

maggie sherman

"Connect, Accept ~ 25 Years of Community Celebration Art"

I remember when I was 7 or 8 years old, or maybe even younger, sitting around the dinner table while my older sister expressed concern about a neighbor she hadn't seen in a while. After I launched into a detailed and up-to-the-minute report of this neighbor's comings and goings and everything that was happening in her life, my sister looked at me with sheer incredulity. The whole family wondered aloud how I could possibly know so much about what was going on in my neighborhood. But I did, and still do for that matter. I've always been an observer of people, and find what they do and how they express themselves through their choices of fashion and lifestyle and their physiognomy utterly fascinating. I see people as a fabulous collection of parts: physical, philosophical, experiential and spiritual.

Growing up Jewish in the South in the '50s, and the youngest of 4 children, I was the Feeler in a family of Thinkers. I was frequently dressed up for a party or taken on a grownup errand like accompanying my mom to the hairdresser, and, after a short round of introductions, I would be carried off to a kitchen or back room to hang out with 'the help'. I loved the physical and emotional warmth of these behind-the-scene inhabitants. They were full of life and without societal masks, genuinely expressed emotion, and used simple, clear words when talking about their lives. I was so very comfortable there, among the down-home wisdom that was easy to understand, and I felt an incredible connection to both people and place. Exposure as a child to the distinct but related worlds of "front of the house and back of the house" fostered my love of connecting seemingly disparate groups and valuing the lessons we learn from and teach to one another.

Naturally, I came to incorporate people-watching and the unspoken language of signs and symbols ... a visual language we were born knowing ... into my work. By using recognizable gestures and our image of self, I have attempted to offer up an extraordinary experience to ordinary people. My civic-minded and community-involved parents planted the seed of social consciousness in me, and my southern roots nurtured my innate friendliness and conviviality, and unleashed *The Girl Looking For A Good Time*. By sharing this perspective with members of communities with whom I work, I am able to draw upon the tangible commonality of experience from which all can respond despite diversity of background.

I see the incredible richness and texture of people, their lives and values. Garage sales for me are a form of urban archeology. In the '70s when I first began the hunt, I saw items that I recalled from childhood and bought lots of costume jewelry, buttons and games because I felt I could give them the home where they would be appreciated. The home they deserved. After a few years of 'collectioning', I realized I needed to do something with these items or they would soon become clutter in my life. And it was at that same time that I began *The Mask Montgomery Project*.

My dear friend Spalding Gray once said to me, "There is no coincidence." Each of my projects has proven to be a way for me to test some of my life's theories and at the same time to bring people together and draw upon their personal histories to create a collective memory of our shared human experience. The work done by participants in my projects is not only memorable but elicits a visceral response in those participants that invariably leads to greater confidence of expression and deeper connections with others.

As 9-year-old Sarah Anderson, a reporter for a local paper, said in an article about my workshops and the projects, "Well, now you know more about what you probably didn't know. Just remember her name, her phone number ... and her art."