

UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA FAIRBANKS

ART DEPARTMENT

MASKING

BFA Degree Thesis Exhibition Report

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Because I was born in 1994, I've never known a world unaffected by the existence of the internet. From a very early age, I had access to the internet and video games on the computer. As I grew up, I was very active on forums and early social media platforms. I created images to adorn my forum signatures and my MySpace profile, GIFs to respond to posts, and even wrote basic HTML code to customize my MySpace and Tumblr pages. I watched the visual styles of the internet change and grow from pixelated, Geocities-style websites to websites featuring very basic three dimensional graphics and animations to the more minimal styles that we are familiar with today. At the time, I didn't consider myself an artist and I didn't consider what I was doing to be art. Looking back, I now see that the internet is where my passion for creating art began and where my first artistic experiments played out.

In middle and high school, I took classes focusing on 3D modeling, sculpture, graphic design and photography in addition to general art classes. I attended a summer intensive in film at a local university which expanded my understanding of the wide range of opportunities available to artists. After high school I took adult education classes in woodworking and printmaking while participating actively in the art and music scenes in Richmond, Virginia. During my time as a student at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, I have worked with local clients doing graphic design work and continued my passion for arts education. I also continued to explore my creative interests while working as a sound technician and planning, DJing, and doing visual

design for a series of local parties. These opportunities have given me valuable experience collaborating with other creatives and working in professional environments.

It's important to me that my artwork operates at different levels of viewership; in my work I want to engage with concepts that aren't immediately legible or coherent. I want my art to be attractive to a viewer but to also have the depth to be worth extended consideration. I believe that what one consumes and surrounds oneself with has a psychological and spiritual effect on one's self. One of the aspects of the beauty industry that I am critical of is that of waste. Most people would be aware of physical waste which is harmful to the environment. I think a less considered aspect, in beauty and in art, is that of spiritual waste or excess that can be created. That is an idea that my work engages with and a reason for which I take the responsibility of creation very seriously.

My thesis show, *Masking*, deals with societal ideas about beauty and the use of commercial beauty products. Particularly, I use the object of a sheet mask in my work as both a symbol and a sort of character. A sheet mask is a very thin piece of fabric that is saturated in serum and is then placed on the user's face for fifteen to thirty minutes. Sheet masks have cutouts in the areas where the user's eyes and mouth would be which makes the sheet mask recognizable as a sort of face. People who use sheet masks would generally spend very little, if any, time looking at the actual object

of the mask because they'd just put it on and then throw it away after. There are also other kinds of masks used for beautification such as mud masks, modeling or rubber masks, peel-off masks, and sheet masks that are more of a gelatinous material. In my work, I want to encourage the viewer to really look at the form of these masks and give a greater amount of consideration to them and, by extension, the other everyday beauty products and practices that go so easily unnoticed in our day-to-day lives.

My interest in this subject matter started in a pretty average way. I wanted to make my skin look better and do what I could to improve the way I look. I logged onto YouTube and became fascinated in the community of skincare and beauty content creators on that platform. I was engrossed. I found myself putting beauty product reviews on in the background while I did chores and played video games. I extensively searched for reviews before buying a product and also was introduced to new products through these videos. I began buying significantly more products than I could use and felt a need to keep buying products. I found it fun and I wanted my skin to look as good as possible. When I reflected on the mindset that I had gotten myself into, I was disturbed to realize that these YouTubers had successfully been able to harness my own desires and insecurities for the purpose of selling me luxury products, most of which I did not need. Given the immense popularity of these YouTubers—and the beauty industry in general— I was not the only person who found themselves in this position.

As a student of art history and anthropology, I've learned about the ways a number of cultures used masks. They can be used to portray a character, as a part of a costume or disguise, in ceremony, to facilitate a spiritual transformation, and more. I was interested in looking at the way that sheet masks could be compared to these other masks. The idea of a sheet mask being a site of spiritual transformation was particularly interesting to me. What transformation was I hoping to gain? Was I achieving that? In most understandings of magic, something must be offered in order to manifest the desired results. What is offered in this exchange for beauty? I believe that the price is a spiritual one. And I think that spiritual price is inextricably linked to the capitalist system in which we exist and the way that that system exploits everyday people and the environment for the benefit of those in power. My art aims to communicate these discussions, problems and questions to the viewer.

The idea of a sheet mask as part of a magical rite is illustrated in my piece *Still Life (Sheet Mask)* where a sheet mask levitates in the middle of a circle of stones and a circle of dandelions. Absent the



Robert Wilcox, *Still Life (Sheet Mask)*, digital, 2020

presence of any figures, it appears as though the mask is acting of its own agency.

The natural environment informs the viewer that this scene provides the potential for some version of life. The mask's penetrating gaze looks past the viewer, unconcerned with their observation and focused on something further.

In the process of creating the work for this show, I've felt pulled in many different directions, but a few things have always been important to me. The first is texture. I think that this element of art is probably the most important in my work. The goal of skincare is generally to make your skin smoother and softer. Texture is also a very physical aspect that I believe is evocative and visceral, a quality that I depend on for the impact of my work. This is where I connect skincare and beauty with my preferred mediums of 3D rendering and sculpture. 3D rendering allows me the ability to create textures that would not be possible in reality or would be very difficult to achieve. Sculpture deals with actual textures which are never as easy to make perfect and are much more difficult to work with.

I think that my 3D work and my sculptures serve as reflections of each other and responses to one another. It also relates to the promises made in beauty advertisements about the efficacy of the products and the reality of the results that one can achieve. I explore these ideas of digital reflections and representation in my sculpture *Still Life (Bronze)* and in my digital recreation of that sculpture recontextualized, *Still Life (Gallery)*. By presenting the objects in these pieces in two



Robert Willcox, *Still Life (Bronze)*, bronze, 2020

different mediums, I ask the viewer to consider their expectations of products and the way that digital presentation operates. It is also a commentary on the gallery system and the commodification of art. While my sculptures do interact meaningfully with my digital work, I think that my sculptures do also have their own focus separately.

While thinking about my digital work and the future of beauty and the internet, I realized that I was ignoring the future of physical space and physical cultural objects. And I think that's because I, on some level, believe that contemporary culture feels very throwaway. Objects today don't seem to hold the meaning that objects of the past seem to. In my sculpture *Mask Quilt*, I fashioned disposable sheet masks into a sort of quilt. The featureless face created by the sheet masks is already unnerving and that quality is exacerbated by the distorted expressions created by the way the fabric hangs and the sewing together of the faces. In this sculpture, the past and current day are stitched together in an uncomfortable possibility of the future.

My 3D work refers to the digital space of the internet, where I believe that most people today are interacting with images, beauty advertising and content relating to luxury and appearance. I think that the visual style of 3D graphics is obviously associated with computers which is then necessarily associated with the



Robert Willcox, *Mask Quilt*, sheet mask and thread, 2020

internet. The internet, in my conception, is a space that earlier in time was viewed very positively as a space with the potential to radically influence the way that people experience the world in real-time. More recently, it seems that this optimism has been lost and the internet serves as a site of control and consumerism. To me, it is very similar to my experience with beauty, desire and my complicated feelings towards these things. My intention is not for my work to be a total condemnation of the internet or of beauty, but I do want to illustrate the deep conflicts that myself and many other people have towards these subjects.

As an artist, I find my work is influenced by a variety of things. As previously

mentioned, YouTube is a source of inspiration for me. I think that getting to view how people choose to present themselves and interact with one another has greatly informed the way that I view people and their interactions with advertising and desire. I enjoy learning about art history and theory through listening to lectures and podcasts. Particularly, I find the poetry-essays of Franco “Bifo” Berardi and the writings and video essays of Hito Steyerl to be enriching and have played a large part in shaping my understanding of politics and power. A major influence on the way that I view the purpose of art is the artist Brad Troemel. In a series of Instagram posts he explained, basically, that he believed that effective art needs to convey a message in a way that can’t be conveyed through other means. This idea really challenged me and led me to create art that operates on a more psychological level.

Visually, my influences are varied and a little harder to pinpoint. Video game graphics inform some of my work. 3D graphics styles used on the internet and in beauty advertising are influential to my visual style. Terrell Davis’s digital still lifes may likely be seen as the most direct influence on my work. The digital animations of Wang Newone, Kim



Terrell Davis, *Late Nite*, digital, n.d.

Laughton, and Sam Rolfes also have informed my digital works. More traditional fine artists who utilize computer-generated 3D works which I admire include Hito Steyerl, Shu Lea Cheang, and Zach Blas.

My 3D work was created using a variety of software for modeling, sculpting, and texturing the objects and then rendered using a physics-based rendering engine. The bronze sculptures for this show were created using lost wax casting. There are also sculptures that use assemblage, the sheet mask becoming a physical part of the work. Through creating this body of work, my technical skills definitely grew and improved. I believe that my education effectively prepared me with the knowledge and skills I need to approach more advanced concepts and techniques in digital art and sculpture as my career continues. I also learned about the process of creating a cohesive body of work and how to effectively communicate my artistic ideas through that work.