

Judith Henry

Artist's Statement

For over five decades, I have created evocative multimedia artworks that explore the friction between interior life and the public self. I repurpose a cornucopia of materials like newspapers, magazines, sound recordings, film clips, internet appropriations, and studio detritus in poignant and amusing explorations of identity. These tools enable me to explore the misalignments between cultural representation and inner psychology. Contradiction and anonymity become a source of freedom.

Society is formed of individuals, each bearing a mark of uniqueness but bound in a commonality of experience—the archetypal human experience—that underlies and unifies the infinitely distinct versions of itself. Having pursued a detached, perhaps secretive or voyeuristic observation of people throughout my career, I feel that my work has evolved into an inevitably revelatory depiction of human nature in all its diversion and mass commonality. Each person is a matchless original as well as a seemingly mass-produced, stereotypical member of this or that faction—a strikingly featureless face in the crowd. As an artist, I have taken on a role of listener and observer, my work a documentation of the teeming communion of diverse human beings. Through the use of text and photographic imagery, I study and reveal the recurring patterns formed by the motions of living, the gestures as different as snowflakes but packing together like snow. As different as each of us is, our sameness prevails.

INTRODUCTION to Beauty Masks: Portraits

Grace Graupe-Pillard

2019

To conceal/shield/veil/distort one's physiognomy is a distinct and bold strategy that is ultimately revelatory. For many years, Judith Henry has been making charged self-portraits

by covering her face and hands with painted and photographically collaged disguises—some grotesquely warped—while others shimmer with a ghostly light blending an emotional range that teases the human condition. In her art we view the malleability of skin transformed by age and the desire to capture eternal beauty through products which are deceptively heralded to defy nature's relentless clock.

In *Beauty Masks: Portraits*, Judith Henry rips photographs out of fashion and women's magazines choosing images of models for their diversity of race, hairdo, accessories and dress, as she partially hides her face, peeking out of pinholes uncloaking her translucent gray-green eyes and elegantly creased hands. Ironically, the exquisite women portrayed in Henry's works are themselves cosmetically "masked" with makeup and through techniques of photo retouching, conceding that appearances are fluid, tenuous and fleeting.

The array of "found" faces osmosing with Judith's own countenance are often seamlessly melded together; on other occasions, changes in select features are more pronounced—resulting in heartbreakingly bizarre collaborations. Tufts of Judith's hair flung over a glamorous subject's tresses; her own hand delicately attaching to a model's long tapering fingers; a quiet smile breaking into a wide demonic grin; sadness overwhelmed by elation; fragility resurfacing as resolution—the infinite breadth of facial expressiveness is emotionally obliterating the web of time.

Judith Henry loves the capacity of art to transport the artist into uncharted terrains. The anonymity of the masks enables her to create deceptive work about herself. Henry's straightforward and cubistic alterations always involve her own lucid, open eye glancing at us, affirming her most intimate vitality, and what we do 'see' is undeniably unmasked and clearly both seductive and stunning.

Her Masquerade (catalogue)

Mary Birmingham

Me as Her, Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, Summit, NJ

2016

Judith Henry has spent more than forty years secretly observing, listening to, photographing, filming and recording strangers in public places, while remaining largely invisible to her subjects. *Who I Saw in New York* (circa 1970-2000) is a huge archive of the black and white snapshots she took of pedestrians. Her “Overheard” book series published by Universe/Rizzoli (2000-2002) pairs photographs with texts excerpted from eavesdropped conversations, and includes the well-known, *Overheard at the Museum*. Several years ago, she surreptitiously photographed people as they posed for snapshots on a concrete barrier beside the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

In several recent bodies of work, however, Henry has evolved from an invisible observer into an active, though hidden participant. Disguising herself with different types of handmade masks, she inserts herself into each photograph and, in a sense, becomes the subject—but not entirely as herself. In the series, *Girls, Girls, Girls*, she restaged high school yearbook photos and posed behind hand-drawn masks of young women to create portraits of shared identity. In *The Artist Is Hiding* she has appropriated an artistic, rather than a personal identity. For this series Henry holds mixed-media masks and poses in front of paintings that, like the masks, echo or quote various movements and styles of abstract art. *Me as Her* continues Henry’s practice of hiding within her work and masquerading behind a façade or false identity. Characteristically, in all of these works her personal identity is revealed only through the inclusion of her hands, which is an important signature aspect of each piece. In *Me as Her*, she creates black and white portraits of famous deceased women in scenes from their daily lives. Not quite candid snapshots, these photographs record momentary interruptions as the women acknowledge or even pose for the camera. They are arresting images that upon further scrutiny seem a bit unsettling, as we begin to notice that the faces are somewhat disjointed from their bodies and articles of clothing don’t always match. The subjects’ hands feature prominently in all of the portraits, ultimately revealing the fact that these are staged photographs in which a woman holding a mask in front of her face is posing as each of the subjects. While her face remains hidden in all of the portraits, the inclusion of her hands provides a clue to her identity as an older woman.

As she has aged and retrospectively assessed her own accomplishments and identity, the artist began thinking about accomplished women she admired who had died. After living most of her adult life in Manhattan's SoHo neighborhood, Henry moved to Williamsburg, Brooklyn in 2006. Having discovered this hip, young neighborhood later in life she wondered, "What if these women came to Williamsburg like I did?" Sourcing black and white images from the Internet, she made life-size photographic masks of these significant women and posed behind their faces in neighborhood spots where she envisioned them. While the individual masks represent specific women, as a group they also characterize a broad spectrum of female identity with their diversity of age, race, religion, and vocation. Since all of them are deceased, Henry became their surrogate, borrowing their identities and taking them to places they most likely never visited—all within a one-mile radius of her home. Georgia O'Keeffe stands in Henry's own garden, Virginia Woolf sits reading with head in hand at a quiet café table, and Anna May Wong lights a cigarette while perched at a marble-topped bar. It is to Henry's credit that she integrates the women so seamlessly into the Williamsburg scene of today. With her slightly ironic placements— Susan Sontag standing beside graffiti that looks like a thought bubble, Jean Stapleton beaming in a Laundromat— she is clearly having fun with this project, and for the viewer, the humor is infectious. In the portraits of Amy Winehouse and Selena, who died tragically, the contrast between their youthful faces and the artist's aging hands is especially poignant. Henry's photographs render these women forever young, frozen in a place and time that never really existed for them.

At times, each of us has probably fantasized about being someone else. Judith Henry's haunting photographs enact her fantasies and invite us to witness the power of her masquerade.

Judith Henry: An Artist in Hiding
(An Introduction to Hidden)

Ethan Greenbaum

BravinLee programs

2015

For over 40 years, Judith Henry has explored representations of identity and authorship. In two recent series, *Me as Her* and *The Artist is Hiding*, she continues in this vein, using masks and photography to probe the genres of celebrity portraiture and abstract painting. *Me as Her* is haunted. In a series of moody and humorous black and white photographs, Henry covers her face with pictures of iconic and deceased women. They span age, race and era. In one, Henry appears as silent film star Anna May Wong. Lounging at a marble topped bar, the actress stares seductively into the camera. Later, she is comedian Imogene Coca, smoking with ironic elegance amidst a messy construction site. The series is shot throughout Henry's neighborhood of Williamsburg and continues her longstanding fascination with masks as contradictory symbols of power and self-erasure.

Me as Her extends Henry's practice of commingling her interior life with the public selves of others. The most explicit antecedent is her earlier work *Girls, Girls, Girls*. In that series, Henry creates drawings based on the yearbook photos of teenage girls from different decades, locations and social strata. She then uses these drawings as masks, shielding her own face in photographic reenactments of the original yearbook picture. While *Me as Her* echoes this gesture, it also departs from it significantly. Rather than creating handmade portraits, Henry sources all her images from the Internet. Further, she chooses from among the most recognizable portraits of her subjects. In their ubiquity, the faces of these women are everywhere and nowhere. They are placeless in a manner that defies ownership—theirs, ours or Henry's. This vacancy is the space the artist occupies, revealing herself through the choice of subjects, locations and the appearance of her hands.

Adding to this sense of dislocation is Henry's decision to ground her portraits in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Once a hotbed of bohemian living, Williamsburg has arguably become a high priced simulation of itself, its own artistic legacy used as a virtual backdrop.

Henry has spoken of her choice to photograph in this area as a way of 'interacting within and around a community that is generations from myself.' However, as is often the case, Henry's interactions are not so simple. At first exposure, many of her subjects exist humorously within their settings: Virginia Woolf perches languorously over a book, Dorothy Lamour vamps in a vintage shop, and Susan Sontag leans against a graffitied wall. A spray-painted diamond protrudes behind the writer's head like a sparkling thought bubble. However, as the succession of pictures unfold, something else emerges. In a bar seemingly inspired by fin de siècle Paris, Edith Piaf's glamorous posturing goes unnoticed by the younger denizens cropped at the edge of the frame. Similarly, Carmen Miranda's implausible resurrection receives the backs of trendy young bar patrons. The indifference is mutual. All of Henry's surrogates only have eyes for the camera. They smile, glower and reflect into the lens, locked in their posterity, untouched by their surroundings. And where is the artist? For Henry, these women occupy a set of contradictions central to her work and life. They are both available and absent, timeless precisely because their identities are so well dispersed. Their portraits are frozen, a fulcrum around which time can move. In Henry's hands, the women become a fixed marker against which her life is measured, compared and possibly occupied.

The Artist is Hiding is similarly evasive. In the series, Henry is photographed standing in front of various paintings. The works, all made by the artist, are discontinuous in style, palette and surface. So Obvious is filled with Pollock-esque scribbles while Target percolates with chromatic cylinders in the spirit of a Sonia Delaunay. In other compositions, Henry seems to discard historical referent altogether. Yet attribution is dubious. In each picture, the artist holds a mask over her face. The masks, painted and collaged, correspond with the painting behind them. Some play their role smilingly. In Makeover, a woman's sanguine face blends harmoniously within a pastel composition. In Kiss the paper mâché visage nearly dissolves into the atmospheric gray of the painting behind it. Other players steal the show. The avatar of Lick is equal parts alluring and grotesque. Collaged with female faces ripped from advertisements, the mask is a femme

Frankenstein in the spirit of a Hannah Höch collage. The avatar lustily licks the canvas in a gesture that unapologetically announces a subject.

Henry has discussed this series as a commentary on the current proliferation of abstract painting in the gallery system. Significant to this statement is the fact that each painting exists on one surface. The works are painted one on top of another in an endless succession. This evolving backdrop registers a wry critique of a market system that celebrates superficial novelty, both in the persona of the artist and their 'signature style'. Henry's process of invention and erasure also contains a defiant refusal. By destroying unique paintings in service of her reproducible photos, Henry signals her unwillingness to comply with the traditional expectations of painting. There will be no trademark style, no contained composition or fixed persona. The works and their meanings are as transitory as the masks the artist grasps and discards.

In spite of all her refusals, this project is not a dour deconstruction. The artist is clearly having fun. The paintings and masks are vibrant, inventive and absurd; the multiple styles are joyful exercises in role-play. In Henry's work, these contradictions and anonymity are a source of freedom. Who cares if one painting is terrible, who takes credit for the beauty of another? By eliding identification, she has found a way to let her many selves speak. Seen in this light, the act of hiding is less avoidance than wily escape. In *The Artist is Hiding*, Henry has created a space of her own, one set apart from the societal constraints of market, gender and genre that would seek to limit her.