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Literal Cloth: Elizabeth Paterson's Masquerades

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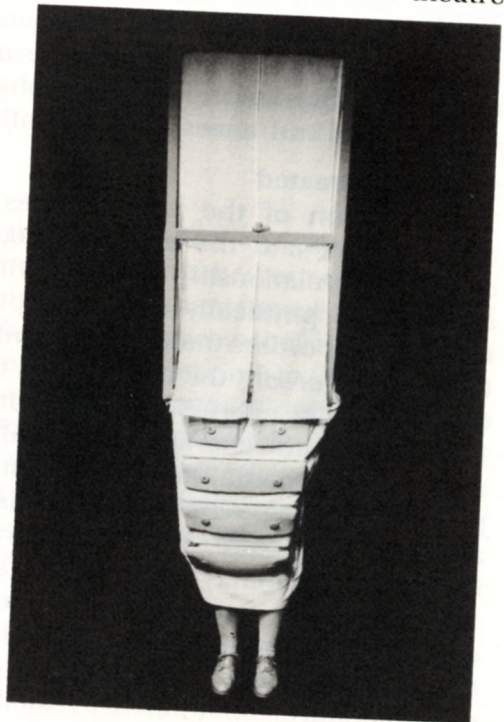
Elizabeth Paterson has been working as a solo performer since 1979, and over the last two years she has created four pieces based around a masquerade figure that she wears. Her work has been shown in two short seasons at La Mama – September 1980: *The Car Person*; *The Old Woman at The Window*; *The 9 To 5er*; and November 1981: *The Old Woman At The Window*; *The 9 To 5er*; *The Merry-Go-Round Person*. She has performed in other theatres, galleries and toured shows to community groups.

The original inspiration for the work came from her seeing photos and reading about West African masqueraders: the Egungun of Yoruba, and her major source was Robert Farris Thompson's book, *'African Art In Motion'*. The most obvious features she has retained from the Egungun is that the performer is covered in cloth – mask, hands and costume – which visually creates both the character and the character's environment, yet her most recent piece *The Merry-Go-Round-Person* is strictly a departure from this convention in that Paterson's face and hands were uncovered. Paterson has described herself as searching "for something of the famed unity of the arts in African performance (that) suggests a sensible approach in which one medium is never absolutely emphasized over others" (Thompson;1974,xii.), and similarly she follows Cocteau in her belief that, "a theatrical piece ought to be written, presented, costumed, furnished with musical accompaniment, played and danced by a single individual." (W. Sorell.;1973:74)

In June 1980 Paterson participated in *Women At Work* – a week of women's performance and seminars about the work held at the George Paton Gallery. In *LIP* (1981/82) Lyndal Jones discussed these seminars in her article, "Performance, Feminism and Women at Work" and further proposed that performance be examined in terms of eight major elements. I have examined Paterson's work in terms of these eight elements, and, where it has been appropriate, remarked upon Paterson's divergence from the Egungun model as described by Thompson in *African Art in Motion* and *Black Gods and Kings*.

1: The Presence of the Artist

In Paterson's work the presence of the artist is explicit in the cloth, in the work done to the cloth. The masquerades exist first as wrought cloth, unlike the Egungun the cloth is not hand woven and hand dyed, but it bears expressly the marks of Paterson's work of choosing and sewing. The cloth has been chosen for its colour and texture, then cut, stitched, overstitched, embroidered and appliqued. Even in the absence of the artist, Paterson's masquerades exist as cloth transformed. Empty, they imply her presence both in the work already done – choosing and sewing, and the work to be done – performing. Viewed alone, the masquerades become objects of art in themselves. They await or prefigure and in that sense contain their transformation to subjects, to be enlivened by filling, animation and movement. When considered as objects they could be traditionally categorised as art and not look out of place in a gallery as something akin to soft sculpture. Similarly when Paterson puts them on and performs, they slide away from the art object toward theatre subject. This transition of the masquerades as objects to enlivened subjects and the merging or closing of the art/theatre boundary is the locus of one of the main conceptual and aesthetic issues in Paterson's work. Given that she has chosen not to effect this transition in terms of conventional illusionistic theatre, ie. 'behind the scenes' or 'backstage', we do not suddenly apprehend her fully clothed and immaculate, rather we are permitted and invited to watch this happen. The process of robing and unrobing the masquerades corresponds to the theatrical notion of taking on and taking off a character in full view of the audience, a concept widely practised in many forms of Asian theatre



Elizabeth Paterson, *The Old Woman at the Window*

photo: Brendan Lavelle

particularly in Japanese Noh and Kabuki, where special attendants carry out this function; and now absorbed within, and appropriated by, Western theatre since Brecht.

2: The Performer

Jones' model draws no distinction between an artist who performs and an actor, and while I agree with her that the line between acting and non-acting is "very blurred", Paterson is an actor and thus the question of transformation is integral. Actors assess their own and each other's work in terms of an ability to effect and sustain transformation, to become other than oneself. During an actor's training, work with masks is often the first way an actor learns and experiences transformation; to become other than oneself. During an actor's training, work with masks is often the first way an actor learns and experiences transformation; later an actor would be expected to transform without a mask. Thus an actor who chooses to work with mask as Paterson does may well feel that they 'ought' ultimately rid themselves of the mask to ensure 'true' transformation. In fact Paterson talks about this as a problem in her work. In her 1981 La Mama show, 'unmasking' was an evident tension. *The Merry-Go-Round Person* was conceived and performed without a mask and in the revised version of *The 9 To 5er* she peels off the mask to reveal her own face and hair and scrutinises the real dummies on either side of her and asks – "Am I like them?". While it could be argued that transformation is peculiar to the role of the actor, the relationship between the performer and the mask still arises as the essential relationship between the performer and the masquerade is a dialectic of hiding and revealing. Yet the performer in the Egungun masquerades is not present as an individual ego, as himself. He merely embodies the spirit of the masquerade, that spirit is real and continuous, the dancer is only an ephemeral vehicle for it, and so his self is intentionally and necessarily absent.

3: Images Created

The intention of the masquerades is to create a character and its environment, and the central image of each is an exploration of the character's relationship to its environment. The extent to which the character is physically and conceptually attached to, or bound by, its environment orders the narrative and metaphorical imagery of each piece. In *The Car Person*, the character is the car driver, the car owner and the car. The car as expression of identity and ego-extension is literalised. In *The 9 To 5er*, the character is part of the city crowd at rush hour. She is at once shopper, commuter and pedestrian and one of the crowd. The crowd presses in, it goes where you go, it is not necessarily with you but you are always with it. Both *The Car Person* and *The 9 To 5er* illustrate the lack of individual autonomy in an urban social environment. The character is implicated in a world not necessarily of its own making, whereas the characters in *The Old Woman At The Window* and *The Merry-Go-Round-Person* are in worlds explicitly of their own making. Both these latter characters are constrained by their age (very old and very young) from complete integration in an external world. The Old Woman is the



Elizabeth Paterson, *The Merry-Go-Round Person*

photo: Jeff Busby

repository of memory and the merry-go-round child is the instigator of fantasy. However within the exclusively personal realm, both orchestrate their environments. The Old Woman retrieves from the drawers of her chest those letters and photos whose lives she wishes to recall in the same way as the child puts on and takes off the little characters of the merry-go-round.

4: Space

The presence of the masquerades draws attention and dominates the space in which they are seen, they tend to dissolve the boundaries of real space. Each piece brings and is its own environment; space is imploded not exploded. Unlike sculpture, which in some respects they resemble, the masquerades do not change, intervene in, or respond to, the space in which they are perceived. The only exception occurs at one point in the revised version of *The 9 To 5er* when Paterson turns the group of dummies, which have a city scape of buildings stiched on their backs, and walks to the far brick wall of the theatre so that the mock building can meet the real building. Otherwise the physical environment that Paterson's masquerades create is self-contained and self-defined.

5: Time

The work implicit in the presence of the masquerades invests them with the time of the cloth. In performance each piece is no more than ten minutes long, but they seem much longer, partly because they bring so much time with them. The work expended in their making has accreted

time to them, and they endure as objects after the performance. In addition, within the narrative structure of each piece it is possible to derive an acute sense of time within the framework of the life of the character. *The Car Person* is a part of the morning rush hour; *The 9 To 5er* is a part of the evening rush hour; The Old Woman looks out of her window in the mid-morning and the child rides the merry-go-round in the afternoon. Correspondingly each character evokes a subjective sense of time – *The Car Person* and *The 9 To 5er* race against time, while *The Old Woman At The Window* and *The Merry-Go-Round Person* exist in the past and the future and do not notice present time.

6: Sound

In the Masquerades, sound is intentional and consists of the words spoken and gestural sounds made by the performer, taped music and effects which accompany all the pieces except *The Old Woman At The Window*. However there are other sounds made by the performer and heard by the audience which could be deemed irrelevant. They arise 'technically' as the means of effecting a character's action within the narrative but they are not the 'natural' sounds accompanying that action yet within the performance they acquire a particular resonance and meaning. In *The Old Woman At The Window*, the cloth drawers of the chest are held shut by strips of Velcro, so when the drawers are opened they do not slide out like real drawers but rather they are prised off the chest like sticking plasters from wounds. Similarly in *The 9 To 5er* the dummies on either side of Paterson have castors on their shoes so that when she walks they move, creating an eerie rattling/rolling sound and a complete mechanical unison as they slip forward and slide back.

7: An Audience

The character reference of the masquerades and the narrative relationship of the character to its environment determine that the spaces in which they are perceived are deemed theatres for the duration of the performance and that the audience responds like a theatre audience. Action, sound and gesture in each piece is sequential and the duration of the performance finite, and the audience is expected to see a performance from beginning to end. The masquerades are literal in the extreme, the characters show their environment and illustrate their relationship to it in all they say and do. The literality of the masquerades aligns them with one of the earliest functions of theatre, the illustration of a narrative, and suggests why it is difficult to see them as other than theatre. Paterson has said it was the explicit literality of Yoruba art, particularly its sculpture, that attracted her as much as the Egungun masquerades.

8: Context

In the masquerades, Paterson's intention has been to reach and communicate with the broadest possible audience and to this end the pieces are literal in content, transparent in form, and the event self-contained and portable.

Within the masquerades the characters are women, or in the case of the car



Elizabeth Paterson, *The 9 to 5er*

photo: Jeff Busby

person gender neutral, and the issue of sexuality is not crucial to any of the characters. However given that Paterson's model for the work comes from Egungun male dancers and to a lesser extent Cocteau, the fact that she is a woman, her choice of non-sexist content, her labelling of the pieces and her increasing use of autobiographical material drawn from her family history and personal fantasy place her work in a feminist context. In terms of feminist values, she uses her own body as the agent which creates and enlivens the masquerades as subjects. The masquerades thus mediate the audience's perception of her, as they literally and strategically separate her from both the work she creates in them, and from the audience itself.

The content of each masquerade is drawn from Paterson's experience of Australia, but the experiences she deals with are not peculiarly Australian experiences, they are more generally of the urban Western world. Furthermore the masquerade form owes nothing to Western theatrical traditions, much less Australian, and Paterson has pared down and dismantled the original Egungun model over the two years so that only the simultaneous creation of character and environment remains.