

Masters of Disguise

Throughout time, disguises have played important roles in the lives of all men. Visual and chemical disguises not only aided our distant ancestors in hunting, but were used in religious and ritual ceremonies of rebirth and transformation as well¹. Modern man obscures and alters not only himself, but also objects and environmental conditions.

The Masters of Disguise exhibit explores, of the more than twenty artists, a broad range of ways we alter appearances. Its seventy-four works will be on display at the Mint Museum of Craft and Design from March 22 until July 30, 2008. Virtually all of the works come from within the Mint Museum collection. A description of several of these artists and their works forms the body of this paper.

Cindy Sherman is known for costuming herself in a role and then photographing herself. This statement is akin to saying Picasso applied paint to numerous canvases, since it trivializes the art form she has developed. She is not only the model and the photographer, but also the costume designer, the scenarist, the makeup artist, the lighting designer and the special effects person. Her photographs become a commentary on the roles women and artists assume². After seeing a porcelain tureen commissioned by Madame de Pompadour in 1756 and made by Manufacture Royale de Sevres, Ms. Sherman costumed herself as Madam de Pompadour. After photographing herself, she took the photo to Limoges, France and had the Acienne Manufacture Royal create one hundred porcelain tureens like the original, but with her likeness instead of Madame de Pompadour's³. We are exhibiting one of these 14 ½”H x 22”L x 11 ¾” D tureens that is a disguise of the original tureen as Sherman is disguised as du Pompadour.

Masumi Hayashi creates beautiful panoramic photo collages of contested sites by first taking numerous photos while solely turning around at the site. The photos are arrayed into a convincing work of art. Our piece is the 22” x 35” work entitled EPA *Superfund Site, Love Canal 2*. Of the Superfund Site works, she says “(Each) site looks everyday: bucolic, pristine and pretty. The irony is that you cannot see the pollution.”⁴ Her works show both the surface of and the reality behind these places, with no need for her to overtly condemn or criticize.

Philemona Williamson paints Williamson paints pre-adolescent children at play⁵. The children are multi-racial and multi-cultural, as was the household in which she grew up. Our oil,

¹ *The Spiritual Life of Paleolithic Hunters*. Accessed 1/23/2008.
http://hummingbirdworld.com/spiritualnature/paleolithic_nature.html

² Sherman, Cindy. *Cindy Sherman*. New York: Pantheon Book. 1984, p.9

³ *Artes Magnus*. *Cindy Sherman*, description of her porcelain tureen, after that of Madame de Pompadour, accessed 1/23/2008. <http://www.artesmagnus.com/artesmagnes/pages/gallery2/sherman2.html>

⁴ *Artist Statement, The Masumi Hayashi Museum*, accessed 1/23/2008.
<http://www.masumimuseum.com/artiststate.html>

⁵ Leach, Mark Richard. *In The Looking Glass: Contemporary Narrative Painting*. MMA, Charlotte, N.C. 1992, p.29

Finders Keepers shows children whose skin color and features are at odds- brown, red and pink and Asian, African and Caucasian. They are gathering peculiar objects for unknown reasons. The work is compelling, but puzzling and ambiguous.

Nick Cave loaned one of his *Soundsuits* to the exhibit. These handmade textile suits cover nearly the whole body and are covered in found objects. These objects are throw-away objects with little value which he transforms into breathtakingly beautiful and valuable art. The suits are designed to “function both as a piece of sculpture for a museum display and as a ceremonial garment for performance art.”⁶ Cave states that once a person is wearing one of these suits, he is transformed and compelled to move in new, experimental ways that may be quite foreign to his normal personality⁷. He teaches a cross-college course at U. of Wisconsin-Madison in Textile and Apparel Design, and runs a successful fashion and design company in Chicago.

Cheryl Laemmle paints the imaginary world of her childhood in a highly realistic, almost trompe l’oeil style⁸. In our oil, *Wake Forest 1989*, she features herself as a girl with braided hair behind a tray of miniature trees on a table. Both she and the trees appear to have been carved from a heavily grained wood and painted white. Her face is featureless, being disguised as a wooden mannequin. It is as if the forest and she have both been transformed from living beings into inanimate, inorganic things involved in an almost religious ritual.⁹

The seventy- four works of this exhibit only hint at the infinite number of ways our genius allows us to disguise ourselves. We humans are the true masters of disguise.

⁶ *Arts Institute/ Interdisciplinary artists in residence. University of Wisconsin – Madison*, accessed 1/23/2008
http://www.wisc.edu/artsinstitute/air/page.php?get=nick_cave.html

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *Review/Art; Paintings Filled with Oak, And Hints of Religion – New York Times*. Accessed 1/23/2008
<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D0CE5D71039F932A25752C0A967959260>

⁹ Ibid.

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