

Hedwig Brouckaert

Peel (America)



December 19, 2023 - February 20, 2024

Project: ARTspace 99 Madison Avenue, New York

With the support of Cafe Royal Cultural Foundation

Hedwig Brouckaert / Peel /

Examining the Layers

Peel (America), a new series by Hedwig Brouckaert embodies a significant evolution of her practice that integrates life-defining experiences. The title suggests removing a protective coating which is integral to the artist's physical process and emotional journey of making the work.

Brouckaert faces the messiness of life and death with optimism during a time when the world seems unmoored. The series evolved during the pandemic, a moment of extreme sensitivity to our bodies. On a recent studio visit, she observed how fear of touch induced in those early days made her even more aware of skin. "Physically the skin is a barrier between ourselves and the world, but I'm fascinated by skin as the organ that gives us the capability to gather information and to feel; and as a metaphor to expand our awareness beyond our physical borders."¹

The bas-reliefs are comprised of grids of pale green ceramic tiles festooned with flowing forms built up from layers of magazine clippings of imagery of skin. Upon closer inspection, some shapes suggest baroque floral carved reliefs while others conjure amorphous body parts. Brouckaert has developed several methods to make these elements. Some are constructed from magazine pages depicting skin from bodies that have been glued in many layers, then meticulously incised to create forms that leave trace lines of the original photographs. The rich,



Peel (I) 2022
paper and acrylic on porcelain tiles
12 ¾ x 8 ½ x ¼" / 32 x 21,5 x 0,50 cm



Peel (II) 2022
paper, acrylic paint and fabric on white marble
5 ⅞ x 5 ⅞ x ¾" / 15 x 15 x 2 cm



Peel (NY I) 2023
paper on ceramic tiles
9 ft x 5 ft x 4 inches / 270 x 150 x 10 cm



Installation at Pen+Brush, NY
Photography by Etienne Frossard

red-brown forms are sculpted from several shades of blended paper pulp. The action of carving into the layers of newsprint, while building up other forms with paper pulp, was her attempt to remove the slickness of the source material, to go deeper, peel open, and create a new surface that feels more 'embodied and alive' to the artist.

As she turns the body inside out, the contrast of conventional beauty and the grotesque has always been an undercurrent in Brouckaert's work. Since 2005 she has been working with magazines and merchandise catalogs to critique consumer culture, capitalism, wastefulness of society, and stereotypes of beauty and sexiness. Her process is meticulous and repetitive, ultimately obscuring and undermining the original image. In earlier work, she responded intuitively to the transformation of her own body and the experience of her surroundings. For instance, the drawings comprising the series *Uprooted* (2011)², which were made while in residence at The Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center Residency Program in Italy, show the subtle influence of the surrounding landscape and her choice to refer to the growing life in her own pregnant body. In *A knot, a tangle, a blemish in the eternal smoothness* (2014), a site-specific installation at the Kentler International Drawing Space in Brooklyn, she incorporated her hair which was falling out - after giving birth to her daughter - to create paper pieces of imagery from hair product ads sewn together with her actual hair.

The pale green color and glossy surface of the tiles provide a foil for the wide array of skin colors that are built up and incised. For Brouckaert, the tile color is cool and calming, a tint of green found in old hospitals in Belgium. The way she leaves some of the paper on the tile surface was inspired by the ubiquitous griminess of subway tiles that form an interior skin of the New York City's transportation system, which, like skin, is a crucial organ for the functioning of



Peel (Flowering) - detail 2023
paper on ceramic tiles
77 ½" x 5' x 1" / 197 x 152,5 x 2,5 cm

the city. Tiles also play an important role in her family history in Belgium. Her late younger sister, Elfriede, worked with broken tiles all her life to create mosaics.³ Over the years, their late father collected a mass of tiles for her in the basement, which has become the source of tiles used by the artist to honor both of them. Confronting complex loss led to the series *Illusive Flesh of Light*⁴, *Joy Rides*⁵, and now *Peel (America)*. Brouckaert noted: "Grappling with loss opened up pathways in me to appreciate life more, to find more sensuality and joy working with materials, and that informed my use of patterns that are playful, and expand outwards from a center."⁶

The installation *Peel (America)* sets up a double-negative spatial relationship between the wall and the tile units, and the tile with the built-up imagery. The imagination is stimulated and compelled to fill in the missing patterns, or observe sections that were constructed together, flipped, and reappear to expand from the center. By engaging the viewer in this play, the project holds space for optimism and the incongruities and inconsistencies of life.

Jennifer McGregor, December 4, 2023.



Peel (NY II) 2023

paper and acrylic paint on ceramic tiles

Part I: 6' x 5' x 2" / 183 x 152 x 5 cm

Part II: 8' x 8' x 2" / 244 x 244 x 5 cm

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1. Studio visit with the author, November 8, 2023.
 2. Exhibited in *Re/pro/ducing Complexity* curated by Peter Lodermeier (with Nelleke Beltjens & Jorinde Voigt) at Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Deurle, Belgium, in 2011.
 3. *To Pieces* with work by Elfriede and Hedwig Brouckaert was exhibited at Jan Dhaese Gallery, Ghent, Belgium in 2017.
 4. Exhibited at *Crossing the Dateline*, Bangkok Art and Culture Center, Bangkok, Thailand, in 2017.
 5. *Joy Rides* was exhibited at Jan Dhaese Gallery, Ghent, Belgium in 2019.
 6. Studio visit with the author on November 8, 2023.



Hedwig Brouckaert is a Belgian-American artist living in NYC and in Ghent, Belgium. She has exhibited her work internationally, including at the Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens (BE), the Bangkok Art and Culture Center (TH), VOLTA NY with Jan Dhaese Gallery, and Pallazzo Vendramin Costa (Venice IT). Brouckaert has been awarded fellowships including AIM of the Bronx Museum of the Arts, NYFA IAP, Rockefeller Foundation – Bellagio (IT), Liguria Study Center Bogliasco (IT), Cité Internationale des Arts Paris, Hafnarborg Museum of Iceland, Yaddo (NY), and many grants from the Flemish Government in Belgium. She received an MFA from the University of California, Davis, after completing a Masters in sculpture at the Sint-Lukas Hogeschool and a Postgraduate at the Higher Institute for Fine Arts in Belgium.

Jennifer McGregor is an arts planner and curator who collaborates with organizations to activate public spaces and create opportunities for artists to engage diverse audiences. Previously she conceived arts and cultural programming at Wave Hill, Bronx, NY, and she was the first director of New York City's Percent for Art Program from 1983-1990. She received her BA in Art from Brown University and studied art history at The Graduate School and University Center/CUNY.

Front Cover: *Peel (Flowering)* 2023
paper on ceramic tiles
77 ½" x 5' x 1" / 197 x 152,5 x 2,5 cm

Back Cover: *Peel (NY II)* 2023
paper and acrylic paint on ceramic tiles
Part I: 6' x 5' x 2" / 183 x 152 x 5 cm
Part II: 8' x 8' x 2" / 244 x 244 x 5 cm

Photography by Michael Hnatov

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