

Skin has a tendency to accept and reject certain environments, climates, and weathers. It begins plump and soft, but, with age, it starts to stretch and wrinkle. Skin absorbs, regulates, senses and conceals. It peels and protects. It is a sheet, a mask, a membrane, a living threshold. Most importantly, our skin is a porous border between inside and outside, at once absorbing and shielding substances that come into contact with our bodies. The 'acid mantle' is just that: a fine layer of invisible film on the surface of our skin that functions as a defensive barrier to bacteria and other viral substances attempting to penetrate our skin. It bears witness to the way we move in and through the world around us.

*Acid Mantle* by JD Reforma showcases a new series of experimental paintings and installations that expand upon the artist's interest in the rituals and economies of beauty. For these works, Reforma has selected organic materials commonly found in skincare products and ingredients, specifically papaya soap, coconuts, and silk. Broken down into fine pigment, powder, and fibre, these reconstituted materials visually articulate a choreography of cumulative artistic gestures: grating and melting soap, felting coconut husk, cutting into silk. The accretion of these processes materialise into paintings, textiles, and carpets, that remain marked by durational gestures of application. Here, Reforma turns a critical eye toward the many ways in which these symbolic processes and materials are incredibly culturally and economically loaded.

The usage of skin-whitening most notably in Southeast-Asian cultures such as the Philippines – where possessing a lighter complexion (amongst other European physical features) is both desirable and indicative of higher social status, wealth and purity. At any given sari sari store, street vendor or supermarket in the Philippines, you will find several bars of the highly distinctive and saturated orange hued papaya soap for sale. For *Intramuros*, Reforma has melted and massaged skin-whitening papaya soap into the surfaces of Belgian linen canvases.

The title 'Intramuros' (literally translating to 'within the walls') refers to the historic walled city in present-day Metro Manila established as a site of political and military power under Spanish colonial rule. Across this suite of paintings, thick and faint applications of soap are layered upon one another. Some surfaces are saturated in excess of the canvas while others remain much more contained, framed by a lined border of soapy walls. Taken together, *Intramuros* simultaneously speak to the political function of borders as vital to the development of the colonial nation-state and more broadly, to how one's skin is tethered to identity, national origin(s) and desirability.

The fine and irregular fragmented remnants collected from the process of creating *Intramuros* culminates in the large-scale floor installation *Mantle*. Positioned in the central core of the exhibition, the vibrant orange detritus of skin-whitening soap is laid out into a clean square carpet that coats the gallery floor. Soap has been crushed and ground to gravel and dust. Referring to the title itself, the word 'mantle' could signal toward the mantle layers that encompass the Earth's crust, or, on a more domestic scale, the architectural centre of the home. The waxy residue of *Mantle* clings to the smoothness of the polished floor below it as if it were a second skin; piling on the ground with a visually enticing porosity which makes us aware of our own body in our encounter with the work.

Continuing this process of reconstituting materials, Reforma reuses the remnants of coconut husk fibres which were first used as part of earlier works made for the exhibition *The Fullness of Time*, 2019, at Verge Gallery, University of Sydney. These textile works, titled *Husk*, are constructed by felting rough, brown coconut husk fibres in several layers.

For Reforma, this required stripping the fibres from the outer shell of the coconut by hand and then moistening and rolling - a process that binds the fibres and ultimately forms a flat textural layer. The disembodied fiber of the coconut's 'skin' appears both painterly and sculptural. These entangled layers index the colonial routes of coconut trade as well as the 'everyday' usages of the coconut itself (in all its forms): the whole coconut palm, the seed, the fruit, a flavour, a scent. It is popular for its versatility of uses, which range from food to cosmetics. It is the stuff of oil, milk, charcoal, soap, furniture, and handicrafts. The root can be used to make dyes, the trunk as timber for houses and boats, the coir binds ropes, rugs, and sacks. It is a material, a food, a currency, and a tool, all at once.

The Philippines is the world's second-largest producer of coconuts, and one of the country's largest economic exports. Notably in 1978, the former First Lady of the Philippines, Imelda Marcos (known for her lavishly materialistic lifestyle) ordered the grandiose construction of the 'Coconut Palace' - an opulent government building made entirely of coconuts in the city of Pasay. Though the coconut here is symbolic of wealth and agricultural production in the context of a nation under the stronghold of a dictatorship, the material of the coconut is by no means endemic to the Philippines. Coco is a large-scale circular, white silk wall-hanging cut by Reforma to resemble disposable sheet masks found in skincare. Silk is prominent for its usage in luxury bedding, clothing, and hair accessories, as it is said to reduce wrinkles and hair breakages. In this enlarged sheet mask, the usual eye, nose and mouth openings are replaced by three circular holes cut to resemble the germination pores of the coconut.

The sheet mask takes on a body of its own in its stature, resembling the figure of coco - a bogeyman in Spanish folklore. Rather than the effect of the sheet mask being rejuvenating and revitalising, it is now made to 'haunt' the exhibition space.

Indeed, there is a 'haunting' quality to Acid Mantle in the way that Reforma's series of works remain disembodied and fleshed out - both conceptually and physically - in its abiding interest in the economies of beauty and its leaky borders. The exhibition re-materialises as both the residue of previous works and expands upon them, regenerating as a new and thickened skin. And, like skin, reveals itself to be defensive and vulnerable, yet always resilient.

by June Miskell