



Behind the Mask

Written by guest curator, Sarah Umles

The mask has a rich global history. Over millennia, nearly all materials have been employed in the making of masks, including stone, wood, clay, leather, metal, cloth, paper, plastic, glass, paint, and makeup. From the world's earliest known masks—which date back 9,000 years to prehistoric times before the invention of written language—to Ancient Egyptian, Roman, Mayan, and African death masks; from early 1600s Japanese *Kabuki* theater masks to modern-day Halloween masks, humans have been compelled to cover their faces, taking on new identities whether human, animal, or spiritual. This deeply rooted impulse and the universal significance of the mask prevail in contemporary culture.

Behind the Mask calls into investigation the role of the mask in 21st-century artistic explorations and understandings of race, gender, sexuality, mythology, histories, and futures. *Behind the Mask* brings diverse artists into dialogue with one another, transgressing physical borders and the boundaries between folk art and fine art. The artists in this exhibition were selected based on the centrality of the mask in their unique aesthetic lexicons, as well as for the distinct conceptual perspectives they bring to the mask as a tool for ancestral remembrance and as an icon of contemporary identity politics.

Jack C. Black is a self-taught artist from Red Valley, Arizona in the Four Corners area of the Navajo Reservation. Black is best known for his portrayal of indigenous subjects, rendered in dramatic light and color. Black's vibrant paintings depict Navajo dancers donning highly stylized masks worn in sacred, ceremonial rituals. The works in this exhibition feature two prominent katsinam—more specifically, Angwusnasomtaka (also known as Tümas or "Crow Mother" in English) and Early Morning Kachina—embodied spiritual energies from the ancient mythology and ongoing ceremonial practices of the Hopi Nation in Arizona.

As an "outsider artist," little is known about the formal and conceptual underpinnings of Black's artistic practice, much less if he lays claim to any of the traditional markers of professional artistic "success"—exhibitions, awards, residencies, publications, and so on. *Behind the Mask* brings his work before a broader community and into conversation with other contemporary artists who also employ the iconography of the mask.

Skount Garcia (Raúl Garcia Pereira) was born in 1985 in Jerez de la Frontera, Spain, and he currently lives and works in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Inspired by the classical Spanish theatre of Almagro, the town where he spent his childhood, Skount's oneiric masked characters beckon the viewer away from their urban environment and into mysterious and playful dreamscapes. The great playwrights of Skount's youth formed a lasting impression. He regards life as a wonderful play, in which everyone has a role.

Driven by the fundamental desire to free his own mind, Skount's creativity knows no bounds. With a background in street art, his artistic expression spans paint, paper, music and performance, to video art, sculpture, and installation. Yet Skount always comes back to masks. As Skount explains, "Humans the world over have used masks since ancient times for sacred rituals, as ornamentation, and in performances and theatre. The mask disguises the identity of its wearer, and symbolizes the need to hide or repress a person's desires, fears and concerns. Skount observes that everybody carries a mask, with it we conceal our identity and adopt a more socially acceptable image to get by day to day. But we can also choose the moments and people with whom we can reveal our true nature, and take off our masks." Skount's irrepressible curiosity for other cultures has inspired him to travel and study different forms of creativity and traditions around the world. Skount has worked and exhibited throughout Spain, Europe, Israel, Kuwait, Bali, China, Japan, Australia, Mexico and the United States.

Ashley Johnson is a writer and a multidisciplinary creative entrepreneur living in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Johnson uses mixed media via photography, textile, live floral, woven and braided masks to navigate intra-racial conflict, identity evolution, southern woman and girlhood, and studies of relative time as it relates to African American/feminine beauty practice.

Johnson's work has been exhibited in venues including but not limited to Bellarmine University in Louisville; Hanesbrand Theatre Gallery, Associated Artists, and Blissful Gallery and Studios in Winston-Salem, NC; SoHo House x Buckhead Art & Company in Atlanta; the Central Gallery at Revolution Mill, Studio 503, and Center for Visual Arts in Greensboro. Johnson's photographs have been published by Darling Magazine, Fourteen Hills Press, and The Coraddi, and she's received acknowledgments in numerous media outlets including but not limited to the CulturePower Podcast, Click Magazine's "20 Women Changing Photography," Call + Response Journal, The Coastal Post, and All the Pretty Bird's 2019 article entitled "Who's Inspiring Us Right Now."

Alicia Piller, based in Los Angeles, envisions historical traumas, both political and environmental, through the lens of a microscope. Her sculptures and installations conceive of past atrocities, suffering, and accomplishments as biological forms—broken down to a cellular level. A variety of materials including vinyl, latex balloons, and photographs, are employed to examine the energy around wounds societies have inflicted upon themselves and others, but also give optimistic glimpses of a possible future with bright colors that show signs of life and proliferating forms that show signs of growth. Piller’s subject matter is often informed by her studies in anthropology and her sculptural process by her time in fashion and craft making.

Alicia Piller received her MFA from the California Institute of the Arts in the spring of 2019. Her work is included in the Hammer Museum’s Permanent Collection. Piller has had solo shows at Lowell Ryan Projects and at the California Institute of the Arts, and has shown throughout Los Angeles, New York and New Mexico.

Sarah Umles is an interdisciplinary artist, independent curator, arts administrator, and art collector. She was born in Bad Kreuznach, Germany and splits her time between Pasadena, California and Silverton, Colorado. Sarah is the founder and director of The Residency Project—an artist residency, community arts organization, and social sculpture. Sarah holds a Master’s in Arts Administration & Policy from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing with emphases in Fiction and Film & Visual Culture from the University of California, Riverside. She has curated numerous exhibitions highlighting work by emerging artists in several formal and non-traditional contexts including the Milwaukee Avenue Arts Festival, Design Cloud Gallery, and 2nd Floor Rear in Chicago, IL. Her own solo and collaborative work has been shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; California Museum of Photography; California Institute of the Arts; and BoldPas in Pasadena.
