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Visual Arts Center of New Jersey

HER MASQUERADE

by Mary Birmingham

At first glance, Judith Henry's black-and-white portraits of famous deceased women look like snapshots that convey scenes from their daily lives. These photographs record momentary interruptions as the women seem to acknowledge or even pose for the camera. But on further scrutiny the images begin to seem a bit unsettling—the women's faces are somewhat disjointed from their bodies and articles of clothing don't always match. The subjects' hands feature prominently in all of the works, ultimately revealing the fact that these are staged photographs in which a woman holding a cut-out portrait in front of her face is posing as each of the subjects. Although her face always remains hidden, the inclusion of her hands provides a clue to her identity as an older woman. The woman behind the masks is the artist, Judith Henry, and this series, *Me as Her*, continues her career-long exploration of identity and the tension that exists between the public persona and the interior self.

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 black-and-white snapshots she took of pedestrians. Her *Overheard* book series, published by Universe/Rizzoli (2000–02), pairs photographs with texts excerpted from eavesdropped conversations and includes the well-known *Overheard at the Museum*. Several years ago Henry 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 unseen observer into an active, though hidden, participant. Disguising herself with various handmade masks, she inserts herself into each photograph and, in a sense, becomes the subject—but never as herself. In the series, *Girls, Girls, Girls*, Henry 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 created an artistic persona holding mixed-media masks and posing in front of her own paintings that, like the masks, echo or quote various movements and styles of abstract art. Especially significant is the fact that each painting exists only in the photograph, as each one is painted over the previous work. *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 Henry's personal identity is revealed only through the inclusion of her hands, an important signature aspect of each piece.



top: *Susan Sontag in Williamsburg, 2014*

bottom: *Jean Stapleton in Williamsburg, 2014*

As she aged and began to assess her own accomplishments and identity, Henry thought about the many women of the past whom she admired. After living most of her adult life in Manhattan's SoHo neighborhood, Henry moved to Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in 2006. She wondered, "What if I could bring these women to Williamsburg?" Sourcing old photographs from the Internet, she made life-size masks and posed behind them in neighborhood settings. 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. As all of them are deceased, Henry became their surrogate, borrowing their identities and taking them to places they probably never visited—all within a one-mile radius of her home.

The artist found convincing settings for each woman, even those—like Emma Goldman and Dorothy Lamour—whose images derive from vintage photographs. Georgia O'Keeffe stands in a nearby 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. Henry often takes advantage of serendipitous neighborhood finds: Judy Garland appears to interact with a group of characters from *The Wizard of Oz*, although she is actually standing beside a movie poster for *The Little Tin Man*. Henry seamlessly integrates the women into the Williamsburg environment and avoids making

them anachronisms (even when they smoke in bars). With her 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.

This body of work runs against the grain of the ubiquitous selfie, typically taken with a smart-phone camera and shared through social media. The selfie is an assertion of personal identity that always puts the subject front and center, relegating the setting to a mere backdrop. By using her body to insert these women into her photographs, Henry makes each the center of attention, but she shares the exposure by sharing their identities. Selfies unabashedly shout, “Look at me!” Henry’s photographs, on the other hand, say, “Look at me—but look at me as *her*!”

Interestingly, a selfie is usually characterized by the absence of the sitter’s hands, as one of them is occupied with snapping the photograph. In the case of *Me as Her*, Henry’s hands assert her true identity, and when they position the masks they become the conduits of her borrowed identity. In a selfie, the hand that holds the camera creates the image, while in Henry’s portraits, the hand that holds the mask directs the power of the image. Additionally, the hands of the living artist often spark a dialogue with the faces of the deceased women. 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 existed for them.

Although the hands are unmistakably Henry’s and imprint her personal identity on the portraits, her use of masks raises larger questions about the public face and the private self. Masks have been utilized across cultures and time periods for protection, disguise, performance, and entertainment. Touching on all of these aspects, Henry employs the mask as a powerful transformative agent that shields her identity while enabling her to assume a new one. Trying on another woman’s “fame” may in fact be Henry’s way of measuring herself against it.

There is a performative quality to Henry’s masquerade as she inhabits the public persona of an iconic figure. The term *persona* derives from the Latin word meaning an actor’s mask and refers to the aspect of someone’s character that is presented to or received by others. In her masquerade Henry is both the transmitter and receiver of information. She places herself squarely in the public eye and allows herself to be viewed as another woman, but each photograph is actually a masked self-portrait in a scene from her life.

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

Works in Exhibition

All works courtesy of the artist and BravinLee programs, New York, NY

Virginia Woolf in Williamsburg

2014

Archival pigment print

16 x 24 inches



Selena in Williamsburg

2014

Archival pigment print

16 x 24 inches



Ruby Dee in Williamsburg

2014

Archival pigment print

16 x 24 inches



Lucille Ball in Williamsburg

2014

Archival pigment print

16 x 24 inches



Judy Garland in Williamsburg

2014

Archival pigment print

16 x 24 inches



THE LITTLE TIN MAN

He's just a guy looking for a heart.

PRODUCTION COMPANY: [unreadable] DIRECTOR: [unreadable] CAST: [unreadable] "THE LITTLE TIN MAN" AARON BERNARD KAY PANNON

Georgia O'Keeffe in Williamsburg

2014

Archival pigment print

16 x 24 inches



Dorothy Lamour in Williamsburg

2014

Archival pigment print

16 x 24 inches

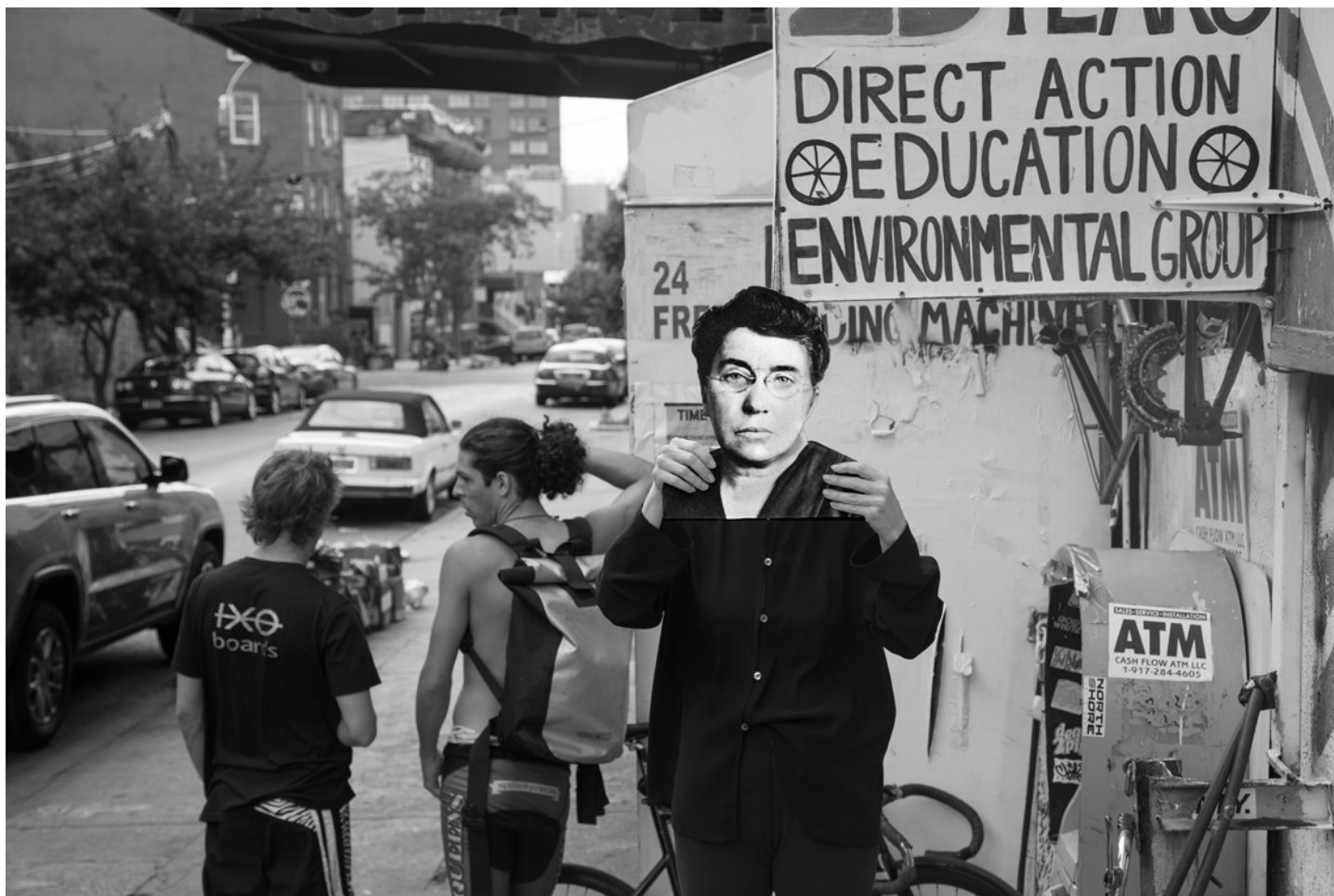


Emma Goldman in Williamsburg

2014

Archival pigment print

16 x 24 inches



Anna May Wong in Williamsburg

2014

Archival pigment print

16 x 24 inches



Amy Winehouse in Williamsburg

2014

Archival pigment print

16 x 24 inches



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Gallery Hours

Monday – Thursday: 10 am – 8 pm | Friday: 10 am – 5 pm | Saturday & Sunday: 11 am – 4 pm

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