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Herrera's images capture a shadowy, surreal world

Body Text: We all dream.

Perhaps that's why I'm so drawn to Germán Herrera's softly surreal digital photographs. Walk into the Fresno Art Museum, where a show of Herrera's work continues through Aug. 21, and his photos beckon from the walls. They whisper of a shadowy world that hovers between waking and sleeping: vague shapes, strange pairings of contrasting images, limblike apparitions, subtle shadings of light and mood.

It's as if he's captured the half-constructed images of his dreams and dragged them out into the clean, bright light of day.

We all wear masks.

Perhaps that's why I'm so drawn to one of Herrera's works in particular. "The Mask" grabbed me from the moment I entered the gallery and really never has left me since.

I'm not talking here about masks as in Halloween get-ups or "Star Wars" storm-trooping shenanigans. Those masks are easy to spot. More subtle are the personas we craft, the fronts we present, the walls we build between us and the world.

Somehow **Herrera** captures a sense of "inner" and "outer," of steely resolve and soft underbelly.

Taken as a whole, his prints in "Fotografía" create a cumulative impression of wobbling between the crisp material world and the fuzzy territory of the subconscious.

When you isolate "The Mask," it seems almost freakish, unsettling, a commentary on the tug-of-war of human existence.

Why do different works appeal to different people? Heck if I know. That's why art is so subjective. What beckons to one might leave someone else completely cold. All I know is that I've learned to embrace images that intrigue me -- to skip that which doesn't connect and burrow into that which does.

In "The Mask," we face a woman who peers intently back at us. She seems composed, at ease yet alert, posing as if for a formal portrait. A high-neck collar, lending an austere and severe look to her pose, would be at home in a Rembrandt painting. The background has the cracked look of oil paint that has shrunk over the years.

Yet any notion that this is a "normal" portrait is quickly dispelled. If pressed to identify any area of the work that seems standard, you could point only to the woman's left eye, a scrape of cheekbone and part of her nose.

The rest is positively surreal.

Instead of a frilly bonnet or carefully arranged hairstyle, the top of her head is covered by a hulking, handleless metal ax blade that's inverted as if she's being scalped.

The right side of her face, including the lower part of her eye, seems chipped out of rough concrete, and the strange texture seems to spread down her face, past her chin, with just a hint of an unaltered mouth peeking from behind. Strange, spindly contusions dance about off to the left of her face.

If Rene Magritte or Max Ernst could have played with digital cameras, they might have made works such as these.

Herrera, who was born in Mexico City and now lives in the Bay Area, has worked both in the tradition of street photography and in the realm of symbolic images.

He uses digital technology to merge images, natural elements, textures and atmospheres.

In notes for the exhibition, art historian Elizabeth Ferrer emphasizes that each image functions as a kind of mirror that "offers the potential to recognize something of ourselves." His work is about fragments, about pieces of puzzles that are recalled from dreams "but that remain tantalizingly beyond full comprehension."

In person, **Herrera** -- who came to Fresno for the show's opening June 24 -- is quiet and contemplative, content to let his audience read what they want into his works. He points out a print titled "Cantor," which to him suggests motion -- and which to me, with its ragged, interlocking shapes and topographic feel, suggests a map of conquest, like a giant Risk board map of Central Asia covered with symbolic armies.

Yet he's also definite about the impulses behind his works, an expression, as Ferrer describes it, "of the totality of the beliefs, feelings, fears and myths that reside within." He is hesitant to speak of spirituality in conjunction with his work because he doesn't want what he does to seem too pat or misinterpreted -- but you can tell, when talking with him, that the spiritual aspect is all-important.

As for "The Mask," we stand in front of it and just look at the work for a few long seconds. We both acknowledge the masks that we ourselves are wearing at this very minute: him the mask of the artist, me the mask of the arts writer. But though we might not always have the same interpretations, we share at least one thing in common besides a high opinion for his work: We both dream.

And in a fascinating, hypnotic way, **Herrera** has found a way to capture those dreams and put them on a wall.

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