

Domestic Subversion

STORY BY
Elizabeth Lopeman

Laura Splan disturbs our notions of beauty and femininity by crafting traditionally feminine objects out of unpredictable materials. For her series *Trousseau*, the Brooklyn-based artist uses cosmetic facial peel in lieu of fabric to craft women's gloves, fans and negligees. The material, a plastic-based gel that dries on the skin before being peeled off, retains impressions of hairs and pores and gives the impression of shed epithelial tissue. "There is at once beauty in its fragility and repulsion in its corporeal source," says Splan. After the initial construction the pieces are machine-embroidered—a process she says took "a lot of trial and error"—with delicate representations of chemical and anatomical structures. Serotonin, a neurotransmitter for functions of sex, sleep and appetite, appears on a negligee; retinal rods and cones on a fan; and naso-lacrimal glands and ducts on a handkerchief.

While her materials change, all of the work has a relationship to the body and most of it has a foundation in textiles. This winter five of Splan's virus-shaped doilies are being exhibited in a group show at the Jönköping County Museum in Jönköping, Sweden. Though historically doilies are handcrafted, Splan likes the idea of making them with a computer-programmed embroidery machine as a response to postmodern life. "Here the maker is sitting by the glow of the computer screen instead of by the light of the fireplace. It's a 21st-century process for our 21st-century domestic landscape," she says. Like viruses, doilies can and have been passed from one generation to the next. They are consistent with Splan's interest in what she calls "domestication of the visceral," or a heightened awareness of the microbial world in our homes as we've become accustomed to thoughts of bioterrorism, health epidemics and antibacterial products. Our ideas about traditionally handcrafted domestic objects are subverted by the use of materials with a direct connection to the body. The work examines "how

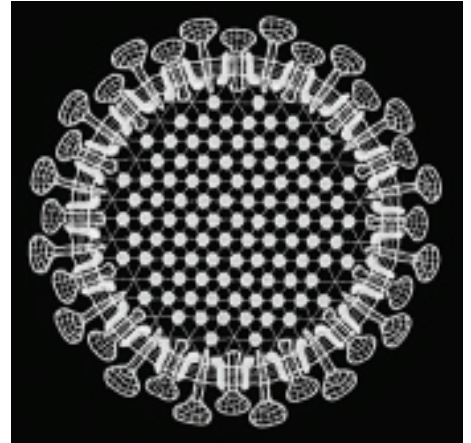
the cultural landscape defines and prescribes our gender, sexuality and sense of worth," says Splan. It also suggests that those cultural prescriptions come with a cost to the body, which makes admiring the beautiful aesthetic of the objects feel ironic and, at times, uncomfortable.

Perhaps the most evocative material in Splan's quiver is her own blood, a perfect medium for toying with our perceptions of what is beautiful and what is revolting. "The process sort of reconnects the somatic experience with the psychological or neurological," she explains. All of the drawings done with blood are from a fine-tip pen, so the lines are like delicate sepia threads. In the first series of drawings rendered with blood, called *Thought Patterns*, are images of pyramidal cells and dendrites, but the drawings look like lacey foliage. Splan says using blood gives her a "sense of aesthetic freedom" because of its reflexive relationship to the content, while the fine lines allow for a more formal approach to drawing. Her newest drawings play with the formal minimalist square with grid lines that give the appearance of fine muslin. "There was something very methodical and meditative about the process that reminded me of knitting and needlework. So I suppose it was somewhat logical that I would combine the idea of handmade textiles with blood-drawing work," says Splan.

"We've become the material," said curator Steven Skov Holt in a lecture in which he discussed Splan's pieces in his 2008 show called "Manufactured" at the Museum of Contemporary Craft in Portland, OR. By using the body as material for textile-based craft, historically thought of as women's work, Splan shifts the conversation about her work in a way that harkens back to Miriam Schapiro's *femme* pieces. But in its nearly painful intimacy with the body, Splan's work has a fresh and universal application: all viewers have their own bodies to contemplate. "It's an experiment of sorts to see if the biological can transcend the cultural and vice versa," says Splan, "so using actual blood or a real beauty product may be the only empirically sound method of answering these questions."

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Facial peel, a plastic-based gel that dries on the skin before being peeled off, retains impressions of hairs and pores and gives the impression of shed epithelial tissue.



Opposite:
Doilies series, 2004,
SARS, HIV, Herpes, free-
standing computerized
machine-embroidered
lace on velvet, each 16¾
x 16¾ in. framed.

Top Left:
Gloves, 2008, cosmetic
facial peel, mixed media,
1 x 12 x 3½ in. each.

Top Right:
Trousseau series, 2008,
detail of hope chest, ma-
chine and hand embroi-
dery with thread on cos-
metic facial peel, mixed
media, dimensions
variable.

Left:
Thought Patterns series,
2003, blood on water-
color paper, 12 x 12 in.