



Barbara Astman / as artifact

Barbara Astman has a history of using portraiture to express ideas, emotions, and such deeply personal parts of her identity that they seem unnamable. Through her work, she establishes a connection between the subject and the viewer. At the same time, she tells stories (both real and imagined) by making use of the portrait in unconventional and captivating ways. In *Visual Narratives* (1978-1979), for example, she poses for a series of Polaroid photographs with a series of short sentences beneath, allowing us to read her work like a storybook. The text is minimal but Astman is skilled in the art of subtlety. In the *Red* (1981) series, she gives her audience more of an explanatory guide, offering different red objects for consideration. Only the bottom half of her face is visible and yet every curve of her mouth, every slight shift in her pose can be read without difficulty providing us with more insight. Somehow, every bit of information gleaned from her visage informs the work and our feelings about it.

Astman takes this even further in *Scenes from a Movie for One* (1997), in which her head and shoulders are sufficiently blurred to create doubt; is it a smile or smirk, a glare or a wink? In this work, the portrait is almost illegible yet continues to have a powerful impact. Every pose draws us in; every shadow begs for our attention. Details are harder to discern but all the more gratifying once they are decoded, even if our conclusions deviate from Astman's intentions.

Each of these experiences is a crucial step in understanding Astman's approach to portraiture in */ as artifact* (2008-2011). In removing even more visual information, she opens up more possibilities as she shifts further away from the face itself and replaces it



with a mask. Thinking of them as masks only, though, restricts the interpretation since they are made, ironically, by using a facial product designed to rejuvenate one's appearance. Astman peeled these masks from her own skin and saw bits of herself—her features, her skin cells, her DNA—within them. The process of applying, removing, drying, scanning, and editing has created a collection of individual expressions, textures, and personalities.

In the gallery space, orchestrated groups of faces confront us the moment we enter the room. A sheet of non-reflective glass separates our world from theirs, yet, they come forward to greet us and each other. Their penetrating gazes capture our attention. We try to imagine what they are doing or what they are saying. Our eyes jump from one to the next, as if we might catch the slightest of movements or a hint of conversation.

Each mask occupies its own space. As its white features emerge from the blackest of black backgrounds, it takes on a life of its own. In *I as artifact #9*, for instance, the nose is folded over, adding layers of brighter white. Its triangular shape becomes an arrow pointing towards the right eye. In this mask the eyes are smaller, evoking a more serious appearance than those of its counterparts. Its mouth hangs open as if releasing a deep breath. *I as artifact #5* appears more delicate. It has fewer ripples throughout the cheeks and forehead but creases along the chin and mouth are pronounced, giving it an air of wisdom. The eyes are wide to gather information or to convey shock. In these small details, the masks become individuals while maintaining distinct identity within the group.



The most magical aspect of the series lies within this identity. Recalling our own past experience influences our construction of particular mask personalities. This process of being viewed allows the mask, though it literally contains the artist, to gather meaning and identity apart from its maker. These uniquely formulated identities inform the relationships between and among the masks. The gallery space comes alive with every viewing as their eyes watch and their mouths whisper to each other, even in the presence of an audience. *I as artifact* may initially appear ghostly and foreboding. Yet, as we spend more time analyzing the faces that in turn look out at us, it becomes clear that we are not intruders but an audience for an engaging display of motionless exchanges between silent faces.

Barbara Astman's interest in the portrait can be traced back to the late 70s. Snapshots of herself, her friends, and her family have led her through different forms of experimentation. By slowly departing from a traditional use of portraiture, Astman has arrived at a kind of crossroads. In *I as artifact*, she has created a body of work that not only reflects the original "sitter", but also grows beyond the identity of its subject and maker. The exhibition is thus interactive as it allows us to explore these masks as not only portraits of Astman, but also as portraits of mysterious entities that are continuously shaped and reshaped by every visitor.

*An essay by Kelly McKenzie,
MA candidate, Department of Visual Arts, Western University*