

# Pam Adler Gallery

37 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019 212.980.9696

# arts

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## JEFF WAY

A form of art prominent in the "primitive" stages of most cultures is the mask—evoking ancestral figures, embodying ideal beauty, and always rife with the supernatural ability to transform man into spirit. Jeff Way has amassed an acute understanding of the historical relationship between art and ritual, citing particular interest in the ceremonies and legends of the American Indian as interpreted in the paintings and journals of George Catlin. Viewing the recent exhibition of masks which Way has created over the last decade for use in his *Transformations* performances, we too acknowledge not only an inherent expressive and decorative beauty, but also the centuries of faith and bewilderment their prototypes have induced.

While Indian, South American, Oceanic, and African influences are apparent, Way's unique interpretation of drama, color, and materials dominates the masks. Many are composed of pariscraft (gauze soaked in plaster and built up when wet) and flamboyantly painted in fanciful encasing patterns. This *horror vacui* is typical of the arts of mythic cultures and was believed instrumental in blocking the penetration of evil spirits. Horns, facial features, and other ambiguous projections are often incorporated into, or themselves dictate, the plasticity of surface design. The red and turquoise stripes in *Two-Horn Mask* descend from their peaks and fan and interlace across the black visage, obscuring one eye. A dual facade is thus created as we strain to discern what genus of dark creature cowers behind the bars of this visual "cage."



Jeff Way, Two-Horn Mask, 1983.  
Pariscraft, 22 x 9".  
Courtesy Pam Adler Gallery.

Straw hats, tortoise shells, hammered copper foil, cookie tins, and folded giraffe-print paper are only a few of the other materials from which Way has fashioned masks. Increasingly he embellishes the basic shapes with elements like feathers, hair, barbed wire or sticks, rendering them more sensory but denying us his fluent expression with contours of minimal definition. The nature of Way's performances, in which he progressively sheds layer upon layer of mask and costume, should, however, ensure a continued devotion to spare forms, for how many of the cumbersome masks can one neck sustain? (Pam Adler, *March 6-31*)

By RON WARREN