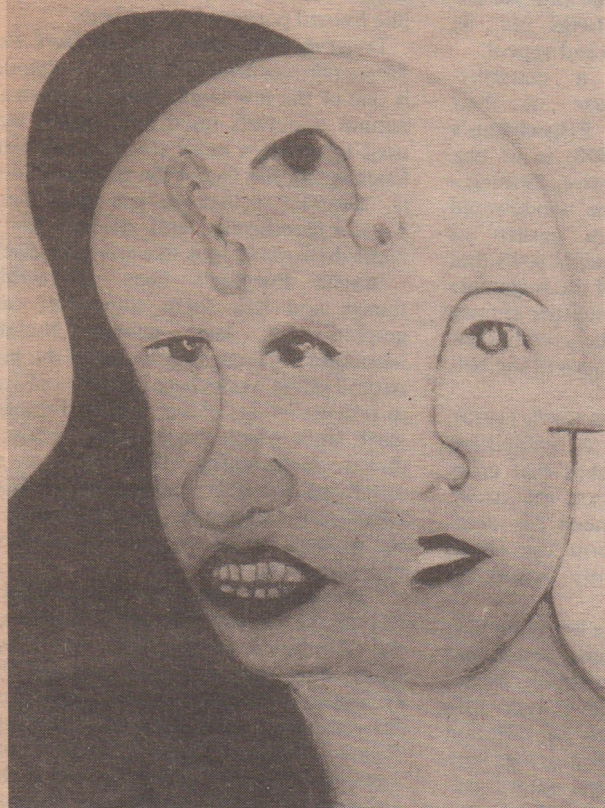


ART



Ken Showell

Jeff Way's *Outer Space Person*

Way Out

William Zimmer

Jeff Way
Pam Adler Gallery
50 W. 57 St.
(through Jan. 27)

Jeff Way does it his way, which means a strong determination to avoid getting into a fixed style. His most notorious piece, *Chief With Cherries*, opened a floodgate of styles. It was (and is, for it continues) a widely-circulated Xeroxed image of an Indian out of George Catlin bordered by cherries — a mixture of the exotic and the sweet. Because this image is at once banal and compelling, one has the widest latitude to treat it any way, including effacing it completely. In 1974 the Whitney exhibited a slew of *Chiefs*, in versions ranging from Expressionist to Conceptual, by Way, his artist friends and non-artists who had come across the Xerox.

For the artist, things exist to be transformed, and Way is getting so adept at rearranging and doing turns that what should seem disruptive comes to effect harmony. At least that's what I feel about the latest slice of Way in this rare solo exhibition. It is mostly "head" paintings, and there is the double meaning of what sits atop the neck, and head comix. The colors are certainly acid — the oranges, greens and purples of the German Expressionists.

Faceting heads is not new — Picasso built a reputation on it — but Way breaks up a head so gracefully that there are no torturous overtones. We read little anguish into heads that sport several eyes and mouths or earlobes that do double duty as chins. Rather the attitude is dispassionate; the heads are appreciated as *tours de force*.

Way's working method also makes it easier not to read personal anxiety into the impulse to facet — although some heads I take to be self-portraits, with the artist somewhat resembling Van Gogh with a close-cropped beard. The genesis of the paintings lies in interlocking four photographs of a person shot from different angles. In a painting Way removes the seam where the photos meet. Such a mechanical approach quells emotion.

The "head" paintings remind me of Antonin Artaud and his habit of walking up to strangers on the sidewalk and attempting to rearrange their features. Way's artistic stance is primarily a theatrical one — a transformation made by the donning of a costume — and we are reminded that Dada — one source of Surrealism — originated in performances. Presiding over the current show is a costumed mannequin (Way has worn the costume in performance) called Ubu Punk. He looks like Jarry's drawings of his creation Ubu Roi but also like a Klan member with his pointy head-covering. The costume, in purple and green, is a combination of those punk staples, leopard spots and zebra stripes, and Ubu holds a pair of maracas in suspended shake. They might be a symbol of the artist's role as mover and shaker.

The heads and Ubu Punk are mildly bizarre, but there are other heads — of turtles and moths — that are more sweetly decadent, as if out of Aubrey Beardsley. There is also a drawing that is at once an atrocious pun and a prime example of Way's fluid line. Called *Hole in my Sole*, it is a fish and the bottom of a foot, each with a tiny perforation.

With images and ideas that are both newfangled and oldfangled, Way is hard to pin down. He remains a between-the-lines artist, a goad. He was once asked,

"How do you see your work in relation to other contemporary artists?" He replied, "In group exhibitions."

He acts to raise the temperature of the work around him, inspiring it to get a little hotter, a little crazier. As the mammoth *Chief with Cherries* has proven, Way has energy to share.