MÁS QUE LA CARA

MORE THAN THE FACE
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the mask as an ambivalent tool of expression

- by Esther De Groot -

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We are the only species which consciously, deliberately alters its appearance. This has been true in every respect of human history and will always be so because bodily expression can communicate things which words never can. Far from a superficial, insignificant medium of expression, the customized body lies at the heart of human nature and capability.

Found throughout the world and in an extraordinary range of cultures, masks are clearly one of humankind’s most ancient and important inventions. It would seem that the world is still - indeed, perhaps more than ever before - in need of ordering, fixing and transforming. And of magic. ¹

For this project i came to decide to have a closer look into my fascination for the phenomenon ‘mask’ and its performative, transformative role. I am interested in the mask as an ambivalent device of expression and wanted to explore the graphical possibilities on this subject; could graphic design and printmaking serve as a tool to investigate and communicate these ambiguous properties of the mask?

In this report, i will start of describing the character of my work and how this relates to the subject i’m working with for my project. Then i will briefly go in to some of my fascinations that i believe to provide the basis for the formation and development of the visual language of my work and have proven to be a great inspiration. After that i will describe my different steps of my process and i will end the report by going deeper into the subject by elaborating on themes that are inextricably linked or closely related to the expressive qualities of the mask and its theatrical and ritualistic significance.

1.1 Starting Point

For long now I have been interested in human and animal representation throughout the history of visual and narrative communication. I am not primarily interested in classic or realistic representations but even more so in hybrid, anthropomorphic phenomena and traditional, non-Western representations, imbued with symbolism and metaphors - for instance Navajo sandpaintings Fig. 1, or Asafo Flags, Fig. 2 - where the human figure is at the root of endless transformations and numerous interpretations and where it serves as an interesting, visual, communication device on an emotional level with endless possibilities.

I tried to combine this interest with my love for graphic design (in the broadest sense of the word) and illustration and added the textile dimension to it.

1.2 Material

Textile is a material I like to work with because of its 2- and 3-dimensional qualities. In contrast to, for instance, paper (another medium for graphic design or screen print) textile is very suitable to process into sculpture or other 3-dimensional shapes. When working with screen print on textile, the material provides the opportunity to make repetitive patterns on large surfaces, something that is hard to achieve with paper. Repetition is a useful tool to create dynamic, expressive visual images and the material allows the prints to be transformed into another dimension.

Besides these material properties textiles (and fashion) can be regarded as a visual language reflecting the spirit of the time, coupled to materials, craft and tradition. Today and throughout history textile has had an exceptional significance as a means of communication, information and mutual association within particular communities.

The use of textiles links the myriad cultures of the world and defines the way they clothe themselves, adorn their surroundings and go about their lives. On top of that textile has a rich history in the field of ‘Storytelling’ and in the tradition of narrative communication through symbols.
Masks are important tools to transport both wearer and viewer from ordinary reality into a realm of symbolism and mythology. Our contemporary tendency is to see the function of masks as simply one of concealing one’s true identity. Cross-culturally and historically however, the primary, thoroughly extraordinary function of the mask is that of revealing, rather than concealing. The revealing of a different persona or entity that functions as a mediator between material and more subtle dimensions.

Remarkable is the fact that both masks and textile have this ambivalent function; where masks can fulfill either a concealing or a revealing role, one of textiles’ properties is to either camouflage you or make you stand out.
1.3 Working Process

Intuition plays a large role in my creative process. Even though I work quite intuitive, I believe that behind this intuition there is a ‘storage’, created by years of reading, researching and making. This yields a broad personal library to time and again fall back on and connect to themes, texts or images that are currently relevant to a project. Yet, it is not always easy to trust on this as it is not a clearly comprehensible phenomenon.

In my Master project I unintentionally forced myself to rely on my intuition more than ever. After spending weeks on researching I collected a broad range of subjects which somehow seemed to connect but the core of the project remained lost in various interesting theories and subjects. Because it prevented me from taking the next step I decided to change method and rely on this ‘personal library’ and move away from the books and start working in the workshop to translate this ‘knowledge’ into something physical.

Once I made the decision to work with textile print, I started trying out different things on the computer, but soon decided this was not the way to go for this project. Although I draw a lot on the computer, I’m not to fond on the accompanying characteristics of computer drawings, as they tend to have a ‘cold’ and unpersonal feel to it. I decided to try out a more ‘manual approach’ and started to work with paper and scissors and made several try-outs of different paper cuts. In the beginning I was focusing on the human body in relation to the mask, but I soon skipped the idea of ‘the wearer’ and I focused solely on the mask and its appearance and different expressions. By working with paper and scissors the decisions are more definite and ‘honest’ in a way, as on the computer you can get lost in altering your images to a point where your initial motifs get blurry.

The first idea was to create three completely different prints within the same theme, but while working with it I realized that for this subject it would be much more interesting to work from the same starting point (the cut-out masks/faces) and explore the graphical, visual possibilities of the face and its different expressions and characteristics. The individual face with its capability of transforming into different roles and showing different faces by putting on different ‘masks’.

I’ve been working in the textile workshop for weeks to explore the physical possibilities of my idea and experiment with different prints, colors, layers and arrangements. I have been trying out to what extend you can layer the prints without completely abstracting it. For most prints two layers was the maximum as it turned out that more layers blur the overall print and reduce its expressiveness.
One layer however, already tells a different story then two. The same goes for printing on an fabric that already has a structure/print itself. When working with the double layered print i needed to explore the material properties even further. Besides trying out different textiles, with different properties and colors i had to experiment with the pigments i printed with. Testing not only different color combinations and proportions, but also different levels of transparancy and color sequences.
RESULTS

I will here describe the three main prints, consisting out of either two (print 1 & print 3) or one layer (print 2)

Print 1:

A layer of masks/faces with different shapes and expressions, printed over by a second layer with the exact same print in a contrasting color. Because the second layer skips the first half of the repeat the second layer does not match horizontally and the mask/faces overlap at different places in the print creating new shapes and mask/faces. The pattern now shows positive spaces, negative spaces and ‘in-between’ spaces. The first ‘original’ layer of faces, the second that adds another layer of faces but also creates a third layer with new faces. So by layering these faces/masks, it becomes unclear where to focus on and new masks/faces arise and make the print more ‘confusing’. Fig. 3 - 10

Print 2:

A print built up by thick, even, vertical black and white stripes. Faces are hidden in these stripes in a repetitive order, creating new positive and negative spaces that seem to pop out as 3-dimensional shapes. It, again, creates 3 layers of faces to look at; one half in negative space, one half in positive space and the face as a whole. Because of the repetitive print the individual shapes (mouth, nose, eyes) stand out from a distance and create a graphic, almost psychedelic print in itself. Fig. 11 - 14

Print 3:

A print consisting of various faces (eyes, nose mouth) that are reduced to basic shapes. By taking away the outline of the faces the context is much more unclear and when put in a repetitive order, the individual parts seem to blend in to the overall pattern. From a distance it looks like the shapes are organised cut-outs that create a pattern all together. The faces seem to get lost in the larger whole.

When adding another layer, slightly shifted, in a different color the faces seem to pop out slightly more. The close overlap of the shapes and the contrasting colors create an optical illusion where the faces seem to be moving and it is hard to see where to focus on. Fig. 15 - 18
With every print i explored various possibilities in the workshop, which resulted in 8 variations originating from 3 different prints. Fig. 19 - 20

The prints play with the masks’ ambiguous functions through the use of different visual phenomena as: positive-negative space, layering, overlap and transparency that relate to and communicate specific visual properties of the mask as: the idea of concealing versus revealing, absence-presence and show a face in motion, constantly transforming itself.

Can i take another step in exploring the expressive qualities of the prints within the concept? Can i further research the prints by continuing to explore its graphical possibilities, not by making more patterns, but for instance by making patterns with the patterns? Taking repetition, layering and arrangements to a next level. Will the use of the prints in different arrangements contribute to the notion of the ambiguous function of the mask or lead to abstraction of the print, to a point that the masks/faces get almost subordinated? Will the layering and the use of various prints evoke a feeling of indistinctness as it is not clear whether it contributes to the notion of 'standing out' or 'blending in' the whole? For the exhibition i want to show a graphical representation of my research in prints on the subject of the mask and its ambivalent qualities. Prints within prints, a subject in motion, playing with the concepts of positive space - negative space, concealing - revealing and being and nonbeing, emphasizing the concept of ambiguity as it plays a keyrole role throughout the project.
‘It is probably no mere historical accident that the word ‘person’, in its first historical meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role. It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves.’

Robert Ezra Park
RELATED CONCEPTS / THEORY

2.1 Masks Etymology

It is not completely sure where the word ‘Mask’ finds its origin but it is believed to first appear in English around 1530 from Middle French masque “covering to hide or guard the face”, derived in turn from Italian maschera, from Medieval Latin masca “mask, specter, nightmare”. This word is of uncertain origin, perhaps from Arabic maskhara “he ridiculed, he mocked”, masakha “he transformed” (transitive). One German author claims the word “mask” is originally derived from the Spanish más que la cara (literally, “more than the face” or “added face”), which evolved to “máscara.

2.2 The presentation of self in everyday life.

Half way through my project, when i was having a hard time putting my project into words, i got introduced to the Theories of sociologist Erving Gofman that i feel are relevant to my work. He does not refer to the mask as a device to literally cover or hide the face, but focusses on the transforming qualities of the intangible mask, a facade, in relation to the individual that takes on different roles by putting on different masks in different situations. I don’t see Goffmans Theory as something backing up the visual aspects of my work, yet it helped me to better understand the work and see it in another perspective. His approach and the connections he draws between theater and everyday life shine an interesting light on the concept of ‘masks’ being more then a traditional, aesthetic device used in ceromonies and rituals. It is also a dramatic device enabling performers to stand apart from their everyday role in society.

Erving Goffman, a 20th century Canadian sociologist, is widely known for his capacity to unmask the comedic aspects of everyday life. He saw a connection between the kinds of acts that people put on in their daily life and theatrical performances. In social interaction, like in theatrical performance there is a front region where the “actors” (individuals) are on stage in front of the audiences. This is where the positive aspect of the idea of self and desired impressions are highlighted. There is a back region or stage that can also be considered as a hidden or private place where individuals can be themselves and get rid of their role or identity in society.²

Goffman uses the term ‘performance’ to refer to all the activity of an individual in front of a particular set of observers, or audience. Through this performance, the individual, or actor, gives meaning to themselves, to others, and to their situation. These performances deliver impressions to others and information is exchanged to confirm identity. The ‘actor’ may or may not be aware of their performance or have an objective of their performance, however the audience is always attributing meaning to it and to the ‘actor’.

The setting for the performance includes the scenery, props, and location in which the interaction takes place. Different settings will have different audiences and will thus require the actor to alter his performances for each setting.

In ‘The presentation of self in everyday life’ Goffman tries to answer the question of “Why do we perform?” Are we expected to perform? Do we perform to be accepted into society? All interesting questions that are closely related to questions that come up in my own work as i described earlier on.
Masks are regarded as one of the earliest creations of humans to establish a relationship between the outer world and the inner person. The use of masks in rituals or ceremonies is a very ancient human practice across the world and it has played a crucial historical role in the development of understandings about “what it means to be human”, as they permit the imaginative experience of “what it is like” to be transformed into a different identity (or to affirm an existing social or spiritual identity). The concept of masks, can be regarded as one of the simplest and oldest in human social theory. Yet it is also connected to the most difficult issues about the interaction between the self and the social world.

Masks cover one meaning with a new meaning, mediate the co-existence of two opposites – identity and non-identity, being and non-being, concealing and revealing – or fix a transitional state between one form of being and another.

These ambiguous qualities are one of the main reasons why mask are so appealing to me. Beside that it’s its playful, alienating qualities that transcends a normative understanding of the body and the subject as bound and contained. It is this ‘grotesque body’ defined by hybridity and transgression of borders but also by parody, humour and inversion, that has a great attraction on me.

Masks can serve as a tool to open the doorway to the imaginary world of the unconsciousness and according to anthropologist Ted Polhemus our troubled, confusing times (times which notoriously bleach meaning and identity away from us) demand that we dig deep into the toolbox to reactivate this most ancient and magical device.3

REFLECTIONS

Looking back on the project, one of the main goals for me was to not make the same ‘mistakes’ as during my Bachelor degree, where I completely blocked along the way and performance anxiety took over the project. I felt there were too many subjects, too many possibilities and got lost in the process.

In the beginning of the process of my Master Degree project, I read and researched a lot, trying to find a subject that would fit my work best and would be interesting enough to work with over a longer period. I started out with a really broad subject that had multiple subjects in itself to work with and did not manage to get to the core of the subject until just before the mid-term presentations, when I decided to work with the subject ‘Masks’.

Because the actual research already took a fair bit of my time I decided to try a different method to not get stuck in formulating a concept. Where I usually start working in the workshop when the research is done and my idea or concept is formulated, I now went in to the workshop without fixed ideas. The approach for this project was more focussed on practical/physical research. As I explain earlier in my report, it was a completely new approach accompanied by a lot of insecurities. It wasn’t until I actually got into the workshop and started to experiment, when things seemed to fall into place.

For me working in the workshop was the best part of my project. I felt really comfortable experimenting with different materials, lay-outs and colours and got extremely interested in the process and possibilities of textile screenprinting. Normally going into the workshop is not what I feel most comfortable with, but I learned that by actually forcing myself, I lost all hesitation about the technical aspects or final outcome and there was no room for anxiety, which was really liberating.

In the end, to me, the most ‘valuable’ outcome of my project is the fact that (other than finding a new and interesting technique to work with) I have found a method/way of working that really suits me and my hesitations about going into the workshops to experiment are as good as gone. Besides that I think that the subject I worked with leaves a lot of room for further exploration. Not only in textile print, but in different materials and dimensions. So for the future I will definitely continue working with the subject as well as the technique of textile screenprinting and I will try to experiment further and use practical research in future processes. So eventhough, in retro-perspective, I would have probably not always made the same descisions as I did now, I still feel it is a start in leading me into the right artistic direction. I hope I will get the opportunity to experiment a lot more in the field of graphic design and illustration and combine it with my interest in textile.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Relevant Books


Dictionary

IMAGES
Fig. 1 - Navajo Sand Painting

Fig. 2 - ASAFO Flag ca. 1920-1930
Fig. 3 - Prepared Screen

Fig. 4 - Color Studio
Fig. 5 - Color Tests Workshop

Fig. 6 - Detail Double Layered Pr.
Fig. 7 - Print Table First Layer

Fig. 8 - Detail Printed Background
Fig. 9 - Detail First Layer Printed Background

Fig. 10 - Detail Black on Black
Fig. 11 - Chalk Test

Fig. 12 - Print Table Black Print
Fig. 15 - Test Print Single Layer

Fig. 16 - Layering Tests
Fig. 16 - Print First Layer

Fig. 17 - Print Double Layer