

Hidden in Plain Sight

In *The Masks I Wear to Pass*, Ben Rak considers what it means to ‘pass’—to appear as something other than who or what we really are. Rak has never been content to be a traditional printmaker, and his practice has often played with appearances. His new body of work extends these investigations, using the screen printing process to explore the layered nature of identity and the way we are constantly wearing masks, even when we are alone.

This idea of masks and concealment runs through the work. Layers are moved, shifted, and deleted, and it’s these alterations that allow passing to occur. Usually, screen prints are made with the screen bolted to the workbench, but in 2019 Rak began experimenting with unhinging the screen and moving it freehand. This method resulted in something that looked like a painterly gesture, even though it had been mechanically created. Unhinging the screen, then, became a way to unfix his works from the traditional vernacular of printmaking.

Rak also printed these works on unstretched canvas and worked the image right to the edges. These two decisions pushed the works further away from the expectations around printmaking, and closer towards painting. In *Unhinged #3*, 2019, Rak tested viewers’ expectations again by cutting the canvas to suggest a sequence of billboard posters or paste-ups.

The images that he works with when he makes these prints are the foul-bitten marks that mar the etching plate during the etching process. Rak has collected a library of these scratchy marks, and he variously manipulates and enlarges them into different compositions. Past works like *Pulling the Christopher Wool over your eyes #1*, 2019, located his interest in the foul-bitten mark in relation to the long lineage of artists who have also challenged the painterly gesture and its revered place in art history. For Rak, then, these marks represent another way of questioning authenticity.

In the series that gives the exhibition its title, he has taken these compositions and introduced photographic images of his own eyes. These eyes are guarded and

unreadable, and their presence pushes the work into a space somewhere between figuration and abstraction. In works like *The Masks I Wear to Pass*, 2020, the eyes also seem to alter the surrounding layers of print. After printing, Rak applied solvent to the surface in places and then pushed the loose ink around to create painterly smudges, smears, and translucencies. The compositions start to feel less abstract and more like the shapes and shadows of a mask wrapped over the rest of the face.

Rak works with a minimal palette. He directs attention to formal questions and the fluctuating identities of the works as they move between printing and painting, and abstraction and figuration. During the COVID-19 lockdown, he developed a new way of working with these ideas. Using the home printer, he ran his compositions out on transparent acetate sheets and then applied solvent, much as he had done with the larger canvas works. On the plastic sheets, however, this technique created spilling and pooling, which he tipped and manipulated to create a strong sense of movement. In *Facets*, 2020, the effect is something like a circling maelstrom of different kinds of marks and gestures.

Rak calls these home printer works degenographs, playing on ideas of degeneracy and art historical hierarchies. The finished works take different forms. The *Facets* works are glossy, large-format digital prints, while *I Know You Know Who I Am* is a series of dye sublimation prints on aluminium, which have then been laser-cut into shapes like masks. These shapes also suggest faceted mineral or rock samples. The material solidity of these aluminium works contrasts with the untethered, shifting quality of Rak's compositions, particularly the drifting eyes.

The eyes return again in the video work *Somewhere Between Omission and Camouflage*, 2020. The work is shown across two screens set at different heights, suggesting imbalances of perspective. On each screen, eyes fade in and begin to slowly look around. At times they almost seem to meet each other's gaze. This subtle movement brings attention back to questions of dynamics, action, and interaction in the work, and shows how the shifting gaze is used to both construct and test identity.

In a social context, passing is enmeshed with issues of power, privilege, and prejudice and is loaded with risk, including the shameful implication of inauthenticity. This is the point where Rak steps away from the metaphor that he is constructing. *The Masks I Wear to Pass* draws on his personal knowledge of passing and includes elements of self-portraiture, but Rak is not declaring a single 'true' identity or attempting to show what's under the mask. His interests are instead in those moments of uncertainty, dissonance, and self-estrangement—in the psychological experience of passing and the shadows it casts over us.

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