If you Google "hair" you come up with 38,300,000 entries, all but a fraction of which promote the multi-million dollar hair care industry. As a society, we are obsessed with hair – cutting it, growing it, perming it, coloring it, moussing, shaving, curling and straightening it. Many of our ideas about nature and beauty, gender and sexuality, individuality and conformity converge with symbolic significance around society's attitudes towards hair.

The tradition of using hair in art was prevalent during the Victorian era. The hair of the deceased was often clipped off at the funeral parlor and incorporated into mourning jewelry: necklaces, bracelets and rings. Besides jewelry, mourners would often weave decorative wreaths and complex wall hangings that were used as memorials. This sentimental romanticizing of hair fell out of fashion in the early 1900s. However, during the past decade, there has been a renewed interest among contemporary artists with all manner of bodily experiences. Increasingly, the body has been used not only as the subject in artwork, but as the medium as well. Menstrual blood, nail clippings and skin have all been used to create works that examine the human body in every possible way. And hair is no exception.

The works of Renee Billingslea, Wrenay Gomez Charlton and Lava Thomas use hair and the representation of hair to address issues of race, gender, social status and privilege. Diane Jacobs and Paula Santiago are attracted to hair as a medium because it contains DNA and connotes associations of identity, portraiture and heritage. These artists also pay homage to the traditional uses of hair in art and the sacred ceremonies of past cultures. On the other hand, Rosana Castrillo Diaz, Charles Linder and Lucrecia Troncoso incorporate hair in their artwork because it is something that is discarded; a tangle of hair on the floor becomes an object to draw or a medium for a sculpture or painting. Kerry Vander Meer responds to the sensuous feel of hair and recognizes the inherent identity and "personality" of hair as she uses it as a medium. Whether it is repulsion or fascination, hair elicits an almost physical response. It is this association with the sensory experience that draws Victoria May, Valeska Soares and John Slepian to the use of hair in their works. It is a symbol of the body; our animal self that co-exists with our intellectual, rational and civilized self. Soares and May also keenly incorporate the intimacy and power of possessing someone's hair; the religious and spiritual reference is tied to the physical response.

The twelve artists in *Hair Raising* use hair in a variety of ways to symbolize and explore issues of mortality, fetishism, social heterogeneity and social differences. Others are concerned specifically with hair's physicality and materiality. Many of them incorporate it directly into their art and others depict hair through drawings and photographs. The result is a wide range of work that most certainly will elicit an equally wide range of associations from Rapunzel to repulsion and everything in between.

Renee Billingslea

This large-scale installation is an artifact of Renee Billingslea's research into the anti-miscegenation laws of the United States. These laws were introduced in 1691 with the intent of keeping the white race "pure." After being called a "nigger lover" while carrying her young daughter into her home, Billingslea sought to better understand the nature of

racism and its legacy in this country.

Billingslea uses luggage tags as metaphors for personal, social and historical baggage. The found objects signify the artist's historical findings. In hand stitching the materials together she continues the historical tradition of quilting through which women made political statements and hid codes to guide slaves on the Underground Railroad. Each tag is sewn with a single strand of hair and hangs from yarn spun from hair. For Billingslea, the medium of hair brings a sense of humanity and personal portraiture to her installations.

Wrenay Gomez Charlton

Beauty, childhood, and social mores are themes that are present in Wrenay Gomez Charlton's work. She is most interested in how society's value on beauty influences us throughout our lives.

In *Untitled (Hair Ladder)*, the ladder suggests both a source of rescue and a means of escape. Constructed entirely from hair, the object itself evokes the lush, rope-like braids of Rapunzel, beckoning the viewer to the climb up the rungs. However, the sensuous, thick, dark hair also creates dueling metaphors for entrapment: the entrapment of seduction and the entrapment of gender. While the Rapunzel fairy tale was the genesis for this work, it was after Gomez Charlton read an article about Russian refugee children selling their hair on the internet that she began to think about hair simultaneously as a tool of power and a source of weakness.

Rosana Castrillo Diaz

Rosana Castrillo Diaz is interested in the fine line that separates representation from abstraction. She creates artworks that manage to be both at once. Castrillo Diaz's exquisite graphite drawings explore fragments of visual images derived from recognizable objects such as paper, staples and hair. At first, they appear to be minimalist geometric abstractions. However, upon further observation, one can discern the highly detailed articulation of her mundane subject matter. Her technique is so meticulous that the drawings appear to be the real thing. Castrillo Diaz has instilled an abstract beauty in these isolated swirls of hair that would otherwise elicit disgust.

Blanche Ida Hardy

During the Victorian period (1837 – 1901), the term "fancy work" came to describe both functional and purely aesthetic objects a Victorian woman made or embellished in her free time. From 1850 to 1875, one of the most popular forms of fancy work was the hair wreath.

Hair wreaths were constructed almost entirely of human hair, which was manipulated to resemble a variety of flowers, floral sprigs, and leaves. Although many of these objects were made as memorials (using the hair of a deceased loved one), hair wreaths were also made as keepsakes among living friends and family members. In this instance, the hair is

from the artist's children as well as her mother and father.

The flowers placed together in a horseshoe-shaped wreath represents a common Victorian symbol for good luck displayed with the open ends up in order to "hold the luck inside."

Diane Jacobs

In 1992, as a way of liberating herself from the care of her "rambunctiously curly brown hair," Diane Jacobs shaved her head. She then began to use it in her work. She became focused on saving her hair and rolling it into hairballs. Soon, she started to ask friends to save their hair after it was cut. It was then that she became keenly aware of the value society places on hair and the assumption we make based on someone's hair. According to Jacobs, "A person's hair influences one's cultural and personal identity and can challenge a stereotype or embrace a tradition." In works like *Weigh Station* and *The Grind*, Jacobs directly challenges those stereotypes and the value system that surrounds them.

Charles Linder

Charles Linder finds artistic merit in unorthodox materials used in unusual ways. The *Merken Tiles* were made from Linder's own hair clippings. He has referred to his work as "situational opportunism" where "intention and chance discovery are equally valued." Linder's title is obviously a play on words. *Merken* is a German verb meaning to perceive. However, mercantile in English refers to an economic system of commercialism. In using base materials to create a commodity in the form of an art object and using double entendre in the title of the piece, Linder challenges the viewer to look beyond his minimalist geometric forms to find meaning in the work.

Victoria May

While many people find hair vulgar and repulsive, Victoria May sees it as another kind of fiber, one that happens to be laden with meaning. *Hairshirt* and *Abandon* come from May's past experience as a master seamstress and the maker of custom wedding gowns. May has employed those skills to meticulously craft these delicate blouses from organza and then elaborately embellish them with hair. The precious quality of these garments dissipates with the realization that the "fur" adornment is actually human hair. However, they retain an eerie beauty despite their repulsive quality.

Paula Santiago

Mexican-born Paula Santiago poignantly combines the ancient art of Pre-Columbian cultures and her own modern-day Mexico. In 1992, at the age of 23, Santiago gave up paint and brushes and began making art with her hands, most particularly embroidery, which she

had learned as a child. She soon set aside traditional embroidery threads and floss in favor of human hair – her own, her family members' and her friends'. Santiago sees hair as her thread of unity, her means of joining disparate parts. She finds hair to be enigmatic, protecting the body even though it is dead and dispensable.

In addition to the incorporation of hair, Santiago also used blood – again, her own, her family members' and her friends'. She abandoned cloth as the structural base for her art and turned to wax and rice paper, materials that appear fragile but are strong and resilient. This series of work, which included *Untitled* and *De la serie Quitapesares:2* were included in an exhibition entitled "Moan." The show consisted of an entire room of infant-sized garments contained in glass cases, each made of hair and blood, rice paper and Mexican kitchen cloth. It was a dark and haunting exhibition in which absence was palpable. Instead, a strong spiritual presence imbues the work. Of the series Santiago has said, "I want my work pending. I want the work to move, to suggest the fleetingness of knowledge, of knowing."

John Slepian

For the past five years, John Slepian has created digitally generated photographs, video installations, and interactive computer installations that investigate what it is that makes us feel human—something, according to Slepian, that is becoming harder and harder to delineate in this world of rapidly advancing, and often shifting technologies. The works in this series depict organic forms that are apparently derived from the human body. Though enormously simplified, they exhibit identifiable gestures and behaviors. These virtual objects are clearly fictitious, yet they can inspire empathy, disgust, and fascination. As Slepian explains, "They are intended to elicit an awareness of the disjunctions that can occur between one's emotional and intellectual reactions, and thereby provoke in the viewer a consideration of the process through which we come to identify with the objects of our gaze."

In particular, *Formal Compositions* and *Growth* depict an autonomous virtual hair-growing device. Over the course of the exhibition (the average time period between human haircuts), the piece grows virtual hair of approximately 1.25 inches in length. At the end of the interval, this hair is "shaved" and the process begins again.

Valeska Soares

Valeska Soares' predominant aesthetic combines a minimalist formal vocabulary with a romantic sensibility. The comforting embrace of ritual and ceremony are subtly and sparingly evoked in *Pecadores/Sinners*. However, the rigid authority of the church and its power to infuse guilt and fear are also implied in the pointed delicacy of this prayer bench. Faint indentations of knee-prints appear in the thick coating of beeswax. Soares has included traces of hair in the indentations, presumably left by the flock of faithful servants who have humbly knelt down in prayer to ask for forgiveness.

Lava Thomas

Lava Thomas is interested in how people mark a need for change in their lives by cutting their hair, and how that change affects their perceptions of themselves. She refers to these drawings as portraits of "shedded selves" that represent a past identity. Her interest in hair initially came from her grandmother who was a hair stylist and owned her own beauty parlor. As a young girl, Thomas would hang out in her grandmother's shop, continually watching as women were transformed during their hour-long appointments. What struck Thomas was not only the change in appearance. The conversations that ensued, the advice, the sorrowful confessions and the happy revelations were all apart of a larger transformation that was only marked by the change in hair style.

Lucrecia Troncoso

Argentinean-born Lucrecia Troncoso transforms hairballs, which universally elicit disgust, into flowers, generally perceived as objects of beauty. Each flower is created by rolling hair into balls, tying them together with colored thread, and attaching them to a painted wire, which is then inserted in the wall.

Hair has long been crafted into floral motifs, most prolifically during the Victorian era (1837 – 1901). Each individual flower represented a kind of portrait of the hair's donor. Often these flowers were configured as a family tree, representing several generations.

While Troncoso is not directly referencing this century-old tradition of unorthodox portraiture, the work does reference individuality. She noticed when she came to the United States three years ago that hair seemed to be extremely important to American woman. In an attempt to understand hair's significance to the American culture, Troncoso began to collect her own hair from her brush each day. She didn't know what she would do with it until one day when she decided to incorporate it into her art. The result is an installation of ironically whimsical beauty.

Kerry Vander Meer

Figure Studies began in the shower. Kerry Vander Meer found that manipulating wet hair on the shower wall allowed spontaneity and fluidity not obtainable with traditional drawing tools. She let the material inform the work and rather than working against it (as most of us do in front of the bathroom mirror each morning), Vander Meer embraced the differences in texture, color and shape to create these free and spontaneous hair drawings.

Focus Gallery
Evelyne Koeppel

Evelyne Koeppel's installations represent fragments of time and transitions. This focus coupled with her interest in the experience of being jailed led her to pursue *Inside Out*. Time in prison is the ultimate waiting room: waiting for mail, for family visits, lawyers,

parole hearings. The three private phone booths have recorded personal messages left by family members for their loved ones who have been incarcerated. Koeppel asked relatives of prisoners to talk to her as if they were talking to a jailed relative. She asked them to leave a message even though it is uncertain whether or not the prisoner would ever actually hear the sentiments expressed. The result is a poignant series of humanist sound portraits that reveal deep and bitter emotions, hope, despair and lives lost and rescued.

Project Room
Lawrence Andrews

we just telling stories tells the story of the Medea Theater Project for Incarcerated Women. During the process of building a stage play these female prisoners tell and retell their personal stories. In so doing, they gain a new perspective on their lives now and on what they have lived through. There is a power in telling a personal story; this work bears witness to this power in action. Many of the women state that it was during their involvement with the Medea Project that they acquired, for the first time, a sense of self worth. The film gives a deeper understanding and knowledge of the numerous and nameless women and mothers who are imprisoned each and every year.

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