

Shown and Obscured: The Layered Faces of Ben Rak

Dr Sam Bowker, Senior Lecturer in Art History & Visual Culture, Charles Sturt University

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Don't Be Fooled By The Faces I Wear

You have walked into an exhibition that asks you not to be fooled by the faces 'worn' by the artist. I'm here to help unpack this warning. Let's see what is being shown, and obscured, at the same time.

The history of photography and screen-printing are shared, for they are efforts to capture the elusive shadow. Both the photographic negative and the printed positive are required to create the image. Ben Rak's work offers an emulsion that allows these two forms to blend into one thing.

Here we are seeing a printmaker translate their practice into a context that is best known for contemporary photography. Like most translations, subtle meanings will be lost in the exchange between languages. Some of these are arcane connotations, some may be idiomatic and challenging to convey. But I'd like to bring your attention to a lingering and vexed problem of interpretation, because it's the key to understanding what is going on here. In a sense, these are all self-portraits.

This exhibition uses the processes of printmaking as metaphors for the performance of self.

This is an extension of themes raised in Ben Rak's previous exhibition *The Masks I Wear to Pass*, (Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, 2020).ⁱ In both exhibitions we see Rak's pursuit of printmaking processes as a layered metaphor, in which each mark-making gesture is also a mask-making gesture.

The performance of self, as espoused by the theorist Irving Goffman in 1956 and many others since then, is a mutable and dynamic proposition.ⁱⁱ It may involve a lifetime of decisions for the person concerned, a continuous state of 'impression management' (much like the career of a printmaker). But it only takes a fraction of a moment for another person to interpret *how* that self is being performed – that brief encounter is an instantaneous impression, like a still from a video. In this sense the 'photographic' self is based on recognition, but the 'printed' self is based on expression. Whilst the photograph's relationship between negative and positive offers potential for differences in scale, a screen print is far more literal – it can only be reproduced at the same size it started from. For Goffman and Rak, the objective of the performed self is to 'pass', and for a print maker the objective is very similar: to be seen as intended.

Rak's recent practice has been centred on the performed self, and specifically the problems of 'passing' as a public persona. But a persona and a person are not quite the same thing. A person may adopt roles, these are persona – taken from the Latin for 'mask'. But a persona without a specific role is a façade, a *tabula rasa* or blank slate, or empty page. It is a point from which we start, infinitely mutable into other things. It could be protective, assertive, a decoy or a defence.

One of the really interesting things about this exhibition is that Ben Rak has taken the 'mask' as an increasingly figurative device. On my first viewing, I mistook the blank 'eyes' of *Second Nature* (one of the largest prints in this exhibition) as actual holes, whereas they are painted grey surfaces – there are no voids here, only deliberate gestures. This reminds us that no-one needs a *figurative* mask to wear a *performative* mask. Wearing a mask simultaneously erases the self, and offers an alternative self in exchange.

Knowing that these complex prints are self-portraits leads us to search for the face of the artist within them. This engages the concept of *pareidolia*, which is our tendency to recognise faces in abstract settings. These fictional faces are coincidences that our gaze exaggerates, given their importance within our ability to communicate. An abstraction can thus 'pass', albeit briefly or imperfectly, as a human face. Just as a few words might be sufficient for us to recall a song or a film, a few basic shapes call to mind some of the most elaborate communication systems we possess – gesture, facial expression, cultural cues, and non-verbal syntax (as simple and nuanced as a glance, a motion, or a twitch). Facial cues are sufficient to trigger an impression of a certain type of person.

In a new video installation, *Skins* (2021), Ben Rak's screen prints find and fix us with a returned gaze. It is characteristic of portraiture to unerringly follow you around the room, but have we ever asked ourselves 'what does the portrait want?' *Skins* reminds me of the historian Ali A. Olomi's recent quip; "If you're feeling ugly today, just remember that the djinn that watches you from your mirror thinks you're pretty."ⁱⁱⁱ The public performance of self, after all, can be a discomfiting process.

A mask is a façade, or a temporary layer over a more substantial foundation. Over the past two years, we have all become intimately familiar with masks in daily life. But Rak's research regarding masks is invested in the quotidian behaviours associated with the performed self as a form of role play, rather than the character itself (unlike *commedia dell arte* or *noh* theatre, for example).

Screen-printing creates a series of overlapping masks. Each stencil provides a new mask, and their accumulation creates a complex persona. Prints are all layers, but painting may or may not be layered, as it consists of an accretion of separate and individual parts (brushstrokes). An analogue photograph is a definitive layer, though it can be divided in post-production, such as montage and collage. When using photoshop, the digital use of layers is one of the first things we learn.

Layering a print with multiple registers seems so casual we might scarcely notice. Yet note the implications of the verb 'to register' – through this term we take notice, recall or display. In a linguistic context the register evokes a person's voice and vocabulary, all means by which they 'pass'. The layering of the precise with the imperfect also evokes the calligraphic practice of *siyāh mashq* or 'black work'.^{iv} In this process, a series of letters are written in ink over and over each other, building complexity through repetition, yet obscuring the original words. Though such practice is impossible to read, but the calligrapher seeks to become legible over time, when a specific message is desired.

To carry the photographic metaphor further, Ben Rak notes that to be 'exposed' is the nemesis of passing. It implies the failure to 'pass', as the exposure of an underlying self has superseded the façade. Thus, passing relies on *withholding* information as well as revealing, sharing or using it.

We should not be fooled by the disembodied faces Ben Rak has created for us. They are tools made of layers and evocations, to be worn just as masks are worn: only as needed, for a specific moment, and removed when that moment has passed.

ⁱ Jane O'Sullivan, 'Hidden in Plain Sight' for *The Masks I Wear to Pass*. Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, 2020.

ⁱⁱ Irving Goffman, *The Performance of Self in Everyday Life*. Doubleday, 1956.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ali A. Olomi, 26 June 2021 - <https://mobile.twitter.com/aaolomi/status/1408474965406531585>

^{iv} Maryam Ekhtiar. "Practice Makes Perfect: The Art of Calligraphy Exercises (*Siyāh Mashq*) in Iran." *Muqarnas* 23 (2006): 107-30.