

Calvin Marcus – *Skin Paintings*

Introduction

The delicate surfaces of Calvin Marcus’s *Skin Paintings* reflect and refract the natural light that floods the Museum Dhont-Dhaenens’s unique glass architecture, creating a subtle and shifting dialogue between painting, viewer, and space. *Skin Paintings* presents oils on linen that depict magnified renderings of the artist’s own flesh, shown alongside bronze and ceramic. Inspired by the artifacts of early human civilizations, this body of work extends Marcus’s investigation of media, process, and the object within the familiar.

These are paintings about the body—not in terms of its associations with subjecthood or identity, but through the lens of abstraction. The artist hones in on the textures, colors, blemishes, and fragility of the epidermis. Skin becomes a metaphor for perception, for memory, and for the cycles of life and decay.

As the artist notes, “The horror of examining skin this closely is the threat of its puncture.” Look at anything long enough and it will become pure surface, devoid of referent; hyperrealism bends back around to the uncanny.

Skin Paintings is the artist’s first solo presentation at a European institution.

The Artist

Calvin Marcus (b. 1988, San Francisco) lives in Los Angeles. He works serially, creating stylistically distinct bodies of work that probe unsettling subjects—both psychic and social—across a wide range of media. For each new suite, he develops unique material processes, often allowing the conceptual idea to dictate the form. As he puts it: “I feel no loyalty to one particular medium, I let the idea dictate the form and go from there.”

He often works in carefully conceived series, developing a focused body of work over several years. Each series becomes its own world, with its own visual language and conceptual concerns. For Marcus, repetition is not about uniformity, but about deepening a set of questions—returning to a form or surface again and again to see what more it can reveal.

In earlier series, Marcus explored surreal, psychological self-portraits — including his well-known green head paintings, where identical ghostly faces hover against flat, monochrome backgrounds. In another, he staged everyday objects—like dentist chairs or fish—in bizarre, isolated compositions that blur the lines between humor, absurdity, and melancholy.

Marcus’s work has been exhibited widely, with solo and two-person exhibitions at Karma, New York ⁽²⁰²⁴⁾; House of Gaga, Guadalajara, Mexico ^(2024, with Laura Owens); Clearing, Los Angeles, Brussels and New York ^(2015–2021); David Kordansky, Los Angeles ^(2019, 2016); K11 Musea, Hong Kong ⁽²⁰¹⁹⁾; The Power Station, Dallas ⁽²⁰¹⁷⁾; Peep-Hole, Milan ⁽²⁰¹⁵⁾; and Public Fiction, Los Angeles ⁽²⁰¹⁴⁾. In 2019, his work was included in the Whitney Biennial. Recent institutional group exhibitions include Deichtorhallen Hamburg ⁽²⁰²³⁾; Start Museum, Shanghai ⁽²⁰²²⁾; Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn ⁽²⁰²²⁾; Louisiana Museum of Art, Humlebæk ^(2021–2022); and Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago ⁽²⁰²⁰⁾, among others.

His work is held in the permanent collections of the Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo; Musée d’Art Moderne de Paris; K11 Art Foundation; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Skin Paintings

At first glance, the paintings in this exhibition may appear serene, almost minimal. They are luminous, restrained, and precisely composed. But as you step closer, the surfaces begin to reveal their complexity: fine networks of veins, faint bruises, ghostlike sutures, and shifting tones of blue, pink, and green begin to emerge. These are paintings that quietly echo the human body—not through overt representation, but through the suggestion of skin, vulnerability, and transformation.

Marcus made close observations of his own body—particularly the nearly transparent skin on the tops of his feet and the insides of his arms—capturing a spectrum of jaundiced yellows, bruised blues, and mottled pinks. The result is a surface that feels uncannily lifelike, yet abstracted beyond recognition. Devoid of pores or hair, these skin-like fields blur the line between realism and invention, representation and abstraction.

Each work is made through a slow, layered process: alternating coats of white and colored oil paint are applied over linen, then finished with delicate glazes. The result is a surface that doesn’t just reflect light, but seems to hold it within. The skin of each painting feels alive, as if it’s breathing, aging, or healing.

Marcus treats the canvas as a kind of living membrane—something that registers time, touch, and emotion. His visual language draws inspiration from both art history and the body itself: the luminous flesh tones of Rubens ^(1577–1640) and Rembrandt ^(1606–1669), the fractured corporeality of Francis Bacon ^(1909–1992), the emotional immediacy of Brice Marden ^(1938 – 2023), and the layered realism of Jan van Eyck ^(1390 –1441) and Hendrick ter Brugghen ^(1588–1629). Marcus transformed the canvas through countless translucent layers of oil and glaze, slowly building waxy, luminous surfaces veiled in milky whites. This additive process parallels the formation of skin itself: a cycle of regeneration, fragility, and renewal.

His paintings are a pulse, a presence, a quiet tension between fragility and strength. In this way, his work resonates deeply with the physical space of Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, where the play of natural light and the stillness of the architecture create a heightened awareness of the viewer’s own body in space. These are paintings to spend time with—surfaces that don’t just reflect the world, but hold it, absorb it, and transform it into something at once strange and deeply familiar.

A final, crucial element in these works is the frame—a detail that insists on the painting’s status as an “artifact.” The gilded frame is not neutral or merely functional; it actively speaks to the painting’s role as an art object, moving through time and history. This frame was conceived by distilling the visual language of a much thicker, more ornate decorative frame down to just two essential elements. The result retains a sense of embellishment, but feels more contemporary—simultaneously refined and referential. Marcus intentionally designed the frame to look as if it had been selected by someone other than the artist, perhaps for the purpose of home decor. This choice adds a conceptual twist: it invites us to imagine these paintings not only as contemporary artworks, but as domestic heirlooms—strange, luminous objects hanging above a mantle, part of a family legacy.

Sculptures

The works in this installation engage multiple temporalities. Marcus’s hyperrealist formal approach, in his Skin Paintings, to abstraction, as well as the sleek gilded frames, locate these works in a contemporary vernacular. However, in addition to their myriad art historical references, their subject matter—the body—bridges the ancient with the present. Time is dislodged again, however, by Marcus’s treatment of the corporeal, pointing to the body’s ephemerality (mortality): skin’s inherent fragility, the way in which age and wear is uniquely visible on its surface, speaks to an impermanence or sense of something fleeting.

The sculptures’ forms recall vessels from antiquity, such as those used in Ancient Greece for practical and ritualistic purposes. Their structural durability allowed many to survive into the present as relics of another time, signalling a continuity or permanence to a particular material culture. Marcus left sections unpainted on certain sculptures, evoking the patina that indexes an object’s age. The clawfeet on certain sculptures allude, similarly, to another era—one of architectural flourishes such as gargoyles and grotesques, or domestic features such as bathtubs. Their exteriors are unglazed, which link the sculptures once again to another architectural period, specifically to the use of limestone, one of the most ancient construction materials. In contrast, the interiors and lips of certain ceramics are painted turquoise. This gesture creates a sense of temporal ambiguity—the bright hue suggests both newness (not worn or faded) and oxidized metals such as copper and bronze, themselves corroded by time and exposure to natural elements.

Whereas their frames make the Skin Paintings legible as art objects, the sculptures play with the presumed oppositionality between function and the work of art. In dialogue with both the paintings and the museum architecture, the sculptures have a slippery relationship to how an artwork is defined as such. These could be seen to recede into or form part of the existing space—as furnishings such as umbrella stands, or in their evocation of older iterations of the built world.

The exhibition is accompanied by a book edited by Goedele Bartholomeeusen, Damian Lentini, and Calvin Marcus, published by MER and designed by Milk and Cookies. and produced with the support of Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens and Karma gallery.