

Ad Lucem: Masking and the Resilience of a Human Spirit

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Abstract

Life and the process of becoming involves a complex series of learned behaviors and social cues. Adapting to varied environments as well as adjusting emotions is commonplace, speaks to the nature of one's journey, and allows individuals to navigate life. Masking, a human coping mechanism used to conform to collective social pressures, locks individuals into a continuous engagement of impression management. In an attempt to please others, maintain relationships, and hold appearances genuine emotions are often substituted for artificial ones. This research project visually examines the practice of masking, shown through a series of photographic images, as it relates to the artists own personal experiences.

Keywords: Masking, Photography, Identity

1. Introduction

There may never have been a time more conducive for the evolution of self-exploration and individuality than the twenty-first century. It seems that social media has ushered in a new era in which part of establishing our own form of identity seems to be inextricably linked to a series of personal photographs that are attached to frequently trivial bits of commentary. In a sense, we've all become amateur documentarians - continually snapping selfies with cell phones and uploading them to the world wide web in order for others to peek into our lives. It sets the current tone for how we would like to be perceived by others. With the ability to be in complete control of our own narratives, is the face we present to others always an accurate representation of who we are? Online profiles give us the means to form personas of which we share as much or as little of ourselves as we care to reveal. In the interest of popularity and accumulating likes we constantly strive to uphold the impression that we live an ideal life, one absent of problems, worries, or concerns. Social media is unique in that it offers individuals the chance to disguise, cover-up, or mask certain aspects of themselves they would rather others not be privy to. In an era of outlandish theatrics by people of power and influence what we're now receiving is an endless array of faulty characterizations. Fictional representation has become the standard for illustrating experiences. We are unwittingly misled into contributing to a culture that embraces the belief that inaccurate portrayal of self is acceptable. However, this approach calls into question our ability to have honest experiences and take others at face value.

In order to assimilate and feel a connection to others, individuals find themselves utilizing the rules of display, a term first used by psychologists Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen in 1975 that suggest that cultural norms are learned early in life and govern the regulation of expressive behaviors depending on social contexts.¹ In *The Psychology of Emotions*, Psychologist Carroll Izard expresses his belief that the regulation of children's social behavior depends on, among other things, their ability to interpret the various emotional messages conveyed by other people.² Taking both Ekman & Friesen and Izard's theories and research about the forming of basic human behaviors

into account, it is apparent that the learning process of behavioral modification or masking begins in childhood. It includes emulating what we see and hear and reacting in ways that prove most satisfactory to those around us. We internalize positive and negative displays of emotion and our own behaviors are shaped by each of these experiences. Research that has examined parents' responses to their child's negative emotions has shown that parents who report more supportive reactions to their children's negative emotions have children who use more adaptive coping or emotion-regulation strategies.³ Therefore, children who are reared in households that are affirmative and nurturing are generally encouraged to be genuinely expressive and to openly share their feelings without fear of retribution. By contrast, unsupportive parental responses, communicating hostility, or invalidating the child's feelings, are likely to teach children not to talk regarding their feelings or problems.³ Consequently, children raised in households that express adverse reactions to pure emotions not thought to be appropriate or agreeable are often taught to emotionally regulate themselves, to hide their true feelings. Identity formation relies heavily on our earliest concepts of what constitutes, pleasant or easy-going experiences and these are the things that stay with us. Interpretations of past experiences influence our daily interactions. We are continually engaged in the process of impression management, the maintenance of an identity and its presentation through a complex coordination of multiple signs.⁴ These signs or adapted traits learned in childhood, cultivated during adolescence, and often well-established by early adulthood are an integral part of our internal navigation system and they determine our ability or inability to relate to others.

2. Reasons Behind Masking

We are largely governed by our belief that others will not accept us unless we demonstrate either verbal cues or visual indications emotional behavior that implies that everything is fine and things are in order. Masking is a behavior learned through various methods of socialization and allows us to manipulate emotional responses and modify behaviors accordingly.

In an effort to camouflage what most consider to be unfavorable emotions such as pain, anger, or disappointment, masking allows individuals to simulate positive expressions externally while concealing negative emotions internally. According to psychologist Abraham Maslow, our underlying intents are driven by our five hierarchal of needs; with two of the most important needing to be fulfilled before individuals can achieve the remaining: to feel safe and to feel a sense of belongingness, to be loved.⁵

Humans are adaptive by nature and share certain essential characteristics that help us establish connectedness to one another. Generally apprehensive in our approach to others, there is an involuntary reflex of sorts that prompts reading the behaviors of others in order to take on the role that best fits the circumstances. Most often we adopt what we assume to be adequate behaviors to assure that others remain comfortable, even if the cost of doing so causes emotional damage to oneself. For the sake of acceptance from others we justify utilizing a variety of masking - behavior modifications.

Smiling is one of the most commonly used techniques of masking. The act of smiling when one is unhappy, nervous, scared, or uncertain is a way of qualifying, lessening their significance when around others. It is used as a way to make tense situations more relaxed or pleasant.⁶ A good example of this is an individual who chooses to smile when someone they don't care for shows up at a birthday party thrown for a mutual friend. In order to keep the mood of the party positive they choose to conceal how they actually feel about the situation, internalizing their true emotions.

Though most individuals often conceal negative feelings with inauthentic positive ones, the act of masking can also include concealing one negative emotion with a different negative one; anger over fear. For example, an individual of a certain ethnicity that does not usually associate with or is not familiar with others of a different ethnicity may express anger if other ethnicities begin moving into their community, when, in actuality, the emotion they are really masking is fear.

Masking as a modulation technique attempting to create balance in a situation but may also be used as a neutralizing approach; for example, disappointment over happiness. An individual has interviewed for the same higher position at a workplace that a good colleague has. The company chooses the individual over the colleague for the position, and in order to prevent any hard feelings or animosity the individual feigns disappointment, suggesting to the colleague that the individual is genuinely empathetic over their loss.

In essence, the process of masking can be and most often is strongly influenced by environmental factors. How one interacts with one's parents, significant other, spouse, friends, coworkers and any number of other situations determines the frequency and method of masking. Its necessity may become so prevalent that an individual may not even realize they are engaged in any form of behavior modification. For many people the act of masking is a survival mechanism. An individual may have simply been born in an environment where they were forced to mask. Any signs

of expression of their true personality may have often been oppressed or denied. It is a manner of maneuvering unpleasant situations, physical or mental abuse, rejection, harassment or even social pressures. Poet Paul Laurence Dunbar aptly describes the practice, sacrifice, and eventual outcomes of masking in his poem *We Wear the Mask*:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, —
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.⁷

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3. Ad Lucem: Masking and the Resilience of a Human Spirit

This project is an attempt to represent the ways in which self-portraiture, created through the medium of photography with the incorporation of sculptural masks, can express the intricacies and resilience of the human spirit. The basic premise behind the work involves mentally revisiting poignant events of my life and interpreting them through a series of visually expressive photographic representations.

Visual narratives created through a series of photographs represent the innermost parts of a being. The purpose is to authentically establish a sense of familiarity from the viewer regarding the complexities of the human condition, while also attempting to connect varied commonalities and recognizable traits shared through similar experiences and emotions.

Photography as an art form has rarely been used to chronicle the lives of people of color in America. The lack of historical photographic references characterizing a people's perpetual spirit and resilience prompted me to document parts of my journey, heavily guiding my own self-examination and providing a purpose and method for the project. The need to visually tell part of my own narrative relating to masking and its lasting effects on my life is the most essential part of this body of work. This project uniquely illustrates my own difficulties of navigating pain and fear, my struggles with anger and disappointment, and the eventual cultivation of self-love and ascendance towards light and positivity. Though no two people's experiences are ever the same, my hope is that the viewer can feel a sort of kinship to the subject matter and even recognize references to their own masking or behavioral modifications in the experience.

4. Process

The modernization of a centuries-old process, first conceived as a projection device by 16th century artists to trace images, today, allows people in the 21st century to eternally immortalize themselves in photos. Technology has ushered in a new digital era and advanced camera techniques. Today, part of establishing one's identity is inextricably linked to capturing parts of one's own existence instantaneously. Effectively, the medium of photography has now become a prevalent tool that influences the manner in which humans document and share life experiences and common connections. Photography is a highly adaptable and expanding medium and its ever-increasing popularity allows individuals to develop their own sense of artistic freedom. Technological advancements are allowing photographers, novice, proficient, and experts alike, to rewrite the very definition of the photographic language by incorporating unconventional methods to create art from a combination of sources and techniques.

In the course of creating this body of work I am chronicling my process of producing self-portraiture through digital photography as a means of examining identity through the practice of masking or behavioral modification. To begin, I first created a list of 150 words and phrases that I felt correlated to my experiences of masking. These are some of the words I wrote down during my brainstorming session: Hide, Rejection, Suffer, Survive, Conflict, Brave, Identity, Strength, Light. In order to get a better idea of the aesthetic I felt I needed in order to capture the essence of what masking felt and feels like to me, these words and phrases were essential to the development of the project.

These are some of the phrases I produced during the initial stages of the process: “You need to always hide your real feelings”; “I know you’re hurting, but just smile and pretend everything’s alright”; “I have no idea who I really am”; “Have the courage to move beyond what they see”; “You absolutely have every right to be who you are”; “You are not damaged goods.” Each of these were things I’ve said to myself many times during my journey. During my adolescence and early adulthood, the phrases leaned more heavily towards negative, unfavorable thoughts. Years later, through much self-analysis and psychotherapy, I was able to reimagine my life and began to live more authentically - leaving behind the darkness and consciously leaning more into positivity and light. In the process I have been able to remove many of the masks I have worn in order to survive family dysfunction, difficult relationships and other life challenges.

4.1 Words, Phrases, and Constructed Masks

During the second part of the process I narrowed the list of words and phrases down to the ones most representative of my masking experiences. I then began visually interpreting these words and phrases through the construction of three-dimensional sculptural face masks using an assortment of materials such as: safety pins, artificial flowers, 24-gauge galvanized wire, 17-gauge 1-inch nails, epoxy, matt board, pine wood, and plastic. Each of the masks are representative of one of five distinct categories: Safety, Complexity, Religion, Beauty and Light.

Safety - Fig. 1. *Safety Mask*. Since adolescence, I have always had an affinity for safety pins. The 500 safety pins that were used to create this mask are symbolic of the ways I have been able to successfully hold together the truest parts of my identity. Despite the necessity to mask or modify my behavior out of fear of rejection, abuse, and hostility from others, inherently, I knew I was worthy of love and happiness.



Fig. 1. Shawn Winebrenner, *Safety Mask*, 2018. Fig. 2. Shawn Winebrenner, *Complexity Mask*, 2018.

Complexity - Fig. 2. *Complexity Mask*. I have faced many obstacles during the course of my lifetime and so many times felt overwhelmed and defeated. Having to continuously hide my true emotions has been extremely taxing and complicated. Forced to wear so many different masks with so many people is complex and has many times left me feeling devastated. Learning to overcome adversity and to walk firmly in who you know yourself to authentically be is tricky and does not come without challenges. I used a 24-gauge wire to construct this oval shaped mask, so I could create a kind of weaving pattern to mimic the intricacies that the act of masking presents.

Religion - Fig. 3. *Religion Mask*. This is an issue that has caused me a significant amount of pain. I was raised as a Southern Baptist Christian and didn’t know there were other religions until I was eighteen. If I was cognizant of others,

my mother's Christian beliefs which became my beliefs must have completely overshadowed them. I recognized during my childhood that I thought and acted differently than most boys. It was during my adolescence



Fig. 3. Shawn Winebrenner, *Religion Mask*, 2018.

that I realized I was queer, and I panicked. According to the beliefs of the churches we attended and particularly in my mother's opinion, being queer was a sin. I spent many years of my life masking my feelings, my identity, and my own beliefs about Christianity, and how harmful I felt it was to myself and others like me. This particular mask is constructed using three levels of matt board. These layers are representative of two things; first, the concept of triple-masking – one concealing emotions or behavior modifying to such a degree that it becomes almost impossible to differentiate between them; and two, they also represent the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost of the Christian Faith. Almost three-hundred, 17-gauge, 1-inch nails were used to cover the top layer of the mask. They represent piercing, hateful rhetoric I have encountered from some individuals and groups of the Christian faith during my life. They also represent the manner in which the Romans nailed Jesus to the cross.

Beauty - This mask represents the joy and grace of being able to overcome many difficult situations. A large portion of my life has been steeped in pain, disappointment, and regret and I frequently wondered whether I could pull myself up from what seemed like the lowest point and make my way out of the darkness. The beauty of moving into a new existence is never lost on me. Flowers are generally one of the first things that comes to mind when I think of beauty, so, I felt it would be most meaningful to create a three-dimensional mask out of artificial flowers.

Light - The last mask that I constructed represents light. Behind most of the theoretical masks I've worn has been darkness and invalid reasoning behind presenting myself as anything other than pure and real. This mask is in direct contrast to all things that prevented me from being whole and secure in myself and my innate ability to be free of negativity. It also represents the power and authority I possess to live life on my own terms. I constructed this mask using a white plastic material generally used for lining kitchen shelves or drawers. It's perforated with small holes throughout.

3.2 Makeup Application

Various makeup applications were introduced into the pre-production processes to help illustrate masking in an alternate way and to enhance the visual aesthetic of images. Masking, as it relates to concealing or modifying one's emotions and feelings, is in itself, the process of one who is acting, just as actors, wearing makeup, may perform for audiences. Makeup permitted me to create some semblance of the many emotions I kept hidden during times of masking, for example: red for pain and black for discomfort or the act of concealing.

In Fig. 4. *Cowardice and Fear* I implemented yellow makeup to serve as my perception of one who acts cowardly - is afraid of saying or doing, is intimidated by others. The white makeup is used to symbolize one's interpretation of the immobilizing effects of fear – the terror and unknowing dread associated with the emotion.



Fig. 4. Shawn Winebrenner. *Cowardice & Fear*, 2017. Digital color photograph.

3.3 Lighting, Editing, and Wardrobe

The final step in the process was capturing digital self-portraits using a Canon Rebel T6s DSLR camera. Images were captured in makeshift studios either in my home or spaces at UNC Asheville. A combination of lighting techniques were used to directly influence the mood and feel of the digital images. In Fig. 4. *Cowardice and Fear*, I used two soft boxes, one on the left and the other on the right, set two feet away to direct all of the focus on the subject (myself) and to create a completely black background. The intention was to create a stark contrast between the yellow and white makeup and the darkness of the black background.

For the images Fig. 5 & Fig. 6. *In the Clothing of Wolves*, I used red lighting to bathe the sanctuary of a church. My aim was to create an environment that embodied the feelings of hurt and rejection I experienced while attending church as a child and young adult. In post-production the original image was edited to give it a more dramatic impact. Photo manipulation software including Adobe® Photoshop and Adobe® Lightroom were used to control the value and intensity of most images as well as replicate the process of dodging and burning areas of images; a process once routinely used by photographers who developed their own film and produced images in darkrooms.



Fig. 5. Shawn Winebrenner. *In the Clothing of Wolves*, 2017. Raw, unedited digital color photograph.



Fig. 6. Shawn Winebrenner. *In the Clothing of Wolves*, 2017. Edited digital color photograph.

ability to merge easily into black backgrounds. Opting for solid colors in clothing helped me keep the focus of the shoots clear and uncomplicated.

Further research into photographic manipulation motivated me to broaden the initial scope of the project. A number of artistic elements and methods were attempted using photo editing software and eventually integrated – inverted images, multiple condensed exposures (Fig. 7.), color saturation – to create a more engaging body of work.

As the primary concept of the body of work is centered around events that were integral to the formation of my identity, the implementation of multiple disciplines – photography, design, and elements of sculpture – were merged to fully express varied emotional experiences and run parallel to the concept.



Fig. 7. Shawn Winebrenner. *Insistent Duality*, 2017. Edited digital color photograph.

4. Influences

Each of these artists contributes a unique perspective on identity formation, emotion, and behavior modification. Visually and conceptually, they are the most influential to this current body of work.

4.1 Cindy Sherman

I believe Cindy Sherman may be to the selfie movement what Picasso was to the Cubist Movement. Her body of work is synonymous with the exploration of identity and creative perception. Since she began working she has morphed herself into an assembly of characters that challenge what we think we know about class, gender, ethnicity, and behavior modification. Her approach to photography set the art world on its axis when she first came on the scene in the mid 70s; and her “just for fun” manner of dressing as different characters to attend parties in New York was the momentum she needed to establish herself as an artist.⁸ She has used successfully developed a long string of identities that mirror reality but defy simple interpretation. Fig. 8., Sherman’s *Untitled #462* is an image of what could be surmised as twins at what appears to be an art gallery opening. They both sport the same hairdo, makeup, glasses and jewelry. What Sherman may be asking of the viewer is to consider what characteristics sets these two women apart? She is a thought-provoking pioneer of self-portraiture and continues to inspire me to push myself beyond my limits.



Fig. 8. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #462*, 2007-2008. Color photograph.
<http://resourcemagonline.com/2012/02/cindy-sherman-retrospective/3078/>

4.2 Jenny Saville

Raw, honest, and mesmerizing are qualifiers used when describing the work of artist Jenny Saville. Her work is sensual, and her use of highly pigmented oils is not easily mistaken for any other's. As part of the YBA (Young British Artist) collective she is ambitious but paints because for her it's life. Her approach to the medium is clearly authentic and that's what I find so appealing about the work she produces. I find her work stimulating and the absolute antithesis of masking. Great examples of her aesthetic can be seen below in Fig. 9. *Hyphen* and Fig. 10. *Reverse*. Unlike the implications of masking or behavioral modification where one changes aspects of themselves to suit others needs, it speaks confidently and boldly.



Fig. 9. Jenny Saville, *Hyphen*, 1999. Oil on canvas.
<https://www.wikiart.org/en/jenny-saville/hyphen-1999>



Fig. 10. Jenny Saville, *Reverse*, 2002-2003. Oil on canvas.
<http://www.elcuadrodeldia.com/post/110883140104/jenny-saville-reverse-2002-2003-óleo-sobre>

5. Conclusion

This process of revisiting past experiences for the sake of creating this body of work has been informative, difficult, and at times painful. The process of masking was such a part of my formative years and early adulthood that I nearly lost my sanity. However, my broad array of life experiences, good and bad, have taught me to proudly embrace the fact that I am many things. My identity and personal characteristics are no longer dictated by the needs of others. This body of work, these self-portraits, remind me that I am still in the process of becoming. My experiences continue to shape me, and I now fully understand that it's perfectly alright to let go of the past. I am an artist and my objective is to make life meaningful by sharing my journey. My hope is that somewhere along the way people will make a connection because they can see themselves in the work.

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7. Endnotes

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