



THE MASK OF DIONYSUS

7th November 2019

Brooke Benington is pleased to announce The Mask of Dionysus, the first exhibition in the Viewing Room featuring Bea Bonafini, Rob Branigan and Frances Drayson.

If we were to visit the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens 2,500 years ago, we might have seen Thespis of Icaria playing out one of his tragedies – his voice raised and clear, taut with drama; his face covered by a mask of exaggerated features, a grotesque, unnatural caricature obscuring the man beneath. Masks such as this, known as personae, served a key purpose in the Greek theatre by enabling a single actor to assume multiple personas – male or female, a mythological hero or a lusty satyr. The very act of wearing of the mask was transformative, representative of an assumption or embodiment of another identity. For a Greek audience, the obfuscation of the player beneath was not so much a deception as a shared suspension of disbelief that allowed the actors' words, not their nature, to express their truth. The mask, an artistic reimagining of nature, was a conduit of that truth.

In the work of Bonafini, Branigan and Drayson we encounter a similar liminality to that which once engaged and excited classical audiences. Each artist engages, in very different ways, with the threshold of transformation: a familiar image or idea re-presented or reimagined.

In Drayson's 2019 photographic series *Effects To Compound Regions*, we are presented with a furred leonine character – the artist – whose face is digitally manipulated to become ambiguous. The resulting mutations, masked as they are through distortion, are neither male nor female but a suggestion of both, seemingly caught in a transitional or transformative state. They emerge from a black ground, their poses mimicking the monumental drama of both baroque sculpture and fashion photography.

Branigan's practice explores the idea of the vessel – a receptacle that physically contains or transports, or a repository for ideas and beliefs – from prehistoric shells to neolithic pots, scientific illustrations, shopping baskets, infograms and cloud storage. In *Ornamental Crime (After G.D. Ehret)*, 2019 he has taken inspiration from botanical illustrations and bookplates spanning from the 16th century onwards. Even though it is entirely removed from context and obscured by several layers of reproduction, we recognise the flattened aspect and clear illustrative stylings of a copperplate botanical drawing. In an instant, threads

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of memory pull us back to fixed moments of shared and personal history, all contained within a single image.

Bonafini in turn directly confronts the idea of the mask throughout history and mythology. Her incorporation of adapted traditional craft techniques makes the viewer highly conscious of the artist's hand at play; the mask is treated as an art object as much as it is a dramatic or representational tool. Her marbled ceramic visages are distorted or malformed, like images in a dream that slip away as we try to reach for the memory of them. There is a sense of the relic to them, a notion that if we were to peer through their empty eyes we might catch a glimpse of the

face that long ago wore it. Perhaps a warrior, a child, a court jester or an actor.

Each of these artists is conscious of how an image or motif is loaded with a cultural and historical context, and how a contemporary audience reads images as fluently as words. In this way, the imagery and iconography of Greek theatre, and indeed each artistic movement developed in the centuries since, are as present in popular culture and understanding now as when Thespis of Icaria first donned his mask. Bonafini, Branigan and Drayson use this knowledge to deftly play the audience, to lead us gently, revealing and unmasking layers of truth.

BIOGRAPHIES

Bea Bonafini (b.1990 Bonn, Germany) is an Italian, London-based artist with an MA in Painting from the Royal College of Art, London (2016) and a BA in Fine Art from the Slade School of Fine Art, London (2014). Recent solo shows were held at: Galerie Chloe Salgado, Paris (2019); Bosse and Baum, London (2019); Lychee One, London (2018); Renata Fabbri, Milan (2018); Zabudowicz Collection, London (2017). Residencies include British School at Rome (2019), La Berlugane-Maleki Residency (2019), Platform Southwark Studio Residency (2018), FiBRA Colombia (2018), Fieldworks Studio Residency (2017), Villa Lena (2016) and The Beekeepers Residency (2015).

Rob Branigan (b. 1992 Liverpool) graduated from the Ruskin School of Art in 2013, and the Royal College of Art, MFA Sculpture, in 2019. He has recently exhibited at Assembly Point, Filet Space, and Belmacz Mayfair, London, and was shortlisted in 2019 for the ACS Studio Award, and the Tiffany & Co Studiometers Award. From November 2019 he will be in residence in a collaborative project with Finbar Ward at Standpoint Gallery, London.

Frances Drayson (b. 1986 London) studied at Royal Academy Schools and Slade School of Fine Art. Recent exhibitions include: *Class of 2019* at Royal Academy of Arts, London; *The Hive Mind* at Koppel Project, London; *1+1=3 [in the bubble]* at Museion, Italy; *Merry Widows* at White Cubicle, London; *Iterare! Iterare!* at URBANEK, London; *Addams Outtakes* at Roaming Projects, London. Drayson was the recipient of the Andre Dunoyer de Segonzac Travel Prize and the Gilbert Bayes Grant, both in 2019.