

Through the Masks, Darkly

By Kay Larson

Bells jingling, **JEFF WAY** dashes through the door into his loft like a squat, slightly mad minotaur. He is wearing a bulging, canvas, kabuki robe and a mask that sprouts black buffalo horns and dangling masses of disheveled black hair. The mask-face is pale, puzzled and angry, as though a psychotic Japanese housewife in the 19th century had just been roused by the Fuller Brush Man. Clacking something beneath the robe, he dashes about on stage in short kabuki-bursts and brief poses. Leaping backward like a demon who's just caught sight of the audience, he flings his head—one almost senses the nostrils flaring—gives a loud *Clack*, and drops two bloody beef shanks to the floor. End of scene one, as he rips off his robe to reveal another robe, and the mask comes off to reveal another mask. In Way's performance last week there were versions upon versions of both mask and costume, most of them carried about on his sturdy personage. In the course of *Transformations*, Way becomes a belled medicine-man/shaman, a cryptic figure carrying sandwich boards, a green-masked tuxedo-wearer who dances to rock 'n' roll, an alligator, a balding painter (also a mask), and his famous green-splotted turtle improvisation with the peaked hat and the turtleshell rattle. At one point, in full mask/drag, he sidles up to each member of the audience and emits a low groan from a noisemaker concealed in his pockets. At another point, extraordinarily, he pulls a thin sheet of folded copper out of his overall, unfolds the metal, smashes it up against the current mask, takes out a hammer, and pounds the copper over his face to make a second mask—a mask of a mask, or a third generation image of a facade. Then he walks into the audience to give it away.

Snakes, demons, sorcerers, shamans, Indian chiefs and Picasso heads (which were based, of course, on African masks) are Way's favorite motifs. Narrative has no part in this performance (there is no narrative to speak of), but visual layering does. Way wears his art like a mask, and the masks correspondingly assume the multiple visual/emotional density of a painted object. The varnish used by painters for centuries was just as much a sheen or skin, a windowpane into which one looked "through a glass darkly." Beneath the skin was layer upon layer of paint that evoked or mimicked the furnishings of real space. The windowpane in Way's case is the mask itself, and what one detects "behind" it are the many skins of allusion and inference, character and meaning, that adhere to the material object. Vision makes up uncannily compelling truths. When Way throws off his other disguises and strips down to the painter's mask, one sighs with relief and says, "nice that he's through with masks and isn't pretending any longer."

The artist as Great Pretender, the clown who puts on a good show, the traveling medicine man patent healer, the fool-with-truth-as-his-guide, is an image as old as the caves and the people who



Jeff Way: the artist as Great Pretender

artists (Eleanor Antin, Laurie Anderson, Pat Oleszko), avoids "good taste" just because taste is the product of civilized social stratifications that tend to obscure the romantic's claim to the Pretender's throne. Between a mystic and the Eternal there isn't room for Amy Vanderbilt. In Guy Trebay's interview with Way last week, the artist-shaman was equated with the American Indian who went off to the woods to receive visions and walked out covered with toads and bear shit, obviously in a state of grace. The artist-shaman isn't above a good laugh.

Way's static objects, which range from xeroxed, cut-up, pop culture images to the works' final state as paintings, are extremely crude faux-naïf attempts at romanticizing shamanism. The lore about Way includes the now famous fact that he was an art history graduate student who absorbed Cubism and George Catlin's Indian paintings, then used them as sources when he turned painter. But one suspects Way's ulterior/interior motives. In the paintings the Catlin conversion is crude both visually and emotionally, tending to obscure magic in a cloud of paint. In the performances, which are leavened by deadpan wit and total indifference to staginess (worlds apart from Richard Gallo's thundering Teutonic), a sort of childlike glee at the tricks he can play gives Way the advantage of artlessness. Which, of course, is a mask like all the others.

The empty swimming pool at C.W. Post College in Greenvale, Long Island, is the latest addition to the growing list of alternative spaces. It began its new career in 1976, when artist **RUSSELL MALTZ**, who teaches there, noticed its rather funky possibilities—its open concrete structure, nice slope, rectangular shape, and human scale—all the qualities a minimal sculptor might fall for. Maltz built two pieces in the pool, then turned it over to a succession of artists who, over the course of four years, did 30 variants on "pool aesthetics."

Artists Space, which itself is not much older than the alternative pool, gave the project some money and has now put together a "post-pool" show. It's probably the only time I'll ever be able to call neo-minimalism heartwarming. The ideas—some witty, some prosaic—prove out Hamlet's remark about the nutshell. Maltz drew on the concrete to create a false mass, then put in a real mass during stage two. **TED STAMM**, Maltz's friend

photographs seems to lever the pool's floor plane up five or ten degrees. **DON HAZLITT**, who knows how to confront a box, achieved a *trompe l'oeil double-entendre* by carving a kidney-shaped swimming pool out of the snow at the bottom of the real (rectangular) pool. This Miami-in-the-snow even had palm trees.

The pool held **JOHN MASTRACIO**'s numbing "Dilettante Rock" performance, **JANE HANDZEL**'s films (projected on the black wall), **ELISA D'ARRIGO**'s drapings of white sheets on clotheslines that somehow converted the pit into a sunken fabric garden, and **LUCIO POZZI**'s pseudo-dangerous, Hollywood-style, cliché narrative in which volunteers jumped from a diving board onto a fake stake (Pozzi makes a career of the obvious). Among student work, perhaps my favorite was by **KEVIN CLARKE**, who sat for a day on a red velvet couch in the middle of the pool, "wishing" over a Sears Roebuck Catalogue; his wishes (snips from the catalogue) gradually got plastered over the wall like rising thought-balloons.

Artists Space is also showing two normal installations. One is by **ED LEVINE**, an artist and busy art administrator, who has architecturally altered an isolated room by subtly manipulating light and proportion. The windows and doors in his drywall partitions correspond not to body space but to the room's space, thus confusing one's kinesthetic prejudices. **REESE WILLIAMS** reverts to what Artists Space calls "fiction," but I call neo-post-minimalist punk, or syntax-art extended until the syntax breaks down. I was annoyed by the work's refusal to proffer its secrets, but that annoyance, typically with the punk attitude, forces you to dig deeper. Is there a bottom? Is there meaning after language? Who knows. Williams's achieves his impasses by associating words and pictures, or pictures and pictures—one of the less cryptic being photos of Paul Newman during various years of his career, paired with the atomic elements discovered during those years. Another series puts pics of assassinated world leaders next to the repeating image of Williams's stairwell, which apparently is suffused (for him) with danger. But most works are less communicative. Williams flaunts his concealed intentions, forcing one to stretch all possible associations to the breaking point. He's learned a thing or two from Baldessari and the linguistic/structuralists like Kosuth, but is determined not to admit the connection. Like the systems-artists, Williams aims

aims for a private, rather than a public, logic. (Artists Space, 105 Hudson St, through June 21)

The idea behind "Exchanges" at the Henry Street Settlement is simple and rather elegant. Last year three established artists were invited by guest curator Renata Karlin to choose three less established artists, who would in turn choose three peers for a 12-artist exhibition. This year the process was reversed: those at the end of the chain chose three peers who chose three more established artists, and each pair then chose a hero or heroine among the well-established. The linear tracings are fascinating: Peter Ambrose from last year chose **GARRICK DOLBERG**, whose cat-aluminum, sawtooth, "escalator" wall-pieces don't look anything like his choice, **JOHN OBUCK**; the fantastic geometries in Obuck's constructivist black and white wood boxes—a sandwich of Magritte and Tatlin—share nothing with the mutual choice, **JENE HIGHSTEIN**, though both younger artists, I'm told, admire the elder for his work's energy and integrity. Highstein's ellipsoid, raw iron modules come in context to project an enormous intensity, like minimalist boulders scarred by thingness. Highstein, **NOGUCHI**, **LOUISE BOURGEOIS**, and **ALEX KATZ** are the show's venerable elders. The two realists **KAREN DE PIRRO** and **CATHERINE MURPHY**, picked Katz—no surprise—but it's fascinating that **BOB ROSSITER**, who has a sly materialist set of drawings (pieces of wood, xeroxes of the wood pieces, pencil on vellum, and xeroxes of the vellum, as an intellectual reductionism) came up with a major figure, **ALLEN BERTOLDI**, as his choice. Together they picked Noguchi, whose classic reserve compares well with Bertoldi's monumentality and with Highstein's cool sensualism. Artists look at other artists' work in unpredictable but revealing patterns. The value of a show like "Exchanges I and II" is that one's own patterns get disrupted and one is forced to think through a different set of propositions (I found myself much more attracted to Highstein's imperturbable rocks, for instance). Interestingly, the only non-aesthetic choice occurred when two young women painters, **DONA NELSON** and **GAIL VON DER LIPPE**, picked Louise Bourgeois; for them, the importance of finding a good female role model outweighed issues of craft. (Henry Street Settlement Arts for Living Center, 466 Grand Street, through June 22)