where we end and where technology begins. Time with friends becomes an opportunity to produce content; commutes are chances to increase productivity. Boredom ended in 2007. Everything physical has become indistinguishable from the internet, and there is seemingly little use for creation without a purpose.

The exhibition ‘Skin’ was conceived to explore these ideas. It is a framework to understanding painting as a metaphor for personhood, and surface as a metaphor for skin. Morgan Stokes is drawn to subject matter that is anchored in everyday life but has a metaphysical interpretation. In his previous exhibition ‘Virtual Gaze’, the artist questioned the dissonance between experiencing art online versus in real life. Yet where he ruminated on the virtual world through painting and sculpture, with this new body of work, Stokes meditates on existence in, and perception of, the physical world around us.

Inspired by techniques and forms seen in Alberto Burri’s *Material Realism*, art movements like the Korean *Dansaekhwa* and *Post-Minimalism*, and the suspended sculptures of Jose Dávila, the works in ‘Skin’ are reduced in order to emphasise their materiality. Surfaces of the canvases form a type of skin, constructed through repetitive actions that create highly textured surfaces.

In a way, his paintings explore the dynamic traits of skin—its vulnerabilities to space and time and its unique irregularities. In some works, traditional painting materials such as linen and canvas are torn up and reconstructed; perhaps questioning what makes a painting in the digital age. Silk, metal and clothing stand in for canvas in others, our eyes question the surface. Elsewhere, the fabric stretches or expands depending on the level of humidity; the painting breathes and changes, it is not a static image.

Rocks are used in both paintings and sculptures, their raw mass and prehistory palpable, standing in contrast to the modern mass-manufactured linens and fabrics surrounding them. This contrast is what compels the show; somehow, a primal sensibility runs through the works—almost as if you’re in a cave, rather than a gallery. Indeed, the artist examined cave paintings for inspiration materially, texturally, and compositionally. Looking to the past, from the lens of the future, as a means to make sense of the physical world.

Over many thousands of years, the surfaces where art materialises have changed; each was fitting depending on the specific point in time. Caves, temples, tombs, rock walls, palaces, churches, buildings, gallery walls—and now, screens. As technology strangles our every waking moment, maybe staring at primary matter is satisfying because it hits some primal nerve; a reminder that we continue to be severed from nature. A back-to-front world.

Amidst our digital dystopia, ‘Skin’ recalls the origins of art, the nature of creation, and the role of material in an increasingly material-free culture. It is a reminder of what came before us and what will remain after we’re gone. History, presence, and future coalesce. The intention? To see our own skin.











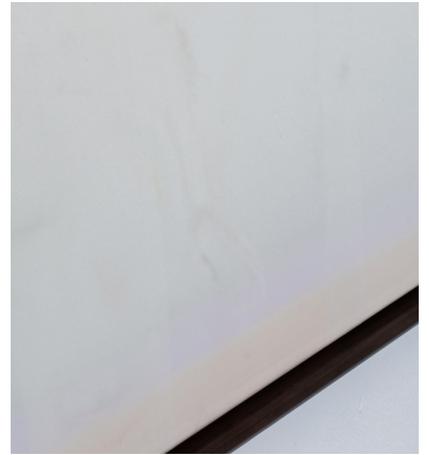
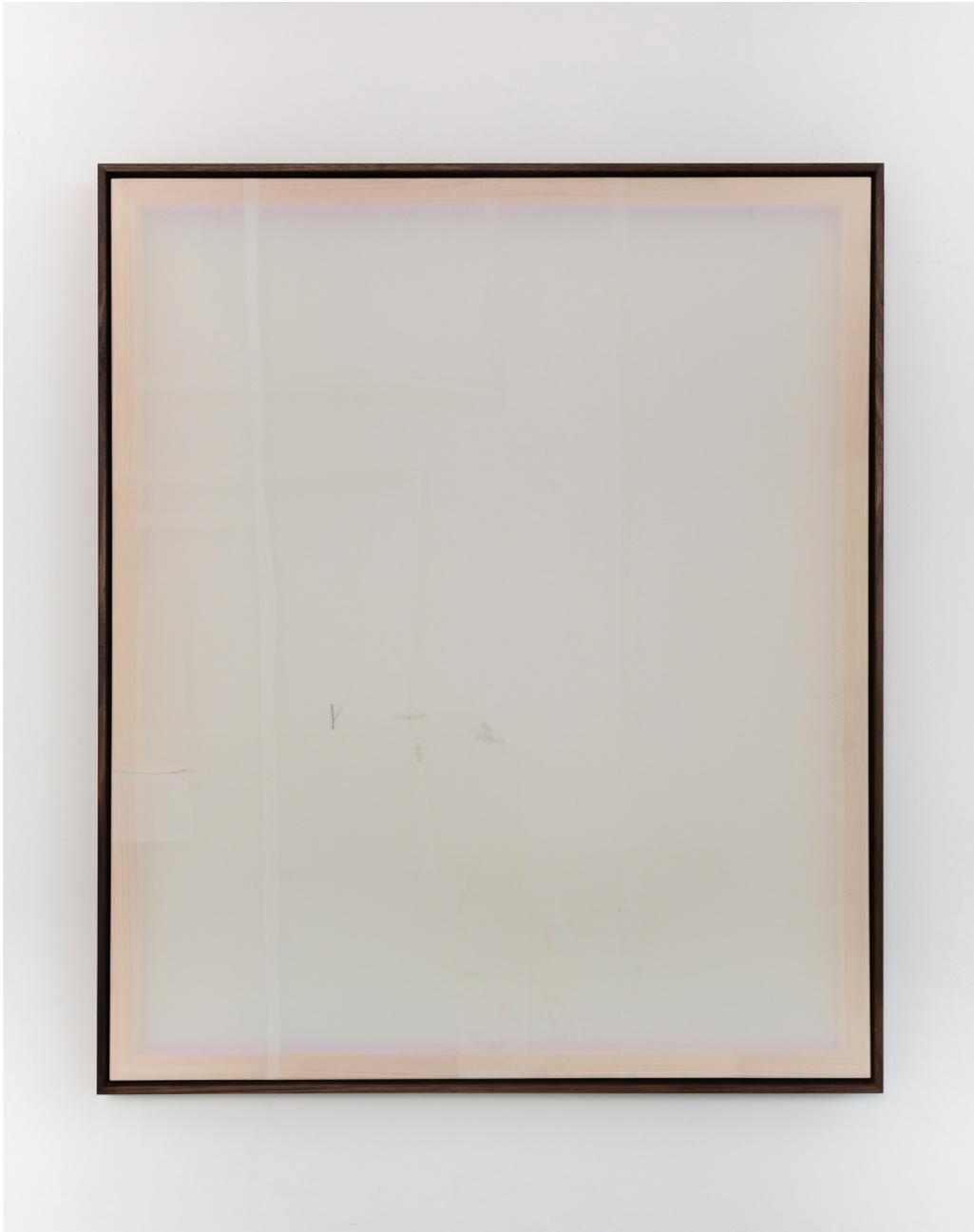






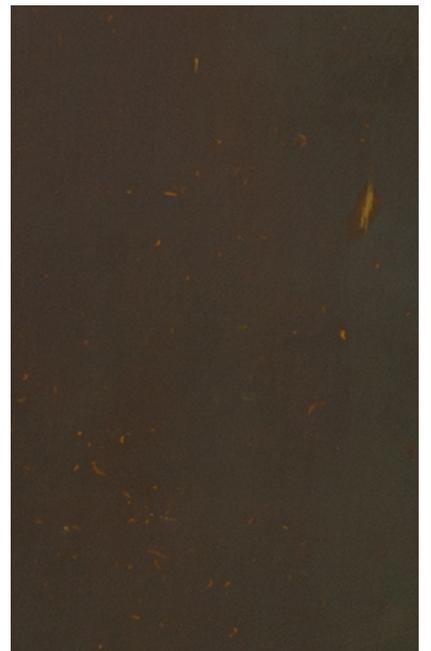




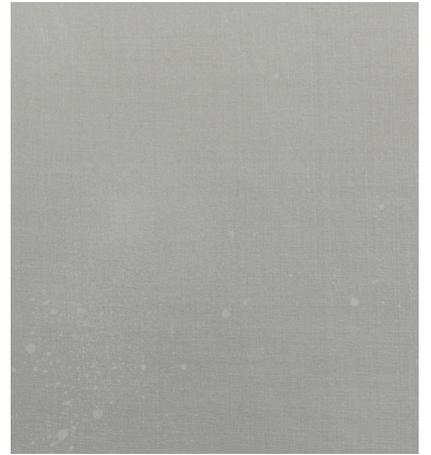








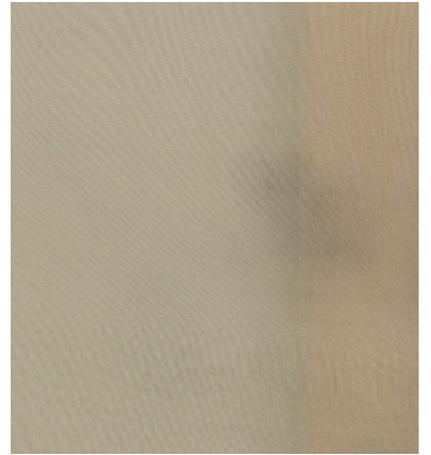








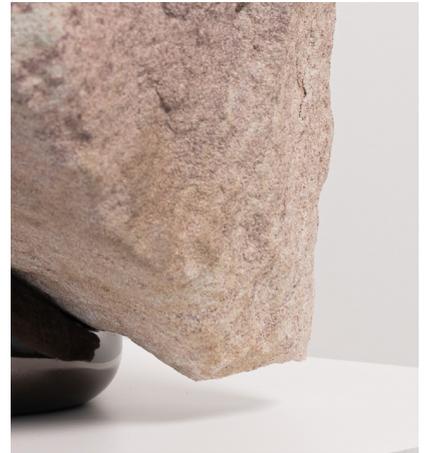


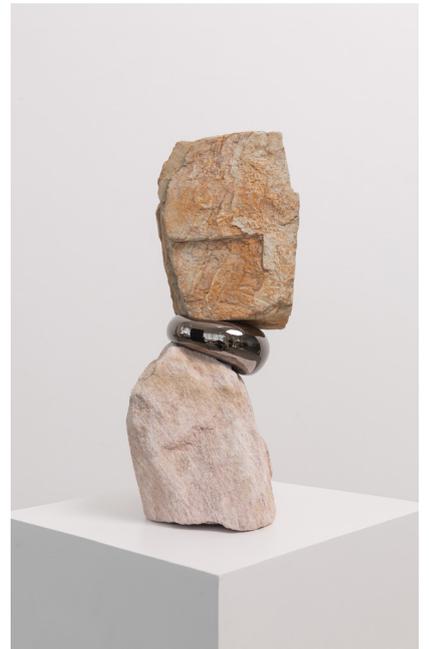
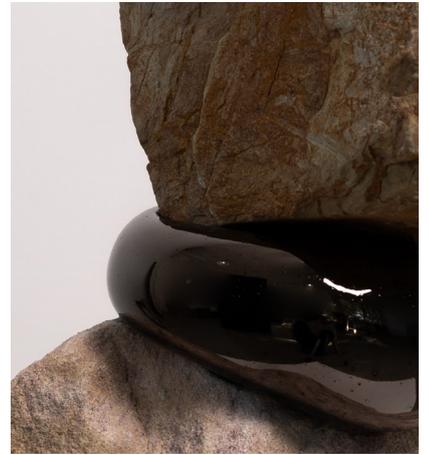


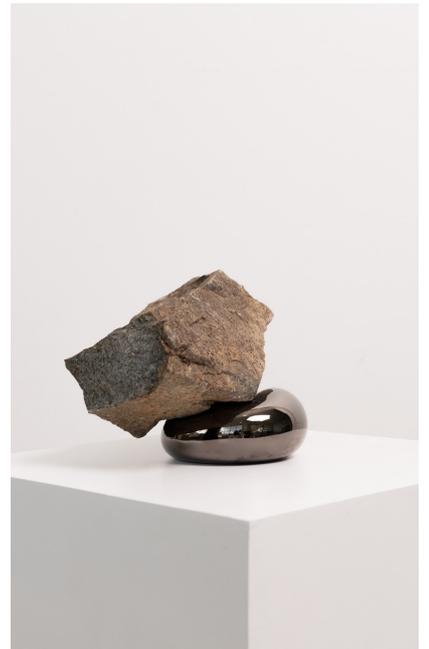


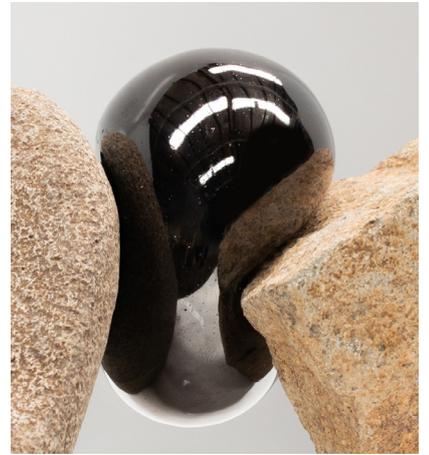


SCULPTURES











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Curatorial+Co. acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the country on which the gallery sits, the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation, and recognises their continuing connection to land, waters and cultures. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.