

This text by Phil Scher is a response to Jess Perlit's *That Which is Set Before the Eyes*, sculptural media produced on the occasion of her exhibition at Pacific Sky.

I Know Yuh By Yuh Nose Hole

"Mask, Mask! I know yuh by yuh nose hole!" During the riotous days of Trinidad carnival long ago, people would shout this phrase in glee as they tried to discover who that person was concealed by masks of the devil, beasts, clowns, wild bears or comely women. The mask hides the person you know, but for the masker, there is no reason to look any further than the face in front of you. The dragon, the beast or the warrior were ways of being who you really were or wanted to be. For people whose lives at every turn were circumscribed by dire conditions of want, poverty, racism and social immobility, the mask was a chance for the world to see them for whom they wanted to be, or maybe, whom they thought they should be. At least within limits. You never saw maskers parading as chartered accountants or desk clerks, even if they were respectable jobs, unless they were parodying the upper and middle class folks who had those jobs and exercised power over their lives through impenetrable bureaucracies or the mystification of educated jargon. That's not the kind of fantasy people generally pursue. But masks do not always exist in the fantastic and upside down world of Carnival. Erving Goffman, the noted sociologist, often characterized the ways that people master the roles they play in life as drama, complete with a backstage and an onstage persona. We are engaged every day in countless costume changes and dramatic role shifts that necessitate the use of masquerade like behaviors. And who among us can say we have ever been so empowered that we have created such personae ourselves, out of whole cloth? What façade do we adopt while idling away in a waiting room? How is the magazine we thumb through an extension of the mask? The kind smile? The conspiratorial and companionable eye-roll we give to strangers as we seek solidarity in our waiting ordeal? And how do others know what we mean by all of these gestures? And now look around you as you travel. The monuments we erect across our cities and towns; monuments to war, peace, devastation, achievement. Are they the masks of the nation? "Mask, Mask, I know yuh by yuh nose hole."

Philip Scher
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