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Masks and Costumes: A Curious Coverup

By Jessica Dawson
Special to The Washington Post
Friday, February 27, 2009

We're three days into Lenten sobriety, our hangovers abating and boas stowed, yet two area galleries continue to exploit the Mardi Gras mood with exhibitions about masquerade and concealment.

The mask metaphor is rich but well tilled. It connotes transformation (of expression, status, gender, race), promises liberation and flirts with revelation. If you know Aeschylus, you know the drill.

Artists Dawn Black and Leah Tinari trot out masks as both objects -- worn by the people in their pictures -- and metaphor. What differentiates these two artists is their approach to those subjects. Where Black's technique is refined, Tinari's is willfully coarse. Where Black trots out a panoply of images that don't always cohere, Tinari gives us off-putting narrative realism.

In her delicate ink washes made on tea-stain-colored paper, the Durham, N.C.-based Black offers objects of consummate technique. Only a brush made from a single eyelash and held with a sure hand could apply ink with such precision. Yet Black's technical mastery can't quite erase weaknesses in the 33-year-old artist's Curator's Office debut.

At District Fine Arts, New York-based Tinari, 32, extends no painterly flourish -- her brash images appear airbrushed onto canvas, their content as subtle as a blowtorch -- yet she squeezes sticky social comment from these grotesqueries.

And though neither artist refers to it explicitly, the Internet's function as our shared arena for revelation (too much, usually) and deception (perhaps benign, perhaps aggressive) links these otherwise disparate shows.

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"Babu's Fantasy," by Dawn Black, juxtaposes exotic "others" with no discernible connecting plotline. (By Dawn Black -- Curator's Office)

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Black mines the photo-sharing site Flickr and magazines such as W and National Geographic for images she paints with near-religious adherence to their sources.

"Conceal Project," the exhibition's centerpiece, consists of 60 postcard-size portraits of men, women and children wearing various forms of costume or mask. Hung in a grid 10 images across and six high, the presentation mimics online shopping's relentless pages of product thumbnails -- all of like kind but each slightly different.

Together they're a gallery of types, some funny and some very sad. Here is the hefty fellow mummified in bondage attire, a clown mask covering his face. Here is the model encased in white lace. Here is the girl with a paper bag over her head.

Images lifted from photo-sharing sites are easy to spot; they pop out next to those obviously based on fashion (as slick as their sources) and those mined from National Geographic (ethnic to the max). They're also the most interesting. These homemade images give a sense of quirky, ridiculous and unknowable humanity. The fashion girls are sexy but cold, the Kabuki dancers fierce but impenetrable. As a group, though, they all work together.

The problem comes in a series of larger drawings also on view. These combine multiple people arranged on blank pages. Here, it's all pastiche: a troupe of exotic "others" -- costumed women from fashion magazines, young children dressed in the indigenous garb of unidentifiable cultures, Mummies -- coexist on otherwise unmarked backgrounds. The artist's intentions are unfathomable. Why that woman? Why that Indian girl? And why -- why! -- Naomi Campbell and Madonna? It's as if Black were playing with dolls but forgot to enliven them with plot.

Tinari, by contrast, settles on a narrative as relentless as a disco beat. Working off photographs of herself and her friends out club-hopping, she translates snapshots into garish swaths of acrylic paint. Tinari presents a particularly gruesome brand of party tribe, the kind of people who pose for pictures with open mouths and tongues wagging, as if in the middle of saying "Dooode, way to Par-TAY!" The settings are upscale and urban, but the drunken exhibitionism timeless.

The people in Tinari's pictures are an entitled, narcissistic lot. "With Our Reflections, We Were Twice the Party" finds baby-faced Wall Street types whooping it up in the back of a limo. "Babes Boogying to Grand Master Flash Spinning" shows three masked women begging for our attention. Though these pictures look gruesome to us, we can imagine Tinari's subjects proudly uploading them to Facebook.

Tinari calls her show "Masquerade Madness," yet obscurity has nothing to do with it. Even when her people are masked they remain untransformed. On the contrary, these young people want you to notice them. Desperately.

The pictures -- several so large they feel like 5-foot-5 punches in the face -- are rendered slick and cartoonlike, like posters. Tinari's palette qualifies as lurid: fuchsia lips and salmon cheeks, ruddy noses.

Who would buy Tinari's pictures? I don't know. But they're cautionary tales, for sure. Most frightening is the artist's own statement, in which she speaks of them as "a visual diary . . . a documentation of 30-something contemporary lifestyle and behavior." It gives me chills.

Despite their pictures' complications, both Black and Tinari touch on a fundamental issue here. Whether we conceal ourselves through masks and false identities or reveal too much on Facebook, our aim is the same: We're fighting, fiercely but futilely, to control how people see us.

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