

ART

Eleven Artists Ponder Flesh's Possibilities

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

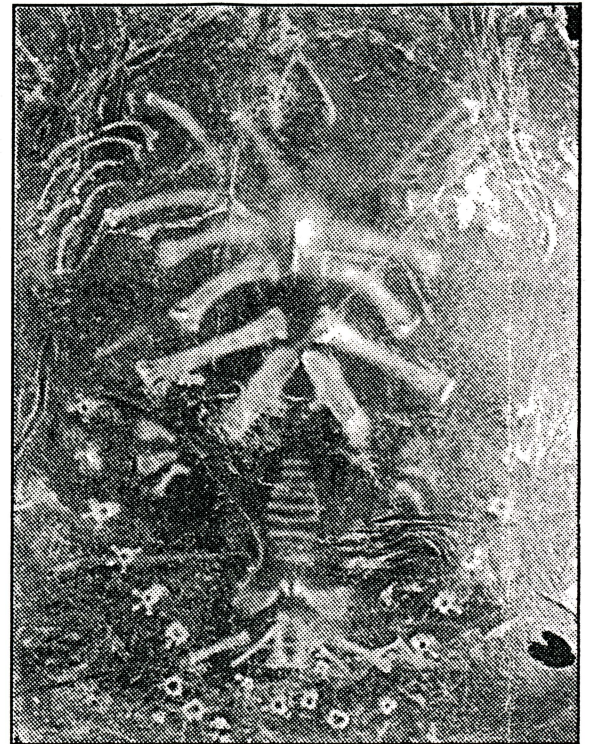
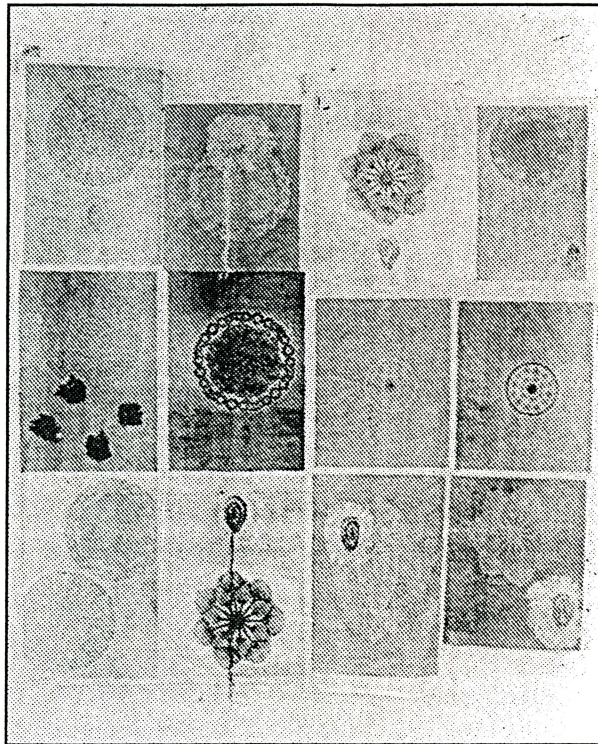
WALT WHITMAN might approve of the current exhibition at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield. In his vision, all of humanity blended into one force. There is a sameness about the work of "In the Flesh" that produces conflicting feelings. At the same time that a viewer's attention flags after seeing skin represented over and over, he or she might begin to feel a palpable, almost itchy sensation. It's as if Christo had wrapped the interior of the museum in flesh.

If the show goes flaccid visually, little of the blame can be laid on Jill Snyder, the curator and director of the Aldrich. She has chosen a subject that is a major area of exploration in the contemporary art world and has creatively drawn her 11 accomplished artists from many, sometimes unexpected, corners of that world. The catalogue bulges with pertinent references beginning with cave paintings, and she has supplemented the art with a videotape of conversations with the artists, and a table of books about them for visitors to peruse.

The weakness lies in flesh itself. Inherently, there can't be a lot of variety in representing skin. Certainly the color range — which causes so many problems in real life — is rather limited. The novelty of using hide or synthetics that make one think of skin soon pales. Unusual surfaces begin to be taken for granted, and the variety of tattooing and piercing seen on almost any urban street these days to the contrary, a finite amount of interesting artistic operations can be performed in this genre.

Ms. Snyder invokes such painters of women as De Kooning and Rubens in introducing her show, but, reflecting the cautious era we live in now, the show contains little lustiness or even joy. Rather Ms. Snyder says objectively that the artists "visualize the concept of skin as a boundary, a container, a barrier, and a place from which both external and internal perceptions arise."

But there is a touch of bawdiness at the outset. Carol Hepper has long worked with animal skins, stitching pieces of them together, and the work by her the viewer encounters first is "Cod Piece" made of fish skin and thread. Stretched hide figures in most of Ms. Hepper's other works.



At the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art: "Untitled" by Kiki Smith and "Saint" by Carol Hepper, above; "Flesh" by Kiki Smith, right, and "Big Hair Suit" by Lesley Dill, below.

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The bones that almost poke through the translucent covering of "Saint" give the piece the look of an X-ray.

Good, if mysterious, titles abound in the show, even if the work itself is rote. Telma Zunz applies coffee, shellac and ink on latex to make banners that stretch almost from floor to ceiling.

The series of eight works is called "Guardian of the Navel." The title is unexplained, but the inchoate imagery, though it remains abstract, puts one in mind of the Shroud of Turin. The taut surfaces of the paintings by Prudencio Irazabal are identified as "non-woven fabric." They are latex like, and Mr. Irazabal uses them to make what surface resem-



ble Color Field paintings — minus much of the color. Many conjure up tattoos, body painting or peeling skin.

The show includes three artists who paint on ordinary canvas. Two of these are political: one, overtly, the other subtly. Glenn Ligon's medium is words. He stencils statements such as, "I feel most colored when I

am thrown against a sharp white background." Byron Kim's basically monochrome work contains rare colors based on the skin tones of a cross-section of humanity.

In a set of representational paintings, Dennis Kardon focuses deliberately and ambiguously on areas of the body. Slit-like lines might have an erotic charge, but he might just be depicting the crook of an elbow. Jack Whitten's sturdy paintings made like mosaics with acrylic chips are innovative, but despite the title of one work, "Mask," and a shape like a fingerprint in another, they don't seem to fit the show's context; the surfaces seem more stony than fleshy.

I must concede that two artists do provide a rise: Kiki Smith's sculpture of a humanoid is cut open and spills internal organs made out of a variety of colorful fabrics; she also has several pieces based on doily patterns. These allude to rose windows, and therefore medieval paeans to the generative allure of females. Simon Leung simply makes pale checkerboards on glass. But the opaque material is skin collected from under his eyes in what is displayed as a painful process.



FLESH

The remaining artists traffic nimbly in hair. Leslie Dill celebrates the unruly or even embarrassing stuff using horsehair, or in the case of her "Big Hair Suit," black thread. Harry Philbrick dexterously balances clusters of pine needles on their tips in a large wall piece; the effect is one of a large patch of stubbled skin.

A second small exhibition at the Aldrich museum focuses not on humanity but on trees. Georgia Marsh uses charcoal — itself a tree product — to reproduce the effect of light on conifers from such varied sites as Central Park and the Merritt Parkway. The dazzling part is that the skeins of jagged charcoal lines are but marks independent of representation on one level; on another level, however, they are fat trees shining in the sun — a rare, but recognizable vision. ■

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"In the Flesh" is at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield through May 5. Georgia Marsh's "Intervals and Compositions" remains on view at the Aldrich museum through March 24.