SPLASH CLUB
Hope Wilson

Opposite: Heather Straka & Emily Hartley-Skudder, *Green Tea with Honey* (2018/2023). Oil on canvas board, powder coated steel tubing, found bathtub (halved), vintage hair dryer and socket, MDF moulding, PVC foam tiles & curtain, metal hooks, wall paint. Courtesy of the artists and Jonathan Smart Gallery. Photography: Vicki Piper.

Splash Club is the title of both the exhibition and publication that Emily Hartley-Skudder presents to conclude her time as the Frances Hodgkins Fellow. During an early meeting in 2023, she introduced this potential title and her plans for a project that poked fun at old-school Gentlemen's clubs with a not-so-subtle nod to the Mermaid Bar on Courtenay Place. This early discussion set the scene for the aesthetics and politics of *Splash Club*, an exhibition that playfully celebrates beauty rituals and retro bathroom aesthetics but also rewards viewers with an eye for the strange or unsettling.

As both artist and curator, Hartley-Skudder works across a mix of media and scales to create perfectly uncanny spaces. In *Splash Club*, the bathroom and bathing bodies themselves become a lens to explore historical experiences of body ownership. Hartley-Skudder zeros in on cleanliness, particularly the cleanliness of feminine bodies, as a site for control and consumerism but also of euphoria and celebration. The viewer's assumptions and background are central to the experience – locating them in the role of surveyor, viewer, homeowner, body-owner – and making the exhibition hum with the question 'who is doing the looking?'

In *Splash Club* the dialogue between installations, found objects, and works by other artists demonstrates the way Hartley-Skudder has continually expanded the tools and vocabulary of her practice over the past four years. Two earlier exhibitions are key touchstones here: *Additions + Alterations* at Dunedin Public Art Gallery in 2020 and *Wendy's Cigarette* with Heather Straka at Jonathan Smart Gallery in Ōtautahi Christchurch in 2023. In the former, Hartley-Skudder was commissioned by curator Lauren Gutsell to create installations responding to eight works in the gallery's contemporary collection. She inserted furniture (including sinks), floral wallpaper, Axminster carpet, lighting, and a faux fireplace into the gallery, observing at the time that 'I was very aware I was given this strange agency over other people's work … to construct an environment they never imagined their work would exist in'.[1] This exhibition led to the collaboration with Straka, where she created installations and provided objects to situate Straka's paintings within faux interiors reflecting both artists' interest in horror films, artifice, and staging.

Both projects reconstructed domestic space by drawing on Hartley-Skudder's extensive collection of source material to collage retro interior design, furniture, colour, texture, surfaces, and finishings. Both exhibitions also played with new processes that weight her installations as a site for exchange – particularly when creating environments for art historical and contemporary works, which bring their own contexts and host of associations. In these earlier exhibitions, Hartley-Skudder left a space in each scene – inviting the gallery visitor to step onto the imagined bathroom tiles and play the starring role. In *Splash Club*, she extends a different invitation to the viewer by giving them an opportunity, not to step forward into the frame, but to step back and consider the scaffolding of the set.

1. Rebecca Fox, 'Adding Another Dimension', *Otago Daily Times*, 13 February 2020.

Opposite: Emily Hartley Skudder, *Staging Your Comeback* (2020). PVC wall stickers, wall paint, carpet, found hand basins, water pumps and water, pine & aluminium trim, with Kushana Bush, *Us Lucky Observers* (2016), gouache and pencil on paper. Collection of Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Courtesy of the artists. Photography: Emily Hartley-Skudder.

Although physical framing devices like pine moulding, bathroom countertops, and a shower curtain recur throughout the gallery in *Splash Club*, the art historical frame Hartley-Skudder assembles is an equally active component of the project. Using keyword searches – including toilet, bathing, Venus, shell, vanity, dressing, mirror, nude – she combed the online catalogues of the Hocken Library, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, The Suter Art Gallery Te Aratoi o Whakatū, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, National Library of New Zealand Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa, Sarjeant Gallery Te Whare o Rehua Whanganui, and Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki to compile a sample reflecting artistic depictions that belong to two interwoven but diverging genres: *la toilette* and the birth of Venus. In this publication, Chelsea Nichols' excellent contribution offers a perspective on the former, while Talia Smith's superb essay addresses the latter.

Significantly, *Splash Club* does not just introduce bodies through the works of other artists but also in one of Hartley-Skudder's paintings. Her chosen sitter is an articulated 'action figure' modelled on Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* – complete with clamshell, two hairstyles, and multiple hands in different poses. In this work and in *Splash Club* as a whole, Hartley-Skudder questions the distance between the living, breathing, sweating, excreting, 'uncivilised' human body and the cast of consumer products, shiny surfaces, and furniture that populate other paintings. Hartley-Skudder's own reflections on this process are developed in her essay, which closes this publication.

Hartley-Skudder's *Splash Club* becomes a vessel for facsimiles of femininity, body-ownership, and grooming and a site to examine voyeurism. She offers up retro furniture and historical attitudes and asks the visitor to decide which models are fit for purpose. Throughout *Splash Club*, Hartley-Skudder acts decisively with her 'strange agency' and collages uncanniness to critical effect.

SEX, VIOLENCE, AND SPLASHING: A BRIEF ART HISTORY OF *LA TOILETTE*

Chelsea Nichols

Diana, Roman goddess of the hunt, was bathing in a forest spring when she was interrupted by a hunter named Actaeon. Embarrassed at being caught in such a private act, Diana splashed him with water, transforming Actaeon into a stag. His own hunting dogs then ripped him to bloody shreds.[1]

This mythological story became a popular subject in Renaissance art, part of the revival in classical subject matter. However, it is rare to see depictions of what is (arguably) the best part of the story: when a leering, lascivious man gets his comeupance. Instead, it is usually shown from Actaeon's viewpoint, when he stumbles upon the alluring sight of a semi-naked woman. There are no hints of any consequences about to befall the spectator for their naughty gaze.

The term *la toilette* describes the process of washing, dressing, and attending to one's appearance. In art history, the term was originally applied to eighteenth-century French Rococo paintings that depicted aristocracy being washed and dressed by servants in their bedchambers. This was a semi-private ritual often attended by political and social allies, and Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell has argued that the popularity of the genre was not primarily due to its eroticism, but its demonstration of taste, power, and political intrigue.[2] However, the subject of women bathing can be found throughout art history, and the term *la toilette* has been retrospectively applied to everything from ancient Greek statues of Venus to saucy biblical scenes of Bathsheba being admired by King David.[3] Indeed, the history of art is utterly heaving with different versions of these scenes, often fixated on the steamy, voyeuristic fantasies of male artists. History favours the horny.

1. Howard Daniel, *Encyclopaedia of the Themes and Subjects in Painting* (Thames & Hudson, 1971), 15.

2. Over the course of the late seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries, the term *la toilette* evolved from an object (a *toile*, the cloth used as a protective wrapper) to a set of objects (a *service de toilette*, or vanity set) to a semi-public ritual. It was only later in the nineteenth century that the word *toilette* came to denote a room with washing facilities. Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, 'Dressing to Impress: The Morning Toilette and the Fabrication of Femininity', in *Paris: Life and Luxury in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Charissa Bremer David (Getty Museum, 2011), 53.

3. Although this essay mainly focuses on Western European examples of *la toilette*, it should be noted that this subject can be found across the art of many cultures and time periods, such as the Edo-period Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock prints included in the *Splash Club* selection. However, these works have an entirely different cultural and historical context that goes beyond the scope and expertise of this essay.

The artworks selected by Emily Hartley-Skudder for *Splash Club* demonstrate the sheer ubiquity of this art historical trope across time. However, while eroticism undoubtedly plays a major role in this genre, her selection opens a more multi-dimensional context for considering the voyeuristic gaze. A startling 1983 to 1984 lithograph by French painter Jean Rustin, for instance, depicts a nude woman opening the folds of her labia to reveal her vagina staring back at the viewer like an unblinking eye. The viewer's intrusion into a woman's private inner realms is not rewarded with gentle eroticism; rather, the gaze is returned with a frank and penetrating stare that confronts the viewer with their own voyeurism. Likewise, in Heather Straka's painting *Repeat after me…Amanda #3* (2008), a beautiful model delivers a withering stare over her shoulder. Standing nude in front of stained ceramic tiles reminiscent of a morgue, Straka's subject seems to threaten the viewer with the same fate that befell Actaeon.

Within *Splash Club*, these contemporary explorations of the gaze are considered alongside historical artworks depicting the biblical story of Susanna and the Elders. In this scene, a beautiful young woman is spied upon by two respected elders, who try to blackmail her into having sex with them by threatening to report her for adultery – an act punishable by death. In early Christian and medieval art, Susanna was nearly always shown completely clothed in modest attire, representing faith and marital chastity. However, by the fifteenth century, more images of Susanna show her bathing nude, presented as an object of lust for fully clothed men. An opportunity for legitimised voyeurism, the scene condemns the leering men while simultaneously placing the viewer in the same role.[4] The implicit sexual violence in these works is upheld in a 1923 nude by the influential British modernist Eric Gill, whose vile sexual abuse against his underage daughters was revealed after his death.[5] This knowledge casts a deeply disturbing pallor on this work, but it also places it squarely within a much longer tradition of art history with troubling undertones of violence against women.

4. Daniel, *Encyclopaedia*, 217.

5. See Fiona MacCarthy, *Eric Gill* (Faber and Faber, 1989).

Violence in the history of *la toilette* genre, however, is not limited to male artists. On the morning of 10 March 1914, 'Slasher Mary' took a meat cleaver and brutally stabbed a naked woman in the back. The attacker was Mary Richardson, a suffragette and art student who was protesting the arrest of British political activist Emmeline Pankhurst. Richardson's carefully chosen victim was *The Toilet of Venus* (also known as the *Rokeby Venus*), a 1647 to 1651 painting by Diego Velázquez which hung in the National Gallery in London.[6]

After Richardson's arrest for malicious damage, she explained that if people were outraged about an attack on a symbol of physical beauty, they should be equally outraged by the government's attack on women's moral character.[7] She later added that she didn't like 'the way men visitors to the gallery gaped at it all day long'.[8] Journalists of the day described her like a feminist Jack the Ripper, as if she had wounded an actual female body. The real object of her rage was not Venus, however, but the prurient male gaze and all it represents about the treatment of women.

In the decades following Richardson's act of political vandalism, artists continued to tackle the subject of *la toilette* in ways that reflected the rapid social changes taking place for women. Modern works by Kay Anderson and Eileen Mayo, for instance, both focus on the role of sisterhood within feminine grooming rituals. The women in these prints aren't depicted lying around like sexy steamed vegetables. They ready themselves to face the modern world together, like warriors preparing for battle in sensible shoes and a bold lip.

6. Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Seuality* (Routledge, 1992), 34.

7. As Richardson explained to the *London Times* (11 March 1912), 'I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest against the Government destroying Mrs Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history. Justice is an element of beauty as much as colour and outline on canvas.' Richardson quoted in Nead, *Female Nude*, 35.

8. Nead, *Female Nude*, 37.

That is not to say that sexiness of the subject was ignored by twentieth century artists. A linocut by Dudley Holland captures a sense of erotic fascination with the modern woman, as she fastens her stocking, beatified in a halo of white light. Art historian Elise Goodman-Soellner traces this tradition of *la toilette* to romantic poetry of the Renaissance, which celebrates a lady's grace as she dresses after a night of lovemaking. As she describes, a central theme in these poems is 'the lover's hyperbolic praise of his mistress's charms and his fascination with her personal effects, which implement and heighten her beauty'.[9]

Le Lever, Le Bas (c. 1880) by French Impressionist Edgar Degas likewise depicts a woman pulling on a stocking, but to very different effect. Stripped of any hint of romantic idealisation, this work belongs to a series of monotypes Degas made in Paris brothels which broke with conventions of the academic nude, showing women with aging and swollen bodies, drooping breasts, and mounds of dark pubic hair.[10] One famous example in the series even shows a prostitute itching her ass. Degas' brothel scenes privilege the animalistic erotic appeal of imperfect, messy, real bodies of women over the untouchable poetic beauty of goddesses.[11]

9. Elise Goodman-Soellner, 'Poetic Interpretations of the "Lady at Her Toilette" Theme in Sixteenth-Century Painting', *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1983): 426–42, https://doi.org/10.2307/2540576.

10. Benedict Nicolson, 'Degas Monotypes', *The Burlington Magazine* 100, no. 662 (May 1958): 172.

11. Hollis Clayson, *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era* (J. Paul Getty Trust, 2003), 35, 51.

Although bodies themselves are usually absent in Hartley-Skudder's work, it is these same messy, flawed bodies that are evoked by her paintings. Drawing heavily on the coded visual language of femininity that has been shaped in part by *la toilette*, her candy-coloured beauty tools, glossy soaps, and luxurious packaging speak to a promise of perfect beauty that is marketed exclusively and aggressively to imperfect creatures. In the context of these historical artworks, these objects operate as the tools wielded by women to help them navigate the dizzying multiplicity of gazes that the genre engenders. Much like Diana and Actaeon, Hartley-Skudder creates space for the ladies of *la toilette* to splash back.

THE VENUS EFFECT

Talia Smith

In a small high school classroom in Ngāmotu New Plymouth, I sat in my art history class as a Year 12 student staring at Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* while my teacher Mrs Hall spoke of Renaissance painting. It was, of course, a small reproduction in the pages of my textbook, but the experience of seeing it for the first time is seared into my memory.

The goddess Venus emerging from the ocean atop a scallop shell.

The hairless goddess inspiring Gillette's Venus, a razor brand.

She's a Bond girl.

She dances a jig in a Monty Python sketch.

She's a cover girl for the New Yorker *magazine.*

And there are of course photographic references from David LaChapelle's Rebirth of Venus *(2009) to Beyonce's pregnancy shoot by Awol Erikzu.*

It seems that the image of Venus on her shell has long been a fixture in all of our memories.

In Roman mythology, the goddess Venus represented love, fertility, desire, and beauty. In Botticelli's painting, she is arriving upon her shell freshly born as a fully grown adult, demurely covering her nudity and looking serenely upon the shore. It is no wonder she's left quite the impression.

Just as Venus became a representation of fertility and beauty, so too has the shell she is standing upon. Another metaphorical device in the painting, shells are also considered to be symbols of fertility, birth, and love. The clam shell in particular was a symbol of the divine conception – in the background of different Renaissance paintings of the Virgin Mary there will be an architectural feature that reflects the shape of the shell, often framing Mary herself in some way.

The symbol of a scallop shell or *viera* can also be found as guide markers along the famous Camino de Santiago pilgrimage. One of the first souvenirs, merchants would gather shells from the Galician sea to sell to pilgrims as proof of their long journey. As in the symbology related to Venus, it's said to represent a kind of rebirth or resurrection upon completion of their pilgrimage.

It is interesting, then, to think that shells are essentially the remnant of a creature; their exoskeleton floating in the ocean for someone to find and put upon their mantle or make into a necklace. For an item valued so much for its purity and fertility, I wonder if the same weight was placed upon the opposite: that with life, naturally comes death.

Painter Georgia O'Keeffe was a collector of shells and bones – she adorned her home with them and slowly they made their way into her paintings. Although heavily debated, and denied by the artist herself, for me there is an underlying erotic energy to her seashell paintings. In *Tan Clam Shell with Seaweed* (1926), a clam shell takes up most of the canvas, its hinge painted in a creamy white which then bleeds into a soft tan that reaches to the shell's lip. The curve of the shell itself and the contrast between the creamy white and tan remind me of a sun-marked breast; the nipple has been covered by a swimsuit so remains untanned while the rest tans in the sun.

There is also *Slightly Open Clam Shell* (1926), which is a large vertical canvas showing the ventral view of a clam shell that is slightly opened. With undulating tones of white, grey, and tan, and a pearl-like darkened spot near the higher point of the shell, it's hard not to see the shape of a vulva. My point is not that O'Keeffe's paintings are erotica; rather, that the object of the shell has an interesting dynamic as a symbol of purity, sex, and even death.

The shell has become synonymous with the Pacific; we are a collection of island nations sustained by the ocean that houses such variations of shells. Culturally, shellfish have been used for food, and shells as decoration, or for ceremony. Yet perhaps the shell is also synonymous with the Pacific because of the history of purity/femininity that it represents. Pre-colonisation, the Pacific was viewed through the lens of exotic/erotic other or the dusky maiden trope; the purity held within was mysterious and secretive, untouched by the Western world. Post-colonisation, purity had morphed into the Christian ideal with Western religion taking centre stage; the virginal Pacific woman who devoted her life to god. The shell is both pure and impure depending on its context.

This exploration has begun to reveal itself in my recent photographic practice. I create still life photographs featuring a lot of different objects that I have collected from second-hand stores, such as a homemade coconut bra, a hula girl doll, and a Rarotonga snow globe with an underwater coral reef scene. I also collect any and all shell-related trinkets: the real object, shell-shaped vases, jewellery, etc. Sometimes, in the resulting photographs, my hand or arm appears, a literal representation of self. I am often holding a shell-shaped object as if the shell is me or I am the shell. In a recent series, I have removed my figure and instead put shells in place – all sizes and shapes. Perhaps the shell says it all as it sits within my images alongside brightly coloured plastic objects that have words like RAROTONGA emblazoned on them, or it accompanies a homemade lei that has long since died.

Yuki Kihara and Louisa Afoa are two artists who have explored the shell and Botticelli's Venus from the perspective of a pacific person. Kihara's *Birth of Venus (after Botticelli)* (2017/20) includes an image from a museum anthropological archive, collaged directly on top of the Venus from the original painting. There has been no attempt to seamlessly blend the two – rather, it is direct in its message. The myth of Venus is just a myth after all, whereas the strength and beauty of Pasifika woman is no myth.

The other exploration is from artist Louisa Afoa. I started this meandering with Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and it seems fitting to end it by talking about Louisa's *Blue Clam* (2018). In this photograph, Louisa is posed in a concrete suburban backyard, complete with washing line, tea towels, and other items. The day is overcast. The shell she stands in is not real but plastic, mass produced here in Aotearoa. A blue tarpaulin underneath it doubles as the ocean. She wears a baby-pink singlet and ruby-red underwear, her hands covering her body. There are no deities blowing wind through her hair nor someone waiting with a robe to cover her.

She is *The Birth of Venus (Papakura to Torbay)*.

It is a stunning assertion that beauty has many forms. Louisa is a Samoan plus-size woman. This portrait is a humorous and powerful act of defiance to the dominance of Western beauty, class, and racial ideals. She is as beautiful or erotic or feminine or pure as any other person before or after. The image is truth and it is refreshing.

From Botticelli to O'Keeffe to me to Louisa, perhaps sometimes it's that the representation of a shell is just as multifaceted as our own experiences. Sometimes it is a white goddess emerging from the ocean, sometimes it is a shell-shaped object in a still-life among kitsch, and sometimes it is a blue plastic shell-shaped pool in a concrete backyard in Papakura.

SHE IS ALMOST CONTINUALLY ACCOMPANIED BY HER OWN IMAGE OF HERSELF

Emily Hartley-Skudder

Opposite: Emily Hartley-Skudder, detail of *Heather Refresher* (2021). Oil on linen, PVC foam wall sticker, aluminium trim, 820 x 600 x 150 mm. Courtesy of the artist and Jonathan Smart Gallery.

Many of the objects that have crept into my studio over the years are suggestive of bodies: things like impractical breast pumps, colourful douching devices, snake-oil beauty tools, and *sinks*. But, for a practice fixated on the rituals surrounding cleanliness and the tools and environments our bodies interact with, there is a noted absence in the depiction of these bodies in my work.

I'm not quite sure where this avoidance of the figure began – I didn't really like human dolls as a child, but I *loved* their houses and accessories. I gravitated towards Sylvanian families; somehow mini anthropomorphic woodland animals were easier to project onto. They were safer.

In art class at high school, I was troubled when they asked us to draw self-portraits. I sneakily got my best friend to do mine. People and faces are *complicated*, in more ways than one. Maybe if I can't do something perfectly, I'm afraid to even try. There is an underlying discomfort there – I don't like the lack of control.

Splash Club is my opportunity to engage with the human figure, which I have so actively avoided, by recruiting existing artworks whose themes converge with my own. Taking a cue from collector extraordinaire, artist Patrick Pound, who said in an interview that 'to collect is to gather your thoughts through things',[1] I approached this as an extension of my own process, which hinges on the somewhat obsessive searching and collecting of found objects and materials. I looked online through public gallery collections for depictions of the intersecting art historical genres *la toilette* and the *birth of Venus*.

La toilette reveals art history's voyeuristic preoccupation with women cleaning themselves. I'd suggest the subtext of this trope reinforces the notion that a woman's body is perpetually unclean and in need of constant management. *Out, damned spot*. Ideas around cleanliness and hygiene are steeped in gendered, class, and racial implications. Luckily, we have today's massive beauty, wellness, and feminine hygiene industries – *for that feminine itch*.[2]

The figures at their toilette often look away, while Venus strikes a pose, 'offering up her femininity as the surveyed'.[3] Birthed from the sea foam as a fully grown woman, she is aware of her viewer. There are parallels to Barbie, one of the first grown-up woman dolls. They are icons of 'womanhood', whether you like it or not. As Catherine McCormack writes in *Woman in the Picture*, it is Venus 'whose body is something of a battleground on which discussions of shame, desire, race and sex play out'.[4] *I'm your fire, your desire.*[5]

1. Interview with Serena Bentley, *Christchurch Art Gallery Bulletin*, 1 September 2015.

2. A slogan seen on a feminine hygiene product at Walgreens in the USA, 2015.

3. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin Books, 1972), 55.

4. Catherine McCormack, *Women in the Picture: Women, Art and the Power of Looking* (Icon Books, 2021), 21.

5. Lyrics originally from Shocking Blue's song 'Venus' (1968), then used in Gillette Venus TV commercials

Opposite: Judy Darragh (1957–), *Birth of Barbie* (1992). Mixed media, 1000 x 875 x 195 mm. Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 55-1992, purchased with funds from the Dunedin Public Art Gallery Society, 1992. Courtesy of the artist.

Scrolling through the multitude of depictions of naked women and girls made by different artists across hundreds of years, I kept thinking back to John Berger's words on page 46 of his classic 1972 text, *Ways of Seeing*:

> A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.
>
> And so she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman.
>
> She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because of how she appears to others. … Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another.

Berger was right – I often envision myself as seen by others. To feel comfortable, I like to experience a sense of control of my appearance before I leave the house. The noun 'toilette' (feminine in French), refers to the act of washing, grooming, and getting ready; it also describes an elegant outfit. In the Collins Beginner's French–English Dictionary, an example of the word used in a sentence is helpfully provided: *Elle passe des heures à sa toilette* (She spends hours getting ready).[6] Ha. I have been known to spend a long time getting ready, especially as a teenager. What a cliché. I struggle with perfectionism, which is apparently 'accompanied by critical self-evaluations and concerns regarding others' evaluations'.[7] I think the time spent at my toilette dampens my anxiety and helps me feel prepared to face the world; an illusion of being in control of how I will be perceived.

Cleanliness and beauty routines offer a semblance of control, but they are also an ideology used to control us and our 'unruly' bodies. Renee Engeln, in her 2017 book about the cultural obsession with women's appearance, *Beauty Sick*, writes, 'we've gone from a culture that reminds you that your body is being looked at to you being the most consistent surveyor of your own body'.[8] *A woman must continually watch herself.*

6. Available at https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/french-english/toilette.

7. Wikipedia, s.v. 'Perfectionism (psychology)', last modified 4 February 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perfectionism_(psychology).

8. Renee Engeln, *Beauty Sick* (HarperCollins, 2017).

This inbuilt self-surveillance can have me reaching for a magnification mirror, compelled to zoom into my pores. I pluck and squeeze and scrub. My anxiety levels rise if I can't find my tweezers. I pick at my face. Attacking blackheads is the closest I'll get to mindfulness. Concealer hides my crimes. I find brushing my hair self-soothing; I get agitated if it becomes knotty. *Moisturizing Is the Answer / Mositurizing Is the Answer / Moisturizing Is the Answer.*[10]

Vanessa Mei Crofskey's bravely confessional 2019 essay on compulsive grooming, beauty, and survival, 'Picking at the Surface', gives me solace:

> Look in the mirror to find the apocalypse. There isn't enough room in our culture to metabolise shame, so we've turned to skincare to cure our topographical feelings. …
>
> Young women who care about their skin are seen as self-obsessed and narcissistic, but the world is complex these days. We're not sure when exactly the rug is going to be pulled out from underneath us, when the tsunami is going to wash over us, or we're going to run into the kinds of trouble we can't just loofah our way out of. Our bodies are the first places we learn how to cope and the first places we know how to assert, to puncture and to organise. You see tweezers, but I see survival.[11]

10. Artist Sylvie Fleury's 1996 work repeats the mantra of its title, *Moisturizing Is the Answer*, three times in neon lights.

11. Vanessa Mei Crofskey, 'Picking at the Surface', *The Pantograph Punch*, 15 February 2019.

Finally going against my childhood preferences, I discovered a 'human' doll online which I just had to have. It was a mini poseable replica of Botticelli's Venus, made in Japan as part of a collectible action figure series. With the exception of the doll in Judy Darragh's *Birth of Barbie*, this was the closest thing to a Barbie Venus, except with more ball-and-socket joints. She had to fit into *Splash Club* somewhere. I set up a photoshoot the same as I would with my usual still life subjects, but I couldn't help looking at this moulded piece of plastic differently. As I adjusted the lightsource in different shots, I found myself noticing which lighting was more 'flattering' across the doll's stomach.

I knew I should make one of these images into a painting, but was it too obvious? Or was I just scared as I inched closer to depicting a body? Arriving at a kind of middle ground, I cropped out her face and focused on her hand, which famously lingers in front of the frozen lock of hair covering her crotch. I spent a good couple of hours mixing up a 'flesh' tone, but hated how it looked. Prompted by the cut-out of Heather Straka's painting *Repeat After Me…Amanda #3*, stuck to the studio wall with deadened-green skin, I changed the colour to a grey-purple in an attempt to 'trick' myself. She was now a kind of android, with no need to stare or squeeze or pluck. I got there in the end.