

Flesh Wounds

**Brenda Barry Byrne
Tammi Campbell
Jennifer McRorie**

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This exhibition brings together the work of three artists from different regions (Regina, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert) whose work shares a common theme – that of scars and bruises on human flesh.

Brenda Barry Byrne's work in this exhibition is from a series called "Becoming Myself: Becoming My Myth" begun in 1993 in response to cancer treatment that involved 21 surgeries. Byrne describes this work as focusing on the "transfigured body" (specifically her own), the "embodiment of illness", and the "transformations" resulting from cancer and its treatment.

Tammi Campbell's work is from her "Bruising/Flesh Series" begun in 2003. Campbell's work is both abstract and literal. In this series, bruises are used as a metaphor for "memory and its distortion over time". Rather than recording specific injuries, her paintings actually mimic the physical process of bruising – fading and altering in color as they age as memories do.

Jennifer McRorie's "Imprinted" series (begun in 2004) is about how the body serves as an "index of our personal and socialized histories". McRorie meticulously paints the various scars and imperfections in her own skin as a form of memento, cataloguing the experiences that are imprinted in her flesh. Her work calls into question the body's capacity to remember.

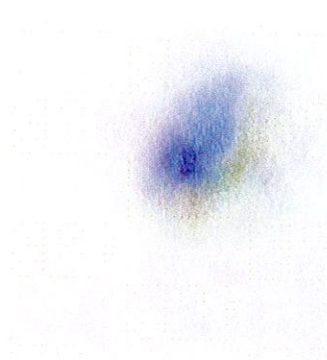
At Tammi Campbell's suggestion, the three artists in this exhibition engaged in an online dialogue to explore the similarities and differences in their work in terms of motivation and artistic processes. What follows is a transcript of their discussion.

Karen Schoonover
Curator

In Conversation ~ Brenda Barry Byrne, Tammi Campbell, and Jennifer McRorie

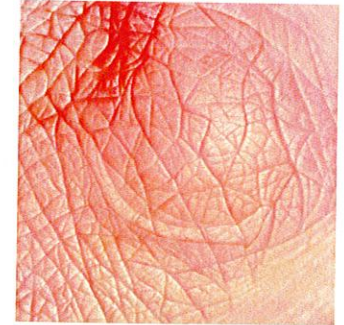
Jennifer: I am interested in the fact that although we may have different driving forces behind our work, all three bodies of work deal with the recording of life experience on the body. Brenda's imagery of scarring initiates a strong dialogue around illness, mutilation and deterioration of the body, while I see that Tammi and I are using images of bruises and scars as a means of initiating a dialogue around memory. Can you both elaborate on the ideas that influenced you to pursue working with this imagery?

Tammi: I find that my work seems to always follow the same threads – a meditation on memory, time, life and death. When I began paint-



Tammi Campbell, "Bruising Series", oil and wax on canvas, 24"x24", 2004

ing the bruises, my interest was in the relationship between memory and bruises – how the body and mind both have the capacity to remember and forget and how the mind and body process information/experience over time.



Jennifer McRorie, "Imprinted 1987", oil and wax on canvas, 75cm x 75 cm, 2005.

Brenda: Medical jargon, and a complete history – surgical reports, slides of tumours, lab reports, research of my particular cancer, and of course the scars themselves, influenced my work. Both Tammi and you work differently with memory than I. I have no memory of obtaining my scars since they were surgically induced. Memory of a different type is prevalent in my work – that of putting a very private process onto an extremely public stage. Teaching hospitals with students can be very invasive. Also, because of the type of cancer I had/have; dissections of my tumours were sent throughout North America for research purposes. Yes, my work deals with mutilation in some fashion, but it speaks to empowerment by putting these on display, as does both of your works.

Jennifer: Both Brenda's work and my own are autobiographical in nature. Why do you think that it is or isn't important for you to reference yourself or your own body in your work?

Tammi: Perhaps all work is autobiographical? In many ways we cannot escape ourselves when we create art. The work I am creating comes from lived experience, from personal experience, but at the same time is not about one significant event, instead it is a culmination of knowing/living/experience. I am trying to capture what it feels like to be human – the bruising series for me is about a disconnect between bodily experience and memory. A quote from Frances Bacon comes to mind, "For me realism is an attempt to capture appearance with all the sensations in which that particular appearance has suggested to me." In the end, I am not sure it is much different than an autobiographical approach. What do you think?

Brenda: I agree with Tammi, you can only work from what you can draw from, and to be honest to the work and its integrity, it has to come from within. Having said this, I don't feel that the works that all three of us present are narcissistic, rather a universal dialogue in some disturbing/uncomfortable areas. If not, wouldn't it be appropriation of some sort?

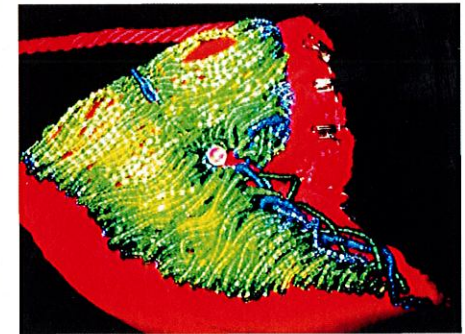
Jennifer: I would also agree with you both that, in fact, all work could be considered autobiographical since we all approach work from our own history and experience. I was thinking of autobiography in more specific terms since I found it important in this series to use images of scars from my own body to create a self-portrait of sorts. I am displaying the remnants of my own history. In doing so, I wondered if the work would be too narcissistic and if there would be room for viewers to associate themselves with the work. But because of the "abstract" nature of the work, I believe that the images do initiate a universal dialogue with viewers, as do each of your works.

Tammi: I find it really interesting that all three of us tend to isolate and compartmentalize our imagery; Jennifer and I by using the square and Brenda by constructing a purse. Do you use this as a method of sampling, separating, obscuring, or highlighting these areas of damage/healing? and why?

Jennifer: I find that the square format of my work highlights the particular areas on the skin that are being focused on in my imagery. The square acts as a circle and therefore emphasizes the imagery rather than the edges of the canvas. I had someone visit my studio a couple of years back, who commented on a work which had a landscape format. He thought that the format always made him aware of the edges of the canvas and it was distracting him from the imagery. I started using the square format from then on. I think that, by isolating the imagery, I am making a conscious effort to control the viewer's gaze. I'm only allowing them to see a minute area on my skin, so I suppose this would act as a method of obscuring the overall body.

Tammi: Interesting, I started using the square format while I was an art student at the University of Saskatchewan. At that point, I was grappling with issues relating to the relevance of contemporary painting. I started experimenting with the elements of abstract painting in a conceptual way and found the square format just stuck with me – it works as a neutral – neither a portrait nor a landscape.

Brenda: I have worked with casting the scars in pewter, beaded onto velvet dresses (taken apart by the seams and used the panels), I have worked in the format of CAT scans and MRI scans, I have used the actual staples and the stitches, I have covered IV bags and syringes – so no, the actual shape is not a concern of mine. I find the detail of the work and the object used



Brenda Barry Byrne, detail "Beaded Vulva Purse", mixed media, 4.5"x7"x.75", 1995

speak to the content and are able to hold the viewer. I do have some pieces in a square format – 3 of them will be in the exhibit, once again. The object becomes part of the piece; the decaying frame, beaded vulvas sewn on hospital linens, velvets, etc.

Tammi: In all three bodies of work, I see connecting themes of death, vulnerability, resilience, and healing. What role does mortality play in your work?

Jennifer: I believe that the scar images I'm working with definitely emphasize the fragility and vulnerability of the body, as well as its resilience, and therefore mortality does enter into the dialogue. I see mortality as a concept that is generally implied in the work but isn't one that I'm directly addressing. Looking at the vulnerability of the body and how it acts as a record or index of our histories, I'm intent on exploring the body's role in constructing memory and identity.

Brenda: Mortality is part of the work, but by no means the main focus. My work discussed the public/private invasion of the body. Most of the damage is still hidden beneath the skin, only available to a select few who open the scars and investigate. So, it becomes almost literal, similar to Tammi's work and connected to Jennifer with the notion of memory – not being able to see all of the physical damage, survived by the memory.

Tammi: When I start a new body of work I always feel like I am entering uncharted territory, not fully aware of what the work will become, and sometimes, not knowing what the work means at the point of creation. Afterwards, I always find a link back to what has come before it. Instead of being something new it is a progression on the same idea or thread of meaning as previous work. With that in mind, can you speak a bit about the body of work that preceded the work included in the exhibition?

Jennifer: I feel the same way when I start a body of work. I like the sense of exploration when you don't know exactly how the work is going to evolve and its meaning isn't resolved. But as you say, after completing the work I can always see a common thread running through it from work I've done previously. This work has definite connections to a series that I was working on in my undergraduate degree, where I was exploring the histories and memories that are embedded in the body and within nature. I created a series of fossilized images, depictions of remnants of the past, including shells, tree rings and fingerprints. The representation of memory and time has been a dominant focus of my work for many years now, but it wasn't until I put together a sleeve of slides more recently that I realized that the scar images have direct links aesthetically, as well as conceptually, to the fossil images I had created years ago.

Brenda: Works that preceded the works in the exhibition have been of similar content and notion; medical ethics and in particular, women. Prior to being diagnosed with cancer, my work dealt with women's bodies and the politics behind it. It is interesting that both of you talk about memory so much in your work – Jennifer about how the actual scar triggers a memory and Tammi, how the bruise fades and only the memory survives. My memory of my scarring is completely different. I have no memory of getting the scar or even seeing the symptoms that lead to the scarring, it was far beneath the flesh. I would wake up with a resulting scar.

Jennifer: Can you explain how the media you work in contributes to the context of your work? Personally, I am intrigued with the possibilities the wax adds to the paint surface, how the qualities of the wax, the translucency and texture, reflect those of skin, and because of these similar qualities, I believe that the medium enters into dialogue with my subject matter. The aesthetic appearance of the paintings have a definite "fleshy-ness".

Tammi: I have always been interested in the technical aspect of painting, the alchemic possibilities of paint and wax. With the bruising series, I have used certain paint pigments and binding agents that are somewhat unstable. For example, oil colours like Alizarin Crimson, Peacock Blue, and Van Dyke Brown deteriorate through exposure to light. By intentionally using pigments that are known to fade and darken with exposure to light and time, I am creating paintings of bruises that actually function like bruises. Initially, I was using oil on canvas to capture flesh and bruises. I would build up texture with the oil paint and then apply many thin layers of colour – both transparent and opaque to capture the semi-transparent nature of skin. In the beginning, I was really working at capturing the idea of bruising.

ing and memory, but, after a few years, I started experimenting with wax. The inherent flesh-like quality of the wax pushed the work quite a bit, once this happened the media started to really have a dialogue with the context. I found I was not working at manipulating the paint to infer flesh, but instead, it was happening naturally.

Brenda: I have seen both of your works and I agree, the "waxiness" lends itself to the flesh rather well – it becomes quite visceral. The running "media" in my work does not exist. I have done several small series in one particular medium. For example, the "beaded vulva" pieces were a series of 19 (at that point I had had only 19 surgeries). The cast "vulvas" was a series of 16 pewter casts depicting the level of scarring achieved after each surgery. The "constant" in my work is the scar itself – presented in many different formats and on many different objects, whether found or manufactured.

Brenda Barry Byrne studied at the University of Alberta and the University of Saskatchewan and currently lives in Prince Albert.

Tammi Campbell studied at the University of Saskatchewan and currently lives in Saskatoon.

Jennifer McRorie is a graduate of the University of Regina and is currently studying in New Zealand. Her home-base is Regina Beach.

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OF REGINA**

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