

Miya Turnbull

I am a Canadian-based visual artist, born 1976. For over twenty years, I have worked with self-portrait masks, exhibiting internationally across sculpture, photography, installation and performance. My practice explores identity through masking, multiplicity and transformation, using my own face as a site where visibility and concealment, authenticity and performance become material.

I have always been fascinated by masks and puppets, drawn to the magic of watching inanimate objects come to life, inspired by masks from around the world, especially Japanese Noh masks and First Nation masks seen here in Canada. My personal exploration with masks stems from growing up with mixed Japanese and British heritage. Constantly asked who I was and where I was from, often based on my ambiguous facial features, I became aware of the human face as a locus of recognition, judgment and identity. Through self-portrait masks and their embodiment in photographs and performances, I examine the mask as both subject and object: something that reveals and conceals, confronts and protects.

Making masks from my own face began as an act of reclamation. If the face is a surface others interpret, I wanted to interpret it: multiplying, distorting and complicating my image, not to hide but to insist on its complexity. Each mask begins the same way, a plaster cast of my face, and becomes something else: layered with paper, collaged with photographs of my own skin, shaped into an object at once self-portrait and artifact, presence and residue. When I put on my masks, something shifts: I am simultaneously the one looking and the one looked at, the maker and the made, the self I know and the self still becoming.

What began as an investigation into my own identity grew into a broader engagement with masking as disguise, protection and transformation. We build protective layers over time and find it hard to let go; I recognize this in myself. My relationship to the mask leads somewhere different: not where the self disappears, but where it becomes visible in its full complexity, layered, multiple and in flux. I am drawn to distortion and concealment, but my work ultimately accesses states of being the unmasked face cannot reach.

This is what my practice is about: not a fixed identity hidden beneath a social mask, but one layered, accumulative and perpetually in formation. My work engages with the surface, the skin, the mask, the screen, as boundary and threshold. What lies beneath? What do we reveal, conceal or project? It is not only about unmasking a hidden truth, but about inhabiting the space between private and public, beauty and grotesque, real and constructed: a meditation on how we assemble ourselves from fragments, and what emerges between one face and another.

To see more of Miya's work: www.miyaturnbull.com and Instagram: @miyamask
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