

ELIA ALBA: THE DISGUISES OF IDENTITY

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On a ledge sit a crowd of cloaked heads. Each head is a photograph of a face printed on flat, fabric discs that are sewn onto husks that serve as both head and neck. Most stare blankly out of the throng, one is caught mid-sneeze. Common to all is the piecemeal quality of their hybrid construction—black faces with peachy pink shrouds, ruddy faces with chocolate necks and scalps. The faces, even when deadpan, are distorted through several generations of production, first by the fish eye effect of a picture taken too close, next by the change in dimension as the image is transferred onto the flat disc, and third as the texture of the muslin cloth warps the features and creates unfamiliar indentations and peaks.

The heads function as both portraits and masks. When worn, they conceal the identity of the wearer in their helmets. In contrast to the repertoire of gestures associated with expression, the faces in Elia Alba's 2003 series "Masks" have only one moment to convey their subject. But such is the nature of the mask (and the photograph)—immobilization—emphasizing the static eternal over the changing particular.

Yet the disguise of a mask is also the opportunity to be someone different, to assume a new identity, to change oneself by adopting its fixed stare. It is this feature of masks that has long captivated artists. The artist Hugo Ball described this experience of masks when his fellow Dadaist Marcel Janco brought several to the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916: "Everyone immediately put one on. Then something strange happened. Not only did the mask immediately call for a costume; it also demanded a quite definite, passionate gesture, bordering on madness ... What fascinates us all about the masks is that they represent not human characters and passions, but characters and passions that are larger than life."



It is this ability of the mask, to invert typical, everyday life with carnivalesque alternate personalities that Alba's work explores. Her masks hold out the promise of alternative personas that cut across racial and gender boundaries to form a polymorphous mix of identities, ones that are often grotesque and dramatic in their strangeness. She photographs people wearing the heads, such as "Mask (hold my face)" (2003) in which a pale, female face is supported by black, male hands. The distortion of the large, overexposed face contrasts with the delicate hands, presenting a hybrid of gentle masculinity and forceful femininity. In "Onnagato (oops)" (2003) Alba presses the issue of gender reversal in her reference to Japanese Kabuki theater, in which men play stylized female parts. A mask of a black man is photographed at a cocked, three-quarter angle, casting a coy side-long glance. Wrapped in a flimsy pink headscarf, dark arms emerge from the frothy fabric to clutch the gigantic head in a parody of modesty. Set against a backdrop of vibrant blue sky and vegetation, the stiff, paper-like quality of the mask interrupts the natural setting with its artifice, creating a fantasy scene in an out-of-scale wonderland. A companion work, "Onnagato (come)" shows the same figure with arms outstretched in a gesture of both entreaty and menace—here the wonderland can easily turn nightmarish, the mask becoming the face of a pursuing monster.

In her piece "If I were a..." (2003), the Dominican artist makes literal the diverse racial composition that has always been a condition of identity in the Caribbean and South and Central America. A series of "suits" made of photocopied transfers of body parts on a muslin unitard, "If I were a..." presents a pink, brown, and "mixed" version hung on fancy hangers, a jarring merger of clothing display and flayed skin. The "mixed" body presents a particular visual challenge, with variously shaded body parts chaotically montaged into an uneasy union. White breasts are mirrored by black knees; a white arm contrasts with its brown partner. The bizarre jumble is a fictional family tree of Latin America, as though one could point to an elbow to suggest Indian heritage, a knee for African, a shoulder for Spanish. Alba's masks and masking suits present versions of race and gender that comment on the impossibility of an "essential" identity. Although the mask's fixity pretends a core character, the multiplicity of identities that emerge when worn stress the range still waiting to be explored.