

Meidor Hu

b.1970, Guangdong, China, lives in Hilo, Hawai'i
exhibited in *Biennial VIII*

Westford, VT, Satun, 2002

color digital print

Collection of the Honolulu Museum of Art, gift of The
Contemporary Museum, Honolulu, 2011, and gift of the artist,
2008 (2008.26)

The work which Meidor Hu made for this exhibition was
accidentally damaged in her studio and could not be
shown. She is represented here by one of the photographs she
showed in *Biennial VIII*.

MEIDOR HU

*Born in 1970 in Guangdong, China
Lives and works in Hilo, Hawai'i*

Chinese opera is a richly codified art form, in which the informed spectator, for full appreciation, must be familiar with iconographic nuances that regulate everything from the classic plot outlines to the color and pattern of the actors' makeup. Meidor Hu, with experience on both sides of the curtain, appropriates some of the formal language of Chinese opera in a series of photographic self-portraits that place her both in character and out of context.

Hu currently teaches digital media, drawing and photography at Hawai'i Community College in Hilo, and was previously a member of the Humanities department at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo. She was born into a family that experienced first-hand China's cultural revolution and the rise of communism, and came with them to the islands in 1981. After receiving her BA in studio art at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo in 1996, Hu moved to San Francisco, to attend the San Francisco Art Institute, from which she received her MFA in 1999. Her thesis was entitled *Reading Painted Faces in Chinese Opera*, reflecting both her then-current interest as a practitioner of this art form as well as its ongoing power that would subsequently inform her more recent photographic work.

While in San Francisco, Hu attended performances of Cantonese-style Chinese opera, and became a performing member of a troupe. She studied various aspects of the art form, including the detailed and time-consuming aspects of applying the all-important facial make-up that, as much as costume, would define the character or role. As Hu notes, this style of performance relies less on staging and is predominantly plot-driven, so the visual definition of each character is significant. She developed the concept of "decoration with meaning," recently observing that "What interested me about opera face painting was that its motifs and colors convey information that opera fans understand but are not accessible to others outside this cultural form. Like people who are interested in etymology, the visual language of Chinese opera faces has a history and origin, the colors and patterns are usually associated with certain characters. Chinese opera face painting is decoration with meaning: patterns and color perform the task of decorating in the beginning, but over time the colors and patterns themselves attained meaning..."

Hu's use of the linguistic analogy is telling, for performance is often thought of as a form of body language, where posture and gestures of the body as well as facial expres-

sions can convey so much, often enriching the narratives of speech itself. When body language is translated into the medium of theatrical performance, and must be read across a more extended viewing distance, the rationale for an amplified range of motion as well as heightened visual cues such as those found in the elaborate face painting becomes clear. The symbolic use of color as well as the shape of certain marks both play a part in defining a character, and Hu has also made use of these conventions.

Growing up first in Communist China and then in multi-cultural Hawai'i, being Asian did not constitute a limitation. Her move to San Francisco, however, did place issues of cultural identity in sharper relief. Hu's immersion in Chinese opera allowed her, as a cultural transplant, to explore aspects of her root culture. It also provided the point of departure for an important series of photographic portraits, created between 2000-2005, in which the artist herself plays an essential role. The primary conceptual shift that occurs in this series of work is the dislocation/relocation of the figure with painted face from the artifice of the stage to the natural environment of landscape. While such a move may serve as a kind of analog

(continued on page 12)

for cultural migration, it also serves to call into question an array of assumptions made about each genre—performance, portraiture, the contexts of culture and nature—in general.

Hu worked initially at sites near the Bay Area such as Ocean Beach and Santa Cruz, but also found locations in national parks, and as distant as Vermont one winter. Her working process generally involved site selection and various stages of preparation, not least of which was the application of the painted face makeup, a process that begins with an overall layer of white oil-based foundation, and might take thirty to forty-five minutes. As Hu had done during actual opera performances, she took on a male persona, as defined by the painted face. The use of every-day clothing often served as a kind of mediating element between the landscape setting and the facial make-up. While Hu could and did, on occasion, use other actors for these staged images, she most often used herself as subject, in part because she knew the characters best. While expediency may have had a role to play in this process, Hu's place in front of the camera, as androgynous persona, adds other layers of meaning to each image.

In one image, Hu stands in a snow-covered road that is lined by bare, snow-laden trees. Dressed in dark coveralls, she lifts her arms slightly away from her body, leaning back slightly. In the context of this cool monochrome setting, in which the body echoes the vertical alignment of the surrounding woods, the bright red and pink accents of makeup are all the more emphatic. In another work created during the same period, Hu lies on the ground in the falling snow, so dense that the tree-line in the background is little more than a dim shadow. Seen from the perspective of extreme foreshortening, she reaches with seeming effort for something, red brow-lines and enlarged area around her mouth suggesting a desperate grimace.

In another image from the series, Hu stands against a backdrop of sand dunes partially covered with pale grasses; in still another, she sits atop an outcropping of moss-covered rock within a tangled forest. Her garb of blue denim work-shirt and pants seems in keeping with the setting, thus isolating the painted face as the focal point. Here in particular, as the natural setting replaces the painted backdrop of the stage, the distance between actor and audience collapses, and Hu returns the viewer's gaze, compelling a stronger engagement.

In the context of portraiture, identity resides primarily in the face, but Hu subverts that assumption. What is to be discerned of the person who resides behind this second skin of paint? And what is to be understood about why this person has been transported from one context to another? In a sense, this series of photographs extends Hu's interest in decoration with meaning, extending the arcane aspects of operatic painted faces into the arcane juxtaposition of such personae with the landscape. In both contexts, the quest for meaningful narrative persists. As Hu reflects, "The series...juxtaposes the familiar—the landscape—with something unfamiliar—the opera faces. I'm interested in the ability of the two to teeter at once between being familiar and different, between seemingly precarious and comfortable. The opera faces taken out of context lose meaning—one is prompted to generate a story for these characters with their new surroundings. Meaning exists in a space of being both what they are and what they are not. The opera characters invigorate the landscape and the landscape in turn rejuvenates the characters. This synthesis creates an environment for new meaning."