

# “Charade is in Order”: Judith Henry’s Beauty Masks

Max Kozloff

## Judith Henry: Beauty Masks, Portraits (Small Editions)



A double-page spread from the book under review, *Beauty Masks, portraits*, Judith Henry, 2020

More seriously, a survey of these faces generates a mood of longing, enacted by their maker, who functions simultaneously as partial subject and object. I'm thinking of multiple personality disorder, a condition in which individuals have lost their sense of self, and compensate by their pretension to be others. The thought of such ego transfers may infuse the beauty book, but mostly as a reckoning with a metaphor of a social thesis, rather than as a documentary on a psychic malaise. For my part, whether people are smiling or scowling under their half masks on the streets, this issue of public life contrasts with Henry's delving into her private concerns.

Criticism has a habit of refining itself at short notice for purposes of isolating distinctions. We often use a device called the "yes, but", as in: Are her young subjects coquettish?—Yes, but some are baffled or just vacant. Is their moodiness a contribution to the narrative aspects of the project? Yes, but they are more pluralistic in psychic shading than you think.

I suggest that color has its own role to play in Judith Henry's outlook. The choreography of her palette includes movements into black and white, which contrast with flesh tones that dramatize her artifice. As for the chromatic environment itself, how could it not reflect disparate sources from the cosmetic routines that fascinate her?



An image from the book under review, *Beauty Masks*, portraits, Judith Henry, 2020

that induces mirth or wonder, or sometimes both. She seems to cooperate with the paper illustrations, as if she was of the same material existence as theirs. The spectacle of it inspires me to think of how Picasso would deal with photos of Audrey Hepburn.

The new book with the word “beauty” in its title plays havoc with a notion of beauty by intermingling faces, such that they exist primarily as awkward physical components of each other—cheeks as dismembered chunks fitted in the wrong place. On one level, they take on the look of modernist grotesquery, familiar in museums. At the same time, I get another and more emotional input from the plenitude of media one offs, who display their improbable coiffures and toothy smiles. They consist of glamour pusses, cutie pies, high school seniors, and haute couture models—of different races. Henry’s elegant fingers everywhere get into the act with a stateliness

---

I've picked up these impressions from glimpses of her art over the past six or seven years (I have known her for much more of that time). My attention is now intriguingly drawn and focused on her latest project, an artist's book titled "Beauty Masks Portraits." It features scores of close-up color photographs of young, glamorous women's faces, cut from fashion magazines into pages continuously suspended by the artist's hands to cover her own face, the two of them acting as a pair of heads that almost reaches the nearby frame. Viewers are therefore asked to engage with a self-portrait matrix that conspicuously declares its intention to conceal its subject. (Though not completely, as Henry's eyes are sometimes made visible through holes that resemble glasses.) This aspect of her theatre raises the question of how to regard a real, though very reticent human presence in these images, capable of staring back at you. In any case, the results are not beautiful, but they are certainly haunting.

When masquerades do their work, proposing alternate faces for the ones we know or might expect, their impersonations are not subtle. Rather, they actively reach out to signal that a charade is in order, and a role is being played. They can't help but pull appraisal toward their own contrivance, as such. A viewer may then realize that the women's faces of "Me as Her" were not "there" in Henry's photos, but only their appearance, in someone else's photos. And the artist's hands, tremulous as they might be, are holding it up. This is not homage to women's creative achievements so much as a statement skeptical of career status itself. Great care has been taken to conceal the actual masquerade, and this fact fosters the effect of seamless illusion that was originally intended. Underneath this iconography, the artist makes her debut but is nowhere to be found, except in the title of this project.

Judith Henry is a contemporary artist who is aware of the invasive disturbances of our situation and chooses to engage poetically with some of them and contends with others., Based in Brooklyn, Henry has roughly a —40-year career of multimedia work to her credit. It developed along themes that embrace theatrical metaphors illuminating social artifice. On her website these are given titles such as “Makeover,” “Casting call,” “Masquerade,” “Me as her,” “Rebirth,” and “Archive.” They refer to phases of her practice that reveal a fascination with identity shifts, questionable environments, and metamorphoses of human life forms. In one of her photo projects, notable women like Emma Goldman and Virginia Woolf are shown at ease in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, a place they probably never visited. This apparent testament to earlier heroines is titled “Me as Her,” 2014. An indifference to their whereabouts runs through this artist’s world of characters—in the act of posing. They seem detached from any social milieu without knowing that they have been repositioned in one, other than the photo to which they originally consented. In Henry’s images, the standard protocols of portrait genres are at an enigmatic loss.

Artists are, of course, known as avatars of individualism and subjectivity. It is a stance that disavows any requirement that they verify something. This imaginative condition applies even to appropriated material, in collage as well as installation art. Within such modes, a mundane object—say a humble tube of lipstick—may attain emblematic status by virtue of its contribution to the fictive assumption of the whole.



A double-page spread from the book under review, *Beauty Masks*, portraits, Judith Henry, 2020

Among images in American civic and cultural life, the subject of the human face remains dominant, though not always used for upright purposes. Certain police departments, for instance, are reported to employ super powerful surveillance cameras in the vain hope to track and match blurry street close-ups of faces with mug shots in criminal suspect files. Or take the recent fuss about the ease with which commercial and political operatives can hack into media, thereby injecting their clandestine interests into TV reportage of talking heads. Consider also the growing animus of fake news and disinformation, which have elevated public mistrust—a sense that we’re not getting things right because they could be compromised in their transmission or history. During the coronavirus pandemic, employers found ways to monitor lapses in employee productivity with the workforce confined to their homes. The integrity of privacy became an equivocal phenomenon, subject to infiltration and real snooping, as self-interest encourages, and as certain apps provide.

At least selfies offer transparency of performance, within their context. Their playfulness is diary-like, nominally composed for or from a social occasion and conveniently transmitted to an audience, warmed or not by their personal content. In their modes of address, selfies act as tokens or reminders of connection, sometimes soliciting reply. Except, that is, when people were actually seen outdoors, as they were during the time I was writing this review, wearing surgical masks. As we know, this spectacle was sponsored by a protective state agency during an epoch of plague. But though a genuine response to a public health crisis, it evokes an atmosphere suggestive of widespread repression, forced isolation, and a social leveling hostile to individualism.

One may well ask: where did all these maneuvers come from; is there a pictorial tradition from which they stemmed? Though the answer is apparently negative, there does exist a scatter of previous self-portraitists who ventured into theatrical modes. Among them are Cindy Sherman, Lucas Samaras, Claude Cahun, and Hannah Höch. Judith Henry's works are as disconcerting as theirs, as complicated psychologically, and of equally high artistic stature.

**Beauty Masks, portraits, Judith Henry. Published by Small Editions (Brooklyn, 2020). All photographs were taken by Howard Saunders with an iPhone 8 Plus, indoors, with natural light. Introduction by Grace Graupe-Pillard. ISBN 978-0-578-64727-2. \$40**

Due to the pandemic, the book is not widely distributed. To order a copy, please visit the artist's Paypal and be sure to include your mailing address with payment: <http://paypal.me/beautymasks>

print