

RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS INC

Ciphers of Identity

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June 4 –July 8, 1994

Curated by Maurice Berger

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Marlon T. Riggs • Elaine Reichek • Mark Rappaport • Yvonne Rainer • Adrian Piper
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Throughout history, artists have often played a significant role in shaping national and personal identity. Organized by Maurice Berger, Senior Fellow at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at the New School for Social Research, New York, the exhibition explores the ways in which artists of varying racial, ethnic, sexual, and economic communities have defined cultural identity in the politically charged climate of America in the 1990's. At a time when racism, sexism and homophobia have become the linchpins in censorious and oppressive attacks against marginal or oppositional culture, artists are now faced with fundamental political and aesthetic questions: In the age of mass communication, can artists produce effective and moving work within high cultural contexts? Should cultural figures and social communities under attack define themselves in relation to individual racial, sexual and ethnic groups and risk divisiveness, or should a cultural politics of coalition and consensus be encouraged? Is it possible for artists to represent themselves through multiple identities? What role should social, cultural, and art history play in redefining the role of self in modern society?

Ciphers of Identity examines the work of contemporary painters, photographers, filmmakers, and video, performance, and installation artists who are committed to examining the complex relationship between identity politics, forms of aesthetics address, and the struggle for social and cultural freedom. The show has a central aesthetic and theoretical theme: each participant employs the formal and theoretical device of displacement – allowing identity to exist outside of autobiography through displaced representations of the self – to question the notion of a unified, coherent identity. By splitting the self into ciphers – in which the self is represented through other people, articles of clothing, animals, objects, fictional characters, skeletons, and other cultural icons – these artists problematize the idea of identity as something immediately apparent and recognizable and hence a willing partner to destructive and undermining stereotypes.

An innovative, forty-four page catalog accompanies the exhibition; the book contains a critical essay by Maurice Berger, black and white reproductions and film, video and performance stills of artists' work, a checklist of the exhibition, and a selected bibliography. To expand the discourse, the catalog includes a selection of quotes and statements on the subject of identity from a broad range of intellectual, cultural, and political figures. Additional information including biographies of the artists and curator are available upon request.

The exhibition originated at the Fine Arts Gallery, University of Maryland Baltimore County and will travel to the University of California/Irvine, the University of South Florida/Tampa, the New Orleans Center for Contemporary Art, and the Kemper Center at the Kansas City Art Institute. The exhibition is made possible with support from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, The Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation, and the Maryland State Arts Council.

Since a number of the works in the traveling exhibition have been shown extensively in New York, several have been temporarily replaced by new pieces never before seen in New York.

Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday, 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., Mondays by appointment. There will be a reception on Saturday, June 4 from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. For more information or photographs, please contact Susan Yung at (212)226-3232.

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