

resurgence

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CHRISTMAS ISSUE



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BREAKING THE SILENCE

KATHERYN TRENshaw

Healing is having to understand the masks that we have worn to survive.

An Interview by Satish Kumar



Father Sun Mother Moon

COULD YOU BEGIN your story with the way you discovered your artistic talent?

One day my therapist suggested that I should focus on art as a way of therapy. I knew the value of art therapy but I needed someone else to put the idea to me and to challenge me.

My therapist specialized in child sexual abuse. I was seeing her because of my own experiences.

When the therapist suggested that you should pursue art, did she consider it as part of your healing process?

Yes, she did. For each person there are different paths to healing. To release

yourself from any kind of trauma — whether it be child sexual abuse or whatever — talk-based therapy is not enough. The trauma is too deep to verbalize. We have a very limited language for this. Also, I am a visual person. For me the visual process makes it possible to express millions of memories and words. It's about getting down into the centre of the body,



Contact.

into the soul and about healing on that level.

So your art was a way to personal healing as well as a way of helping others?

Yes. Many people who have been through trauma want to help others in the same situation. It is reciprocal. The fundamental aspect of art is to get to a healing place, and the effect is very profound.

When you discovered that you could use your art as a way of healing, did that change the kind of work you were doing?

Yes, it did. I became less concerned with the aesthetic *per se* and more concerned with where the image came from. So instead of deciding that I want an image to look a certain way, I started to sit quietly and meditate about a certain issue I wanted to resolve. Invariably, the work that comes from the deepest places is the most magnificent. Whether that is a place of great joy, or a place of great pain, it doesn't matter. Surprising things hap-

pen. I always envision my art coming out of my belly.

Then you went to mask-making. Why?

Well, I've always been very moved by the power and symbolism of masks. When it came to a way of expressing deep emotions of trauma, the mask was an absolutely perfect medium. I thought about the hundreds of thousands of masks which we all wear in order to survive — to get along in the world.

It was very exciting to look at my inner gallery of masks. It was as if I had a closet and there were all these masks hanging there for me to choose from. Which ones do I want to explore? Which ones do I want to throw away? Which ones do I want to give more attention to? Literally having a mask and holding it up and dancing with each mask in my closet from a psychological perspective is perfect.

In the beginning I thought that the goal was to get rid of all our masks. I wanted to get to the bottom of it. But

that faded fairly quickly. I realized that actually our masks serve us quite well. Putting someone behind a mask where they don't have to be involved in their current ego state allows them to get into the spirit or characteristic that they would really like to explore. It's very liberating and very pure.

What kinds of mask do you make?

The masks that I create are raku-fired ceramic masks. Part of the reason for this is that clay is my favourite material to sculpt in and the firing process is like a ritual. Raku is a primitive form of firing from Japan. If the masks make it through all the processes, then they are really meant to be. It is a very dramatic experience. There's lots of smoke, lots of fire, pieces explode and break in half because of the harsh temperature changes. Raku has a very high loss rate.

There is also an interesting parallel between the process of firing these pieces and the process of healing from child sexual abuse, which is the point of my work. When you go through the



Totem protector.

raku process, you never know what your work will look like in the end, and you run a very high risk of masks breaking up. But if you make it through, then there is this incredible beauty at the other end. The whole process is very harsh — but you get these amazing effects. Similarly we have to go through fire in our lives to be healed.

With healing from trauma, you can't scoot around it, you actually have to go through it if you want to move beyond it. The healing is having to understand the masks that we have worn to survive and to cast off the masks that no longer serve.

There could be the mask that was adopted by a five-year-old; the mask of smiling, yet underneath that mask we are screaming. But the expectation is, if you can't say something nice, then don't say anything at all. So one of the masks that I have created has a diagonal line across it, the top layer being a happy face, and underneath that, it's just screaming.

Can you talk a bit more about the

different images you have made?

One group is this gallery of masks. These convey the experience of having your voice taken away. I've worked around this theme quite a bit. One of the aspects of child sexual abuse is that we are told never to tell our story. It's a double-bind. Quite a few of the masks have their mouths sewn shut with copper wire or the mouth is ripped away and hangs separately or is cut away neatly. There's a piece that's called, *You Stole My Voice*. The mouth has been removed and there's a neat rectangle in its place with four metal screws. It's very clear that someone else controls the screw-driver, not the child with the mask.

The mask that breaks out of the silence is the mask with the mouth wide open. The secret is out. It is an empowered mask. It is also a very frightening mask. People find attraction and repulsion in that image. It is not a pleasant image. There is clearly a struggle in this recovery from pain.

The mask helps us to look at the pain, to give it a form and to give it a

voice. So often in child sexual abuse the problems are the things that come out sideways. There is a trauma that occurred so long ago, and how do you keep from repeating that trauma over and over again unless you get to the source? Healing is about looking at these masks as the source for that healing.

I also work on masks which give protection. These images are manifestations of inner strength and are reminders of a space deserving protection. I call them my peaceful gargoyles! They are a bit like the gargoyles on the top of Notre Dame that ward off evil. ●

Katheryn Trenshaw is an American artist and therapist who has recently moved to Devon, England. She has exhibited her work and led workshops in healing through creative expression, ritual and movement. She will be leading a 5 day residential workshop, 6th-11th July, 1997, at Monkton Wyld Court in Dorset on "Affirming the Female Body". To receive more information please contact: Katheryn Trenshaw, PO Box 3, Totnes, Devon TQ9 5WJ.