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The Playhouse

Mixed media

To exist is to perform. We don alternating masks to express the manifold self by way of the archetypes provided by the collective unconscious, a concept psychoanalyst Carl Jung explained as a ubiquitous set of internalized symbols uniting the whole of humanity. While Jung framed the persona as a limitation of expression, I sought to investigate the authenticity of this everyday performance through the lens of the collective unconscious. I created my own set of masked players to explore contrasting facets of myself as well as the relationship between internal and external acting. My principal sources include Jung's own proposed archetypes, the stock characters of la commedia dell'arte, and shared mythology such as legend and religion, and William Blake's original mythology. In terms of art I referred to Candice Lin's *Wigan Pit Brow Women: Intersections with the Caribbean* mobile, paper dolls, shadow-boxes, and folk art traditions related to my heritage. As writer Virginia Woolf stated: "illusions are to the soul what atmosphere is to the earth." Performance is essential, with the most successful mask being one that reveals rather than disguises.

Masking the Unconscious



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We are perpetual actors inhabiting the archetypes dictated by the collective unconscious. The most effective use of mask does not rely on disguising, but revealing (Marshall *Some Fifth-Century* 189); its power comes from an emphasis on shared language. The Shakespearean maxim is that the world is a stage and we mere players. It is an earned cliché; its ubiquity, like those of symbols within a shared psyche, reveals a resonating truth.

Jung defined the collective unconscious as a “part of the unconscious that is not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behavior that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals.” He elaborated: “the contents of the collective unconscious are known as archetypes . . . So far as the collective unconscious contents are concerned we are dealing with archaic or—I would say—primordial types, that is, with universal images that have existed since the remotest times” (Jung *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*). The archetypes as a whole comprise an ultimate truth, while masks (or personas) are a signifier of falsity. Jung stated that the persona is “a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and, on the other, to conceal the true nature of the individual” (Jung *Two Essays*). We are perpetually masked, performing our personas to ourselves even when we have no audience (Berger *The Theatre of Indifference* 71). Still, our acting is not insincere: “personality is built up largely by acts of introjection,” said philosopher Erich Neumann; “contents that were before experienced outside are taken inside.” (Neumann *The Origins and History of Consciousness*). The inward synthesis of the outward world then becomes our performance of self in a reflection of the world around us. Our masks are no less genuine than reality itself. In combining the concepts of archetype and persona through theater, I aim to explore the seemingly contradictory authenticity of our everyday performance. How does Jung’s concept of archetypes in relation to the collective unconscious intersect with masks and this performance?

How does it dictate reality? Does the fact of our performance render self-expression inauthentic? Do we shape archetypes, or do they shape us?

Differing cultures' approaches to acting expose contrasting angles of the nature of performance. European theater often employs suspension of disbelief for the sake of immersion, whereas the actors of Chinese theater put on characters in much the same way one puts on a coat. A kind of "alienation" is implemented so that, in becoming aware of the other, one becomes aware of oneself (Brecht *Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting* 136-140). The author Scott McCloud observed, "when you look at a photo or a realistic drawing of a face, you see it as another. But when you enter the world of the [mask] you see it as yourself" (McCloud *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*). If an audience was familiar with the archetypes of the masks, they would be immediately familiar with the characters represented before they so much as spoke or moved, stirred by fragments of themselves expressed through the inherent archetypes of a collective unconscious.

The use of masks in performance originated in ancient Greece. They were used to communicate intensity of emotion, as well as allowing for smaller cast sizes given that actors could change character by changing masks (*Theatrical Uses*). The practice spread across Japan, Tibet, Java, Bali, and the rest of Europe during the Middle Ages (*Theatrical Uses*). The end of the Renaissance saw theatrical mask-wearing largely fall out of fashion as art grew more self-serious, with portrayed archetypes being primarily translated to folk art shows with puppets or marionettes (*Uses*). Pulcinella of la commedia dell'arte, for instance, evolved into Punch of Punch and Judy (*Commedia dell'Arte*). After all, it is much less jarring to watch Punch thrash Judy with a wooden fist than one of flesh. Absurdity became an asset. This trend toward folk theater saw the medium becoming widely accessible as a tool of common expression for the greater population (*Uses*). Its

universality is an unsurprising one given the all-encompassing nature of theater, spanning forms of writing, acting, scoring and playing or singing, costume design and creation, set design and creation, and dance.

Despite no longer acting, I love the theater for its melding of media, which, if exceptionally successful, transcends the stage in the way that all the best art stops being “art” and becomes a part of the soul. I pore over costume concept illustration and performance from the works of Shakespeare to contemporary oeuvres. Listening to much of my favorite music is like watching a play, complete with dance numbers, getup changes, and wheeled set pieces rolling on and offstage. My closest friend admits that whenever she makes me a playlist she starts by finding the most theatrical songs.

I created eight of my own archetypes to explore my individual reality in conjunction with that of Jung’s twelve archetypes in the context of the collective unconscious. I took cues from William Blake’s original mythology and its symbolic characters, also drawing from Candice Lin’s *Wigan Pit Brow Women: Intersections with the Caribbean* mobile, folk puppet theater, and shadowboxes. While my archetypes are an expression of my individual consciousness and unconscious, they inevitably intersect with and parallel others, such as Jung’s 12: The Innocent, the Everyman, the Hero, the Outlaw, the Explorer, the Creator, the Ruler, the Magician, the Lover, the Caregiver, the Jester, and the Sage (Shannon *The 12 Literary Archetypes*). Sometimes this reference is intended and sometimes it is an instinctual embodiment. I chose to do eight because of the number’s tie to the eight Jungian cognitive functions as well as the eight-fold path of Buddhism (which outlines the steps necessary for self-completion), both concepts ruled by their own archetypes and symbols (*Understanding the 8 Jungian Cognitive Functions & Eightfold Path*). Eight, furthermore, seemed like a realistic number of characters to focus on. My cast

includes the Unicorn-Knight, the Twins, Mother Marrow, the Stitched Man, the Professional, the Caterpillar-Fairy, L'amateur, and Playwright. These characters will take the form of masked puppets.

I. The Twins

I am a woman (legally, now) who wields pronounced masculinity, not half American and half Dominican but wholly both, born under the tarot card of the Lovers, whose harmonious life is dependent on “the cooperation between the conscious and the subconscious.” A figurative mirror still grants reflection (as noted above in terms of Chinese theater and McCloud’s observation). The Twins act as siblings and lovers, conscious and unconscious, a man and woman neither man nor woman. Dual and absolute, they govern the realm of harmonious contradiction.

Above all the twins are a reminder of possibility beyond the singular. Archetypes on the whole exist in this plural state. Neumann professed that symbols (in this case the symbol of archetypes) “gather round the thing to be explained, understood, interpreted [so that] each symbol lays bare another essential side of the object being grasped, points to another facet of meaning. Only the canon of these symbols congregating about the canon in question, the coherent symbol group, can lead to an understanding of what the symbols point to and what they are trying to express” (*Origins and History*). A double is only the beginning.

II. The Unicorn-Knight

A Sagittarius with four of my major aspects likewise in Sagittarius, I grew up riding horses, listening to my father’s stories of Lancelot and the quests he met while riding Gringolet, the steed gifted him by Gawain. I delight in the myth centaurs—horses even more, for their uncanny ability to mirror those around them—yet my fascination is with the unicorn.

I first visited “The Hunt of the Unicorn” tapestries at the Cloisters at seven years old. Its artist (or more likely artists), order, initial patrons, storyline, and symbolism are all contested (Jow *Why the Mystery of the Famous Unicorn Tapestries Remains Unsolved*), and I have even heard it

argued that there are panels missing from the display entirely after having been lost or destroyed. Mystery has become an integral part of the unicorn's story. The most common theory surrounding the work has become its default narrative: the unicorn, an allegory for Christ, purifies water, and, for this naive display of compassion, he is hunted, tricked, and captured (*Mystery of the Famous*).

This is simply the most popular of many theories. The tale of the unicorn can never really be known, and, as a result, any attempt to chain him in a truer sense is ultimately thwarted. "We are not always what we seem, and hardly ever what we dream," observed writer Peter S. Beagle in his novel *The Last Unicorn*, wherein humanity is so unable to conceive of the unicorn that they see a white mare in her place until she is enchanted, caged, and put on display (Beagle *The Last Unicorn* 30). Humanity can only trap itself, caught in the self-imposed prison of ego, convinced that to cherish and to own are the same thing. As writer James Baldwin stated: "freedom is not something that anybody can be given. Freedom is something people take, and people are as free as they want to be" (Baldwin *The Fire Next Time*). I bought a gift-shop print of the unicorn in captivity with the image of the unicorn blazing in my second-grade mind. Bloodied and collared, he gazes at an unknown point with the serenity of someone who knows something the onlooker does not. Now I, too, own a piece of him, on my wall, my notebook, my pajama pants, and in my snow-globe, holding onto shreds of incorruptible innocence. The Unicorn-Knight is one of my first masks in that she is not a mask at all. She is too trusting to think of wearing one. She is a performer unwittingly forced in front of a gawking audience.

The Unicorn-Knight is an inverse centaur. Like Nick Bottom's head of an ass, a symbolic mask denoting his role as the Fool, the Unicorn-Knight's face is that of an innocent: the horned horse. She hails from the myth of knights and chivalry, of cowboys and the West, of la commedia dell'arte's Zanni the buffoon (*Commedia dell'Arte Characters*), of the witch Morgause's boys

dragging around the head of the unicorn they mutilated as a trophy and hating it for evidencing the beauty they destroyed (*White The Queen of Air and Darkness*). She bears scars and wears armor. Her imprisonment is at her hip now—a lasso of pearls.

III. The Stitched Man

Armor is fallible. The Unicorn-Knight will be wounded as she has been wounded before. The Stitched Man is named for the Wound Man, the medieval image of a man suffering from every injury, trauma, and ailment conceivable, ranging from rash-ridden legs raked with thorns to the blades dangling from his form like pins on a butterfly. Little is known about the esoteric figure beyond the fact that it is thought to have been used in a medical, likely surgical, context (*Hartnell Wording the Wound Man*). I applied the name of this repeated image—this archetype—to the Vodou fetish or bocio, which is, conversely, a symbol of protection and healing (*Beyer What Are Voodoo Dolls and Are They Real?*). The doll is fastened with 6 milagro folk votives in places that have been damaged or require the most protection: the head, throat, heart, stomach, womb, and knee. Just as the religion of Vodou is a blend of the West African religion of Vodun with Roman Catholicism (*Vodou*), I combined the European Wound Man, Caribbean Vodou doll, and Iberian milagro. These cultures, all of which comprise aspects of my heritage, illustrate in turn the cycle of protection, injury, and healing.

IV. Mother Marrow

Roles of acting and watching are simultaneous and transactional. Like critic John Berger said, everyone is “forced to be either spectator or performer. Some performers perform their refusal to perform” (*Berger Indifference* 70). The walls hanging with paintings on display and the seats of

theatergoers alike are referred to as the gallery. Yet the private stage takes a unique role for men and women. Berger distinguished that “*men act and women appear*. Women watch themselves being looked at” (Berger *Ways of Seeing* 47). Men are defined by their deeds; women their appearance. Women, in turn, watch other women, constantly measuring ourselves against one another. Both binary sexes act as an audience to the female spectacle. In the words of writer Margaret Atwood, “you are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur” (Atwood *The Robber Bride*).

Mother Marrow is translucent, bare, an aspic Madonna with her insides exhibited along with her exterior. Her visage a rejection of the traditional European nude, she radiates the histrionic sexual power of ancient fertility fetishes (*Venus of Willendorf*), a child tucked into her gelatin womb like a Christ in a king cake. Mother Marrow is the side of womanhood so innate it defies mask: nurturing, earth, spirituality—all parts of the divine feminine. By existing, however, she performs. The same collagen binding bones, muscle, and skin (*Collagen*) binds the cottage cheese and pineapple in a housewife’s 1960’s jello salad: “Dainty Desserts for Dainty People” (*Dainty Desserts for Dainty People*). The pure and spare Jell-O girl (Grey *A Social History of Jell-O Salad*). A breakdown of protein. Weak bones. On the last day of school before I moved to New York we had a classroom party, during which I discovered a plastic baby in my second slice of cake. My best friend was so jealous she cried.

V. The Professional

The doctor, the psychologist, or psychiatrist, is not insane—the captor is not trapped. The Professional crafts the masks of existence and tacks them to his study walls, from “Acting” to “Zygodactylous.” He invented flowers by labelling them and race by fearing ones that he did not

belong to. Existence to him is a communal game of solitaire. Cracked Actor, Sane Hatter, he delights in the confines of Plato's allegorical cave as if the shadows are a puppet show put on especially for him (Gocer *The Puppet Theater in Plato's Parable of the Cave*). Il Dottore of la commedia dell'arte wears funereal black despite being an alleged healer (*Commedia dell'Arte*); The Professional wears technicolor in delirium contradictory to his repository of order. Prescriptions cling to the Professional like butterflies on the head of a bald man. Yet he is also a lawyer. A politician. A writer. He is a pedophile in love with his mother.

VI. The Caterpillar-Fairy

The Caterpillar-Fairy is a method actor in regard to her perpetual becoming. She will not only don the regalia of a butterfly but dissolve herself completely in order to play her new role (Webster *Goo and You: Radiolab*). Her transformation is a dramatic one: she will enclose herself within her chambers, come apart, and reappear from the wings to make her entrance. The woolly bear caterpillar shadowed me in Wyoming this summer as I was in the midst of a particularly painful evolution. Each day yielded at least one sighting of the blond-streaked larvae, crossed in front of me on hiking paths and winding their trail around the deck of our cabin. They must be very common, I thought. Despite this, my parents never seemed to see them. I searched them online to find out their final form: the Isabella tiger moth (*Tiger Moth*).

VII. L'amateur

French, as the language of love, suits L'amateur as his appellative association. Although the English word "amateur" denotes a beginner or novice, the French counterpart from which it derives refers instead to someone with a "marked fondness, liking, or taste," originating from the Latin

“amator,” or “lover” (*Amateur Definition & Meaning*). Passion makes up the fabric of L’amateur and engrosses him to the point of projecting foolishness. He is no fool, however, and his love stems *from* his experience—he has seen the world and chooses to greet it with the joy of devotion. Love letters scatter from his pockets and his chocolate-wrapper ruffle glitters gold foil as he strums his lute.

Although partly based on Arlecchino of la commedia dell'arte, he is too honest to be a true trickster. “Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within,” explained Baldwin. “I use the word “love” here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth” (Baldwin *The Fire*). The artist, Baldwin stated, is “distinguished from all other responsible actors in society . . . Society must accept some things as real; but he must always know that visible reality hides a deeper one, and that all our action and achievement rest on things unseen” (Baldwin *The Creative Process*). L’amateur’s greater purpose as an artist is illumination. His cheeks shine as red as the apple he holds as offering, both an emblem of seduction and his will to free others from the vise of ignorance. With a wink and a nod, he gestures toward the strings that attach him to his wooden control.

VIII. Playwright

“Playwright” is called “Playwright” instead of “the Playwright” in the sense that “God” is not referred to as “the God.” She is manifest, omnipotent, and infallible. According to Berger, an onlooker “cannot conceive of the theatre of indifference. He has never seen people producing such a surplus of expression over and above what is necessary to express themselves. And so he assumes

that their hidden lives are as rich and mysterious as their expressions are extreme . . . he cannot yet see the invisible—that which, according to his imagination, must lie behind their expressions and behaviour. He believes that what is happening in the city exceeds his imagination and his previous dreams. Tragically, he is right” (Berger *Indifference* 73). Playwright recognizes performance for what it is. She, too, is a participant in the play, acting through the stories she writes, the characters she begets and the planets she raises borne from the exhibition of expression. Said writer Virginia Woolf, “illusions are to the soul what atmosphere is to the earth” (Woolf *Orlando: A Biography*). The reality Playwright creates is illusory in the manner that reality on the whole is, and, by the same token, is wholly veritable.

We play many roles throughout our lives. Our own rotating cast, we begin as one person and end up another, remaining ourselves just the same. Shakespeare conjured a version of such archetypes: the Infant, the Schoolboy, the Lover, a Soldier, the Justice, the Pantaloon, and the end (Shakespeare *As You Like It*). My own original archetypes govern my present self. In time they will no doubt develop, shift, and be replaced by others until they take their final bow and the curtains close.

“Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp’d towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.”
(Shakespeare *The Tempest*)

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