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- THE MASKS OF VENICE
- A FLOWERING PASSION
- SASKATCHEWAN'S NORTH
- BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY
- GREAT BLUE HERONS
- CAPA/CLUB NEWS
- COMPETITION RESULTS



Liminal Animism: The Masks Of Venice

By Linda Briskin



During a recent visit to Venice, I was riveted by the plethora of masks. Even the cheap knock-offs from China were compelling. Hand-made masks tucked away in small ateliers were lush, captivating and seductive. I took hundreds of photos.

The culture of masks in Venice is intriguing with a rich history dating back to the 13th century. Although associated with Carnival, in the 17th century, Venetians wore masks in public for six months of the year. The wearing of masks was associated with disguise.

“Secrecy was prized and self-revelation not always prudent.”

But in the rigid social hierarchy of Venice, masks also created “an appearance

of equality, eased the interaction of social classes, permitted women to go out unescorted and allowed beggars to conceal their shame.”

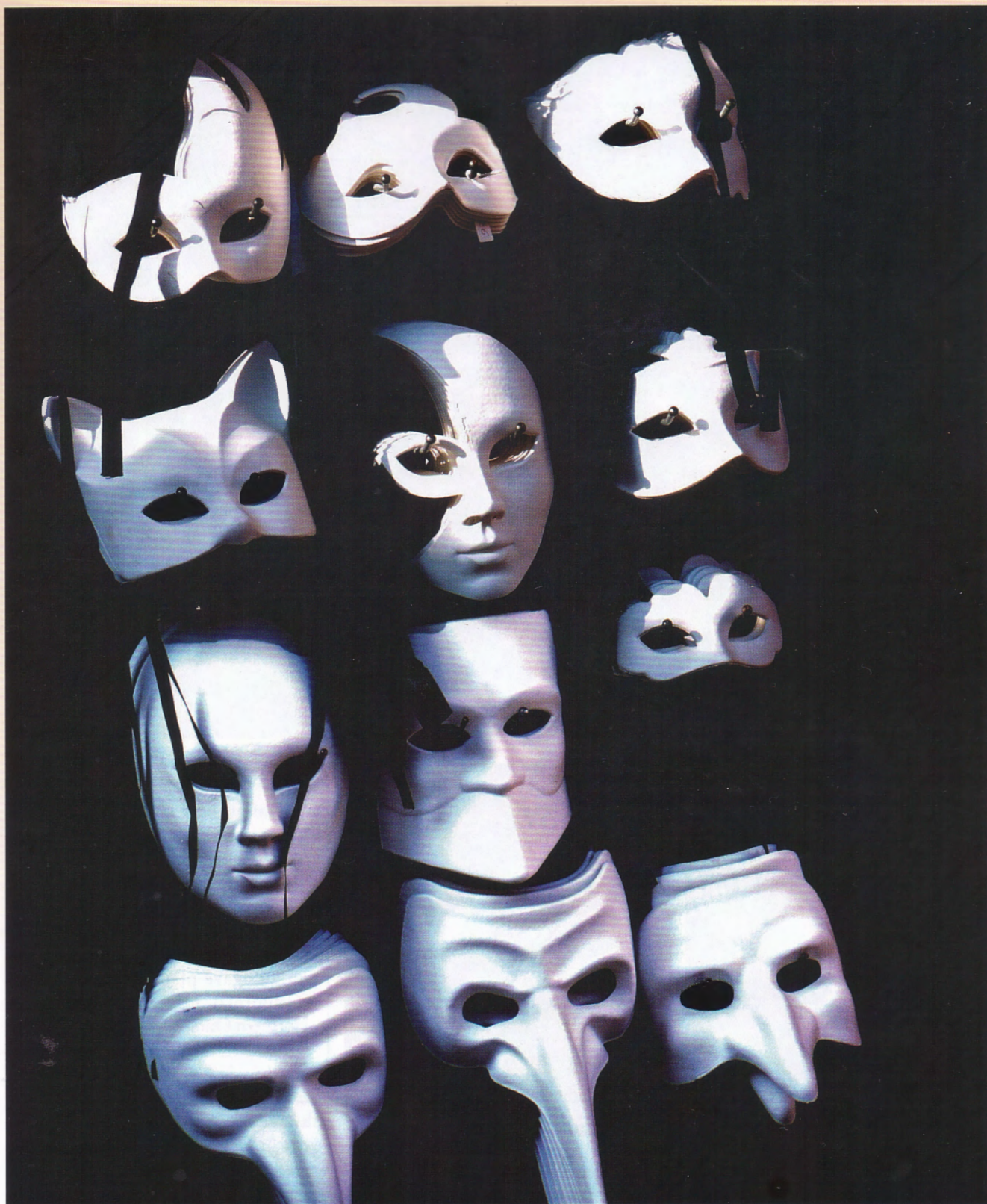
Venetian masks are a sophisticated and quintessential form of art and artifice. They harken back to the original meaning of artifice—a skilled piece of workmanship—and also speak to the contemporary understanding of artifice as fakery, deception and trickery.

In Liminal Animism, Venetian masks are layered within photographs of nature. Photo-collage, then, is used to construct unique and painterly images rich with nuance which both embrace and displace the original photographs. These photo-collages involve physical and metaphoric layering.

They re-imagine nature and the human experience, generate ethereal realities and inspire suggestive narratives.

Revisiting nature photographs

Like many photographers, I have a passion for nature, seeking light, lines,



shadows, texture, reflections and images that last only a breath. Despite the delights of nature photography, the ubiquitous images of nature on Instagram, flickr and Facebook,

many of them splendid, can be overwhelming.

This series offered an alternative and unconventional use for nature photographs. I looked with fresh eyes

at my extensive collection, seeking those that would bring a Venetian mask to life.

After much trial and error, it was a pleasure to find the right fit.



Despite how stylized they are, masks have an uncanny way of echoing a human face.

In this project, I wanted to deepen this human-like character. Inserting a mask into a nature image had an eerie way of bringing the masks to life.

The combination of mask and nature also unexpectedly illuminated



the animating spirits of nature, deepening my appreciation of the nuance and subtlety in nature. A delightful symbiosis of masks and nature.

Counter intuitively, then, in Liminal Animism, the masks became a vehicle to unearth and make visible some inner truths about the essence of nature.

From a black sand beach

Readers might be interested in the specific nature photographs which were used.

A shell on the black sand of a beach in San Diego became the backdrop and inspiration for the music mask.

In other photo-collages, the backgrounds are the curly white filaments on an agave plant in Palm Springs (California), bracken on a tree log in Northern Ontario, reeds floating on the Seguin River in Ontario, tropical greens growing on Cayman Brac off the coast of Grand Cayman, a rose under a tree in a park in Wales, the edge of a fallen palm tree in Indian Canyons (California) and greenery on Hornby Island, a gulf island off the coast of British Columbia.

Techniques

Despite years of using Photoshop, the program continues to amaze. The capacity of its tools are limitless and I am always discovering new possibilities.



For *Liminal Animism*, I used layers, various blending techniques, the eraser tool and transform. Lots of trial and error. Once I found a fit between a nature photograph and mask, the process was painstaking and required patience and persistence.

A Liminal space

The title—*Liminal Animism*—highlights both liminality, a place of transition with an unstable border, and animism, which speaks to the attribution of a soul to plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena.

These layered photographs suggest a fluid crossover between the imagined and the real, the natural and the constructed, the authentic and the fabricated. The artificial is made natural and the natural artificial, challenging the nature of both the natural and the constructed.

The series embraces ambiguity and invents an alternative reality. Via a lim-

inal space, the viewer is encouraged to look twice, look again, wonder, puzzle, and to embrace, at one and the same time, conflicting, often contradictory layers of interpretation, vision, and reality.

Similar to Alice's wonderland, in *Liminal Animism* everything is slightly off and nothing is what it seems. A strange anthropomorphism illuminates what is real, human, natural and constructed. Through illusions, then, some truths are revealed.

Conclusion

Rather than the acquisitive amassing of images as a way "to collect the world" (Susan Sontag), these works seek to re-imagine Venetian masks and nature itself, not through what is seen, but through what is imagined.

Perhaps this approach is in the tradition of what some have called post-photography.

Liminal Animism, then, is not about capturing images but inventing them. The series offers an imagined reality which is fictive rather than representational.

Liminal Animism suggests an intriguing approach to and unconventional use for nature images.

Hopefully, it also invites fanciful dreaming about combining various kinds of photographs and inspiration to move from the compelling representational to imaginary and imagined projects. *

Linda Briskin is a fine art photographer living in Toronto. More examples of her collage work can be viewed at www.lindabriskinphotography.com.