

The Roles We Play; It's 'Identity Theft'  
by Holly Myers, Special to The Times  
June 8, 2007

There is a wonderful photograph near the beginning of "Identity Theft: Eleanor Antin, Lynn Hershman, Suzy Lake, 1972-1978," the Santa Monica Museum of Art's contribution to this season's feminist spectacular. In it, Antin appears dressed as a nurse, lying across the pillows of a bed, surrounded by stuffed animals and paper dolls, biting her thumbnail and smirking like a mischievous 12-year-old.

Take a closer look and you find that most of the paper dolls — actually props for use in the elaborate video dramas on view nearby — are not only male but nude. "Dare ya," Antin seems to be saying, "to come play."

It seems neither inappropriate nor demeaning to surmise, as this image suggests, that the roots of role-playing in feminist art — the subject of the entire engrossing exhibition — lie in the realm of the nursery.

The brilliance of second wave feminism was to turn a political spotlight on regions of life long ignored by the seats of power and to marshal the energies contained in those regions. Each of the artists assembled here drew on instincts that most women develop while playing with dolls, then typically funnel into the complicated business of being female: instincts for dressing up, assuming personas, shaping narratives, managing interpersonal relations.

But in taking this process several steps further than most grown women do — constructing elaborate imaginative identities of the sort usually permitted only to actors and the insane — these artists illuminate the theatricality of the everyday and call into question all the costumes we normally take for granted — the heels and miniskirts, hairdos and face paint — as well as the roles those costumes support.

The artist best known for this type of work is, of course, photographer Cindy Sherman. Indeed, curator Jori Finkel begins her essay in the exhibition brochure, "Sometimes it seems like Cindy Sherman invented the idea of role-playing in contemporary art." This show offers a useful corrective. (Though most of the work, for the record, was created in the five years before Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills," which date from 1977 to 1979.)

Moving through the show, one begins to suspect that Sherman's ascendancy had less to do with quality or rigor (all these artists are comparable in that regard) than with her living in New York and her work being cleaner, easier to package and, frankly, sexier. In any case, there was clearly something in the air for such similar endeavors to be brewing in New York, Detroit, San Francisco, Southern California and elsewhere simultaneously. Examining the trend more widely as the history of the period is beginning to solidify profits everyone involved.

The show is divided roughly into thirds and begins with Antin, which is wise, considering the artist's irrepressible charisma. If there's anyone capable of luring ambivalent bystanders into a hard-hitting feminist critique, it's she. The selection includes photographs, drawings and videos as well as the set for one of the videos (the interior of an airplane, with a bevy of paper dolls), all relating to Antin's four elaborately constructed alter egos: the king of Solana Beach, a transplanted 17th century monarch; Antinova, a black ballerina formerly employed with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes; and two nurses, one conceived in the spirit of Florence Nightingale and another more like someone in a daytime soap opera.

Lake's photographs and videos from this period focus less on the invention of character than on the erasure of it, with extremely creepy results. In one series, "Transformations," she remakes her face photographically into the faces of friends and colleagues. In "A Natural Way to Draw," a series involving both video and photographs, she paints her face white and proceeds to apply another face according to the directions of a drawing manual. In "A Genuine Simulation of ...," she applies makeup to photos of her face.

Hershman's project — presented here for the first time in its entirety, according to the press release ("WACK!" at MOCA contains portions of it) — is the most extreme, and also the most unsettling. In 1974, Hershman invented a character named Roberta Breitmore (the name comes from a Joyce Carol Oates story) and, in a curious echo of Hitchcock's "Vertigo," proceeded to bring this character to life on the streets of San Francisco, ultimately securing, among other things, a driver's license, an apartment, a shrink and a succession of dates.

The materials on display include surveillance-style photographs, letters, psychiatric reports ("incestuous relationship with brother, pattern of masturbation, finds intercourse painful, achieves no orgasm"), personal ads ("Woman, Cauc., seeks bright companion to share rent and interests") and a collection of personal effects, including clothing, accessories, and urine and blood samples (actually water and paint).