

## Masks are Us

Essay by Eleanor Heartney

Masks are as old as civilization and as widespread as human society. But their function differs by culture. In tribal societies, masks often serve to cement group identity or designate roles within a hierarchy. In communal cultures, they are part of rituals that affirm jointly held customs, mores and beliefs. However in the individualistic west, masks take on more personal, even private meanings. In art and literature, they may reference communal meanings, but these tend to be reworked to express private fears and fantasies as well as concerns about the integrity of individual identity.

Take, for example, some of the most famous masks in western literature. In Edgar Allen Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death*, Death himself invades a masked ball held in castle where a group of aristocrats are waiting out the plague. In this story, the fearsome masked figure who fells them all represents the futility of efforts to elude fate. In Gaston Leroux's *Phantom of the Opera*, the mask conceals a horrible facial disfigurement that serves as well as a metaphor for the Phantom's deformed soul. In H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man*, a tale of science gone wrong, the mask gives substance to the main character's visual and spiritual vacancy.

Similarly, in the work of the contemporary artist, masks both conceal and reveal, alter identity and create it. They take many forms and serve many purposes, often giving new life to familiar artifacts and activities. In this exhibition, for example, some artists deliberately play with the tropes of the discipline of anthropology, for which masks offer clues to a society's religious and social rituals. Closest in spirit to this kind of scientific investigation is the work of Phyllis Galebo, whose lush photographs document the use of masks and costumes in countries as diverse as Nigeria, Brazil, Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti and the United States. Olaf Bruenning takes a more playful approach to the study of other cultures, creating photographs and videos filled with clichéd versions of the "primitive" types who served in anthropology's early days to affirm the superiority of western culture. But in Bruenning's hands such group identifications become remarkably fluid, as characters morph effortlessly from Vikings, to Maoris to contemporary adolescents immersing themselves into escapist subcultures. Nick Cave, meanwhile, draws on the spirit of the ritual costumes of African and Caribbean cultures, transforming them into wearable sculptures composed of found and recycled objects.

Other artists take their inspiration from theater, where role playing and the creation of characters allow them to explore extended narratives or comment on the theatrical nature of ordinary life. Matthew Barney, for instance, has created innumerable characters for his epic *Cremaster* cycle, using prosthetics, costumes and props to tell an oblique tale of gender hybridity and sexual differentiation. Trenton Doyle Hancock, by contrast, has created an heroic narrative of the cosmic struggles of two invented peoples, drawn from sources as diverse as comic books, B movies, classic animation and apocalyptic literature. Despite their fantastic appearances and environments, their trials and tribulations mirror our own. Here he presents a mask which transforms the wearer into Sesom, one of the heroes of his epic. Folkert de Jong

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also creates a pantheon of unusual and grotesque characters. His figures are fashioned from Styrofoam and polyurethane and are designed to comment on various pathologies of our own often socially and morally dysfunctional society. The reference to theater is more explicit, meanwhile in the work of Markus Schinwald's *Curtain* in which a red drape serves at once as theatrical curtain, masking device and backdrop from images of veiled women. RammellZEE, the legendary rapper, finally, is a theatrical performer, donning masks to transform himself into characters drawn from a heady mix of goth fantasy, science fiction, Manga and his own personal fantasy.

Another inspiration for contemporary artists is the masquerade. Here artists echo Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the *carnavalesque*, a state of mind dating back to the medieval carnival. During such feast days, Bakhtin maintained, all hierarchies and official orders were suspended, temporarily replaced by a liberating chaos in which roles were reversed, hierarchies upended and decorum abandoned. Though Bakhtin envisioned this as a cathartic event, it also has a darker side, picked up in Bill Owens photographs of dispirited clowns as emblems of the troubled undercurrents of 70s America, or in Cindy Sherman's unsettling impersonations of hags, witches and other figures of nightmare. The *carnavalesque* takes a more playful turn in the work of Tony Oursler, where an aluminum splatter has been animated by incorporation of a video depicting human eyes and mouths stretched into comically horrifying distortions. This work presents the idea of a role reversal between artwork and viewer, as the sculpture observes and reacts to us behind the protection of the masking splat. The *carnavalesque* becomes political in Yinka Shonibare's film *Un Ballo in Maschera (A Masked Ball)*, which is based on the assassination of King Gustav III of Sweden in 1792 during a masked ball. In Shonibare's version, king, courtiers and assassin move in stately stylized movements and are dressed in the artist's trademark Dutch created "African" fabrics. The gender of both king and killer has been altered and they are presented here as females, making both, metaphorically, the mothers of change and revolution. Meanwhile, the climactic event is replayed several times before the whole series of events is presented in reverse, suggesting the malleability of time and history.

The mask can also be an instrument of concealment undertaken for criminal and other illicit purposes. Works in the vein reference masks donned by burglars, terrorists, members of secret societies. Jürgen Klauke's *Antlitze* offers a compendium of images of masked figures appropriated from newspapers from 1972 to 2000. Drawn from well publicized and lesser known events, among them the abduction of Israeli athletes by Arab terrorists during the 1972 Olympic Games, as well as less celebrated robberies, abductions and terrorist incidents, they serve as memory triggers, uncomfortably reminding of the pervasiveness of the language of terror. Intermingled are images of women in burquas, another pervasive media image, and a reminder that masks can also be protective coverings. Andres Serrano also draws on real life with his photographic portraits of members of the Ku Klux Klan in their hoods. Close cropping and dramatic lighting bring out the deliberate resemblance between their robes and traditional religious garb. Hans Haacke picks up on a notorious image of masked victims, presenting a figure whose bag covered head recalls the photographs of prisoners from Abu Ghraib. In Haacke's version, however, the bag/mask is composed of the field of blue and white stars from the American flag.

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Genuine terrorists and thieves use a variety of means to conceal their identity, including stockings, scarves and bags. The iconic image of these figures, however, involves a ski mask. Jeff Sonhouse picks up on this emblem with paintings of black men whose eyes, noses and mouths are all that remain behind an obliterating mask of white. The resulting images are unsettling, not least because we are unsure whether their disguises denote vulnerability or aggression. Rosemaire Trockel, meanwhile, takes us back to the origin of this ubiquitous, symbol with her series of knitted Balaklavas, the precursor to the ski mask which dates back to the Battle of Balaclava during the Crimean war in 1854.

While works like these bring out the more unsavory aspects of disguise, masks may also conceal identity for less pernicious reasons. A prime example of this is the Guerilla Girls, the feminist artist group who donned gorilla masks and short skirts as part of a highly successful effort to dramatize the unequal treatment of women in the art world of the 1980s. And finally, masks may also serve to underscore identity rather than conceal it. This is evident in Gillian Wearing's *Self Portrait as My Mother Jean Gregory*, which is precisely that, a photograph in which she has made herself up to resemble her mother as a young woman, thereby affirming the personal and genetic ties that bind them. Ingrid Mwangi and Robert Hunter in their joint persona as IngridMwangiRobertHutte, have created the video *Masked* in which Mwangi conceals her face with a mask of her own dreadlocked hair, arranging and rearranging it in a reminder that her countenance is not the only signifier of her identity.

Masks intrigue us because they seem to offer respite from "reality". Yet they also bring out social, cultural and political realities that might remain hidden beneath the apparently transparent façade of everyday life. In the hands of artists like those here, masks are something more than artful disguises or theatrical props. Rather, they go to the heart of who we are and force us to consider: Do we create our masks or have they have created us?