

Southern California

'Trans-personae' and John Heskuth at UC Riverside/CMP

A pair of concurrent exhibitions at the California Museum of Photography offers the work of four contemporary Los Angeles photographers, each of whom pursues divergent strategies in examining the construction and perception of individual identity. John Heskuth's one-person exhibition both installs and projects selections from an ongoing portrait series in darkened gallery spaces the better for highlighting the luminous pageantry, psychedelic swirl and saturation of colors and ethereal apparition of angel wings that abide in his vision. Captivated with both the individual diversity and creative self-determination of his fellow Angelenos and the vibrancy of the collective urban soul, Heskuth uses an elaborate process of long exposures and dynamic flashes of colored light elements to generate a painterly, expressionistic riot of hues and wiggles and waves that enfolds his subjects. The effect of the aura, the halo, the underwater wonderland that gathers around the men and women is, for the artist, a metaphor for the inner angel of every citizen of a city named for the celestial variety. The work is a bit carnivalesque and what tends to shine through more than information about the subjects is the explosive vision of the artist himself, the prism of his own hyper-spiritualized perception of the fabric of society as the driving force behind the series' power.

The three photographers represented in *Trans-personae* in the main floor gallery take that humanistic compassion and turn it on its head. The portraits and self-portraits here also follow a shared directive with Heskuth: theatricality and illusion used to unearth a deeper truth. However, rather than summon an outer expression of an inner existence, Robbie Miller, Naida Oslin and Bob Debris qualify the literal donning of disguises, masks and costumes as an act of assertive, personal self-identification. For them, the obfuscation is the noteworthy source of fascination, and their subjects' (or in some instances their own) deliberate construction of self is the main narrative event.

The long-term project Oslin has undertaken in her Polaroid series *Captiva Collection* is an awe-inspiring archive of snapshots depicting individuals attending gatherings, conventions and the such involving costume to various degrees. Santa Claus, Star Trek cast members, Playboy Bunnies, Abe Lincoln and other fixtures of historical reenactment fare, and, of course, Elvis get the most play. Her understated, almost casual mug shot style lends the images a fragile intimacy as objects, and provides no information at all about the person, the event or the environment depicted. But at the same time, it underscores the exotic ordinariness of each person's choice to discard their own identity in favor of assuming some one else's, and the paradoxical fact that this self-effacement is experienced by the person as a creative act of self-expression.

Debris pursues a similar thread in his more produced, animated, provocative portraiture of people inhabiting their alter egos. From the women of alt-culture roller derby to the cast of wrestlers and showgirls in the long-running vaudeville and Mexican wrestling productions of Lucha Va Voom, his subjects, like Oslin's, don masks, makeup, costumes and entire persona, but with different aims. They invent and name their own alters in order to participate in shows and sports and performance art that require over the top behavior, extreme camp and spectacle. They need to let themselves go, to find a way to break boundaries, to channel their inner icon of stage and screen without reservation. As with Oslin's *Captivas*, they seem to find a deeper truth inside the fantasy.

Into this thoughtful conversation on the meaning of self and community bursts (like Rodney Dangerfield into the *Caddyshack* clubhouse) the ridiculously hilarious photography and video of gifted satirist and physical comedian Robbie Miller. Using himself as the model, Miller examines the more diffuse, insidious ways in which popular media influences and infiltrates individuality in our culture. His *What I Would Wear If* series from 2007 starts from a deceptively simple premise; Miller dresses himself in the clothing and hair styles he would adopt were he to appear as a contestant on TV game shows like "Wheel of Fortune" (business casual, freshly trimmed hair, irritatingly earnest grin), "Dancing with the Stars" (think Fabio and the Karate Kid with jazz shoes on) or "Survivor" (the gay Rambo). Besides being laugh-out loud funny, the work, like all good satire, points to a real danger: the imminent possibility of a society organized on the vacuous principles and precepts of reality TV, lacking the ability to make good judgments about fashion, decorum, integrity and who their children's heroes should be.

—Shana Nys Dambrot

Trans-personae: Bob Debris, Robbie Miller, Naida Oslin and John Heskuth; Los Angeles closes April 5 at UC Riverside/California Museum of Photography, 3824 Main St., Riverside.

Shana Nys Dambrot is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.