

# Silhouettes of the Soul

## Interview with Damcho

Otto von Busch

*Damcho is a multimedia artist who has exhibited and performed in numerous solo and group shows in Europe and Australia, as well as being the recipient of numerous awards. From early on in her practice, Damcho's work has explored the notion of boundaries and sought ways to subvert this concept. While being informed by feminist thought, it is her spiritual contemplations—which are grounded in formal studies in Buddhism, including living ten years as a nun, holding Tibetan monastic precepts—that motivate and often narrate her art and research. When Damcho returned to making art after her decade as a Buddhist nun, her practice aligned with the re-awakening of her sexuality and body awareness. Taking inspiration from the materiality of the rubber trees' serum (latex), her postgraduate autoethnographic research has been conducted under the banner of Bodhi Unbound—"Bodhi," meaning "awake" (also referencing "body") and "Unbound," connoting a delimiting of restrictions. Damcho is currently a Master of Contemporary Art candidate at the School of Art, University of Melbourne, Australia.*

**OTTO:** Could you start with how you got in contact with the latex scene?

**DAMCHO:** I was in London and I was going through a difficult period. And so a friend said, let's go to this alternative handcraft market, which was people selling kinky things. We went there and the first store I came across was a latex couture stall. And there was this woman who's been making latex clothing for something like twenty-five years and was from the Royal College of Art, where I was working at the time. We made a really lovely warm connection. So when I

was faced with her racks of black latex gear, which I would usually have found intimidating or would have been a bit shy about approaching—not knowing where to start in considering the outfits—I felt disarmed by her and I just started looking through things and then decided to try a few things on.

The first piece I tried on was a black studded corset, and it felt liberating! It made me feel embraced. It made me feel empowered. It made me feel exposed. It was a combination of so many things. Putting it on felt very ritualistic, and it strongly reminded me of being a monastic again. But this time it felt like I had the power. Like I was the one that created the rules around these kind of “robes” or uniform. I wasn’t subjected to someone else’s dictation. I immediately got hooked on the sensation and possibilities and you know, latex isn’t cheap, but she gave me a good deal. Then soon after, there was a pop-up shop sale at another latex store in London and quite quickly, I started to build on my latex wardrobe. I also started learning how to also make my own latex garments.

**OTTO:** So you understand latex culture through a lens of Buddhism? Can you just say something about “Bodhi Unbound”?

**DAMCHO:** Yes. When the seduction of latex wearing first grabbed me, the paradox of its capacity to simultaneously restrict and provide relief and release struck me as something akin to the experience of being a Buddhist monastic. As a nun, I was frequently aware of the inhibiting nature of the precepts and the prescribed conduct for a nun, whilst also seeing these restrictions as opportunities for transcendence or as a vehicle to awaken to my true nature. So, for me, what resonated was that element of restriction also allowing possibility for transcendence, or you could say of the boundary being the territory that you can also transcend. There’s a Sanskrit word for this awakening: “bodhi.” In Buddhist terminology we frequently hear bodhi coupled with the word sattva which means being; “awakened being.” Or bodhi plus citta, which means mind or heart; awakened mind. Bodhi is pronounced “body,” so when paired with the word unbound, to me suggests the potential of awakening from the restrictions of form or the preconceptions related to the body. I hope it might also allude to the potential of awakening from within this vehicle that we inhabit.

**OTTO:** And what is this relationship to embodiment you seek in the work you do with skin and latex?

**DAMCHO:** Yeah, I think it is because we relate to the body in many ways, but when you're identifying the perimeter of the body, you look at the sheath that encloses it, the skin, the outer layer, that shows the structure of our form and houses what we identify with as "self." And in that sense, I think the body can be viewed as the home where wisdom, where the potential for enlightenment resides. Identifying what is enclosed, the body can be viewed as a temple. I think that territory of the body and the way that the body is enclosed, or closed, can just highlight that aspect. The form is the vehicle in which our mind and enlightened potential, and wisdom is housed. So when we're talking about the body being enclosed, we're actually just dressing the perimeter of the body. The latex itself, or the robes, are simply the dressing or the ornamentation on what you might call the temple of the body. So they highlight the form in which these things take place and in which they reside. It's only the outer shell of it.

**OTTO:** But robes are often loose and draped to make the body shapeless in ways, or at least very differently from latex as a second skin. So is there also an idea about the tension between these two?

**DAMCHO:** Yes, absolutely. Both of them deliver an identity. Neither of them are apologetic in their presence, I guess. You're right about the robes: they are very loose fitting. My lower garment [*shamtab*] was just a tube of fabric, which is folded in a particular way, thus identifying the lineage from which my ordination came. And it's tied with a rope, a belt with a bow in it. As a part of the many pieces of monastic robes, there's also a draping shawl [*zen*] across the shoulder over the top of that. So the form is shrouded by layers and layers of lengths of cloth. And every time I put the robes on, it was a reminder of the precepts that I'd taken. But it did nothing to help me identify with the body. It only helped me to identify with the lineage I was part of and the choices I had made to become a nun.

Latex, on the other hand, is a very physical punctuation to the form of the body. So that for me immediately gave a site for a dialogue between the container and the contained. With the robes, that dialogue was much more ephemeral. I really lost touch with my body through the process of wearing robes and keeping the precepts, whereas putting the latex on was a way in which I found a territory through which that dialogue could start to take place again.

**OTTO:** You have used the image of the mirror in Buddhism in relation to latex. Could you explain some more about that?

**DAMCHO:** As an analogy in Vajrayana Buddhism, the mirror is used to signify the nature of our mind in that it reflects everything that comes before it, but it does not get stained or caught up in those reflections. So the mirror might be reflecting something ugly or something beautiful or something distressing or something soothing, but the mirror itself is unstained by anything that comes before it, and yet it is there as a witness to it. We could project anything onto it and it remains neutral. However, we often get caught in judging the image that we see reflected in the mirror.

The idea of a connection with latex came as it can also have a very shiny and reflective surface when it is polished with gloss. And further to that, I became aware of how that surface received the projections and judgments of others onto me. Like assuming I was submissive or dominant or assuming I was a sexual object or things like that. But then on the inside, it became a mirror for me as well. So my internal experience of it was because it had a sense of amplifying my form of making me feel hyper feminine, of making me feel objectified. It became a mirror back to myself about how I actually behave in those situations or how I feel in those situations. And there, I also tried not to be stained by the projections, but to remain clear, but perhaps more like a two-way mirror. You know, as it just has these dual connotations of reflecting from both inside and outside.

**OTTO:** There's something very physical with latex that is different from other materials, as it retains the humidity of the body and it doesn't insulate. It is a material that amplifies the skin as you experience temperatures different or stronger. And with the skin being our largest organ, latex can sometimes be like a magnifying glass between the skin and the world. Is there also something about the material qualities of latex, and its affect on sensation, that is of interest, that is, it's not about what others see and think, but something that is in our sensation of being in the world?

**DAMCHO:** Yes, absolutely. Because the Buddhist meditation teachings explain that we've got multiple senses through which we can be mindful and aware, such as sight, hearing and touch, etc. The touch sensation is something that we become so familiar with, that we become used to, such as the drape of the clothes on our body or the wind blowing on our skin. But for me, when I put on the latex, it becomes this amplification of the sensation of touch. It brings with it a heightened sensation of the body in relation to space. So temperature becomes amplified, breezes become amplified. Someone stroking you, or not, those things become amplified. And that

pressure on the skin, of having that constant hugging of the latex, provides a continual awareness of the boundaries of the body. So I found that a particularly stimulating invitation to become mindful of the body in a heightened way.

**OTTO:** Coming back to the question of boundaries, unboundedness and bondage, and relation between tension and release, does that relate to your Buddhist perspective?

**DAMCHO:** Yes, in fact, one of the most physically liberating sensations that I have experienced in recent years has been simply the latex catsuit being taken off! The moment the zip is pulled down, the body meets the world anew. First, the body is encapsulated in this heightened sensory bound state. But the moment that it's released from that, the unbound-ing brings an even more elevated sense of the boundary of the body. In this sense, it's like it's been freed. For me, every time that is repeated, it actually reminds me of loosening from the restrictions of the precepts. So I guess it's a repetition of one of the ways in which I experienced a sense of freedom being returned to my life when I stopped being a nun.

**OTTO:** It reminds me of Oscar Wild's quote that you give a man a mask and he will show his true face, that a freedom comes from covering up. And similarly, there is something about the restriction of the body that may also allow a type of emotional freedom.

**DAMCHO:** My experience of being a nun wasn't always easy, given the difficult relationship that I (and some others) had with our teacher. But despite that, there were times when I felt I could live within a set of very rigid constraints and still feel complete and whole and at home with myself.

But unfortunately, the traumatizing nature of the situation with the teacher meant that there weren't the conditions to safely continue on that path. Rather than leading to freedom, the restrictive conditions were damaging.

Whereas with the latex, the restrictive nature is a self-inflicted experience. For me, it wasn't masochistic, but a self-dialogue that I set up in order to contemplate structures of restriction. And I guess the boundaries and territories that wearing latex creates become a playing field on which transgressions can be explored. Whilst being a monastic, there was so much rigidity in what could and couldn't happen. Exploring the transgression of boundaries is just a way of coming to know our own mind, our own temperament and the possibilities of assumptions versus freedom. It was a much more rigid playing field as a monastic, whereas with latex these territories are actually open for you to explore.

**OTTO:** We discussed earlier the notion of latex as a second skin, and I'm just curious if there's also a connection to another sense of self? If it evokes another layer of self?

**DAMCHO:** I think that the notion of the mirror relates here again because through the reflection on this second skin, you could say there could be as many second selves, as there are people perceiving us. The human form is a site for projection. We project onto each other's forms and appearances all the time.

But I would say the latex makes it more poignant, and that goes back to the latex being an amplification of the boundaries at the site of the body. It is the mirror onto which countless projections can be cast. As for it being a second self or soul, I think it can relate to, as you mentioned earlier, the skin being a special organ of the body, a larger organ than the heart. We all experience the sensations of the heart and what it can do and how it feels, as well as how it performs its biological functions. We experience that in different ways, but for me it's a very fertile but hidden, essential organ that I carry with me. In the same way, the skin produces the sense of knowing that I'm here, I exist through the sense of feeling of physical form, in space, in this body, in this world. Without touch, without the perimeter of the body's form, you drift.

Actually, there was a contemplation that monastics are told to do when you experience desire or attraction to someone else: you're supposed to visualize them being skinned alive. So they become a mass of blood and flesh and muscles and fat and bones. That contemplation never worked for me. Because even if I felt desire towards somebody else, it was actually a heartfelt connection I felt for their inner being, rather than their body. But without the skin that held that person together, there would be nothing to desire.

**OTTO:** There's something fascinating about just that metaphor of a person being skinned alive, a person you feel desire to. And their inner anatomy and blood and all of that comes out. I'm thinking of the projection of desire, and its working with the second skin of latex, what dreams you project onto that mirror. If you will see that image of latex skinned, what would be beneath that? So just like if there's organs and blood and all of that in the human body, what is under that skin that holds together your projection of your desire?

**DAMCHO:** Right. So the question becomes how do you then unpick what your projection is. You have to skin your own projection. That fleshy body under your desire. It's interesting. Some of the most fun times I had in London were going to "Rubber Cult," a latex fancy dress party, where people would just wear the most brilliant costumes and masks. So the entire body is re-

identified with another identity altogether, dressed in latex in some really very striking outfits. But rather than those becoming a solidified identity through which we would relate to someone else, you're left with reconsidering another person afresh. Some people are covered head to toe in latex and wear contact lenses, so you're unable to connect with anything of the "original" body—I guess like someone in a zentai suit, though with added personality of the costume—but you're left with a voice and eyes and that's all that is there to relate to of that person. It's something exceptionally freeing in communicating afresh with somebody you don't know who's under that skin, that costume. You've got no idea of who they are, or their back story. It's just the outer skin that is presented and rather than the form being deceptive, I found the interactions in those settings very open and deeply relatable. Perhaps it's that thing with what Oscar Wilde said about the mask. People were very real with each other, but you've got no idea who each person is outside of such a setting.

**OTTO:** So under the latex mirror skin, there's actually a different kind of realness. A masquerade can also offer that, but it seems you suggest this is a masquerade, more embodied in a way. It's a masquerade of people in a special skin.

**DAMCHO:** One of the paradoxes of latex itself is that it appears to be plastic or of not being natural. It's not a woven, breathable fabric or anything, but it appears futuristic and otherworldly. But I sometimes consider it as the serum of a tree that it has been tapped from. And so it's one of Mother Nature's inner expressions that we're wearing on the outside. Quite early on in my experiences with latex, I developed a poetic material relationship with it being something that anchors me to mother earth. So when you talk about a second skin, it actually felt like not another skin, but something that was just picking up and just drawing from within the earth, something that's already there. Yes, this special skin of latex is something deep coming up to the surface, through the serum of the rubber tree. And so, the second skin emerges from within.