

Tickle Your Fancy

With Masks.

What culture doesn't have a tradition of masks? All over the world masks are associated with religious rituals, carnival, theater, opera and dance. From Switzerland to India, people hang masks on their doors to ward off the evil eye. Whether lofty or low, spiritual or earthy, serious or playful, the fascination masks exert has deep, primitive roots in our psychology. The mask-bearer has permission to be another, and through masks another world is allowed to enter our own.

Whatever their function, masks also possess an aesthetic dimension, and the latter is primary at Karin Clarke's current Mask Invitational exhibit, for which the gallery invited 11 local artists to create masks. The result is a playful array of masks bearing the stamps of widely different imaginations.

Ceramics: Faye Nakamura's exquisitely carved and painted ceramic masks include two large-format, full-head masks, one inspired by Japan, the other by Egypt, and five smaller eye-masks. All are decorated with incised motifs (flowers, dancers, women's faces), delicately carved flowers, seashells, or snakes. Colors are soft and luminous.

Paper: Paper, in skillful hands such as Bonnie Bartell's, can acquire surprising sculptural properties, as in her all-white *Mask of Methuselah*. Though quite varied in form, Bartell's masks are highly playful, often inspired by a punning imagination. *Maskerade Ball* uses a softball with a bright



MAKE A WISH, MIXED MEDIA, BY JUDITH SPARKS.

reddish gold profile, whose expression evoked for me the folk hero and prankster Till Owlglass. To the left springs a bird's torso, painted gold over black. These toys are from an attic's trunk, far in aesthetics and sensibility from today's manufactured toys, but I suspect they would speak instantly to the imagination of any contemporary child.

Painting and collage: Clarke's *Mask* depicts a young, gently enigmatic face, painted in rich but muted complementary tones of reddish and greenish browns. Below, collaged letters spell the word MASK. I found this discrete painting to have enduring power.

Wood: In *Sculpture on my Mind*, Clarke assembled wood pieces of different sizes and shapes, stained almost black, to create a tall mask in a "primitive" vein with a different face in front and back. On one side, an abstract sculpture functions as a head-dress that evokes abstracted birds in flight. For *Mask Head* and *Head Mask*, Jim Bartell used cedar boards cut out and carved into profiles. Nails, together with copper wire flattened and coiled, create beards, hair, and facial marks.

Mixed media: Judith Sparks' pieces show remarkable diversity of means, moods and inspiration. *Make a Wish* is an intriguing assemblage of animal bones, the largest suggesting a human skull-mask. Strings of seed beads dangle from its chin, each with a wishbone as pendant, and dice peer out of its sockets. Meanwhile, in *Scarey*, Sparks makes clever use of a single photograph of President Bush printed in different sizes, grain texture and darkness to create a photo-montage in the shape of a flower bouquet, as well as a political spoof. In contrast, Beverly Soasey plays with minute variations on the mask-shape theme in a series of five masks painted sienna and red with black accents, and decorated with feathers, sticks and beads.

Other media used include metal (Harold Hoy), glass (Annah James), wood appliqué (Barbara Kensler), hydrocal (Miriam Kley) and stoneware with found objects (Betsy Wolfson).

After viewing this display, visitors may well be inspired to dream up a mask of their own in any medium they fancy. "Mask Invitational" is at Karin Clarke Gallery, Oct. 21-Nov. 15.

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MASK OF METHUSELAH, PAPER, BY BONNIE BARTELL.

pink-and-gold eye-mask on. Framed *Mask for Invisible Man* consists of an empty rectangular frame decorated in fluorescent pink. Her *Three Masketeers* is a triple mask created out of a long narrow panel of colored paper.

Mark Clarke's *From the Toy Box*, a three-headed mask, also demonstrates the versatility of the paper-and-cardboard medium. The central part represents a toy soldier's head wearing a bright red cap, one side of its face painted green, the other dark red and purple. To the right emerges a boy's

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