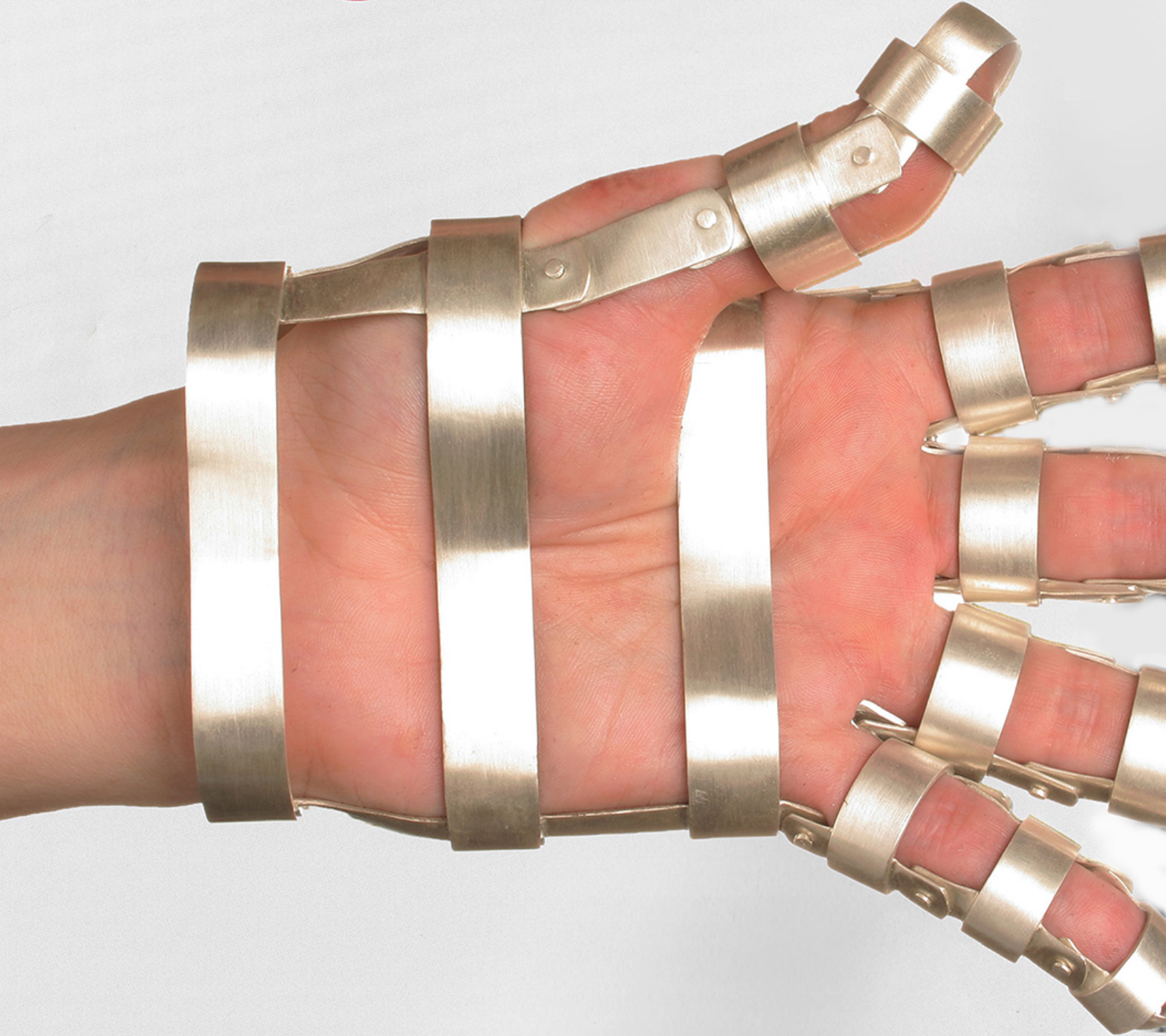


# CONCEPTUAL Cosmetics



WORDS KATE FULLER

Some people pierce their ears, others colour their cheeks and paint their lips, while some lift their brows and fill their lines. But when does superficial adornment and cosmetic enhancement become art?

This is just one of the many questions contemporary artist Tiffany Parbs has been attempting to answer during a decade-long journey as one of the most progressive and bold artists to emerge from the Barossa.

“I grew up in Nuriootpa – I went to the local primary school and high school and my first job was at the Community Store,” she says from her home in Melbourne.

“I had an interest in art at school but it wasn’t until after university that I really found the confidence to take on visual art as a career.”

After finishing her Bachelor of Arts in Communication Studies at the University of South Australia, Tiffany continued studying at the renowned South Australian art institution, the North Adelaide School of Art (NASA).

“I completed an Advanced Diploma in Applied and Visual Art at NASA, focusing on conceptual jewellery,” Tiffany explains. “I have been working as a conceptual jeweller and contemporary artist since graduating in 1998.”

While her training may have been traditionally based – projects like brooches and necklaces fill the early pages of her portfolio – Tiffany’s work has dramatically evolved from her graduate days.

“My interest has moved to removing the layer that sits between the body and a piece of jewellery by working directly with skin,” she explains.

It’s an interest that has served her well. In the years following NASA, Tiffany’s abstract works have been exhibited throughout the world, her pieces gaining exposure in Japan, Belfast, Edinburgh and Houston.

“I recently completed an artist in residence tenure at the jewellery department of the Birmingham Institute of Art & Design (UCE) in the UK,” she explains. “Residencies provide a fantastic opportunity to remove yourself from your comfort zone and purely concentrate on making. I have a group exhibition in London in 2012 and am currently working on a new solo project so I keep myself fairly busy.”

She’s also challenging and expanding public perception of what jewellery can be. Using her own body as a canvas (with pieces then exhibited through photographic presentation) her works are a voyage into conceptual experimentation – how the body can be adorned without the use of conventional cosmetics or jewellery.



*Catalogue of work: (left) gesture, 2006, sterling silver; (top) extension, 2008, synthetic hair; (bottom) blister-ring, 2005, skin. (Artwork captured in digital prints by Terence Bogue). (centre) Tiffany at her work bench (Photograph by Samuel Mac George).*



Tiffany created *bake* in 2008. The digital image by Terence Bogue captures the sunburned stencil on her chest.

"I take a particular interest in the things people allow into their intimate space," she says. "I mainly make work for exhibition purposes, commenting on the traditions of jewellery and how it tells a narrative about the wearer and am influenced by abstract European jewellers of the 1970s.

"I use my own body because it's immediate," she continues. "It also allows the luxury to research thoroughly and play and experiment with concepts."

One of Tiffany's most controversial pieces, the *blister-ring*, came from a series exhibited five years ago, titled *marked*.

"*Blister-ring* is probably the most contentious piece I've ever done. I created a ring by forming a blister on my finger," she explains, admitting the piece is one which is often most challenging for viewers.

"My work is never painful, that's not my intention. Nor is it to scar or injure or make lasting changes to the skin," she assures. "I am very conscious of making pieces that are as temporary as possible, so there is no permanent mark left on the body. The *blister-ring* could have left a permanent residue, but because I researched at length before making the piece, the blister healed without scarring.

"But it is certainly the one piece that has received the most extreme reactions from people, which was not my intention when I made it," she says. "For me it's really just about removing a blister from its original context."

So does she struggle to explain her artistic intentions?

"I don't think people have trouble understanding what I do, I just think that when people see my work they don't automatically view it as jewellery.

"Sometimes I have to explain the meaning behind my pieces before people can really understand where it is coming from but I try to present it in a way that is engaging with the viewer.

"For example, with my recent project, *cosmetic*, I explored the idea behind why people change their physical appearance," she continues.

"The word 'cosmetic' implies something that is only superficial, whereas in the case of cosmetic augmentation people will go so far as to have invasive surgery. I was really trying to understand why people decide to have something as dramatic and permanent as surgery to alter perceived surface flaws."

And for Tiffany, invoking questions and sharing ideas is what being a contemporary artist is all about.

"When I'm making a piece, I always hope that it will be something that engages people, something that is not easily dismissed," she says. "I want to make the viewer think a little bit, even if they don't like it or agree with it – that's what makes me feel like I've achieved something.

"It's interesting how other people's interpretations can differ from the original intention behind the work, but I think it's better to get a reaction than no reaction." **BI**