**Corona Virus Wearable Art Response Project Essay**

**Amnéus**

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I first met Tina Gutierrez dancing with the Flying Cloud Academy of Vintage Dance—an activity that required ‘dressing up’ in both nineteenth century and early twentieth century garments. Having spent a number of years as owner of a bridal shop in Reading, Ohio—a mecca for brides in the area—she found her favorite part was dressing the women who were to be married. Tina thought of the gowns as the “ultimate expression of fashion as art.” These experiences, and as a co-founder of the Cincinnati ArgentineTango Society, she has long been interested in ‘costume’ or dress. And so, it was a natural aspect of Tina’s subsequent work as a photographer, to ask individuals to dress themselves in response to the Corona Virus pandemic. The result was the Corona Virus Wearable Art Response Project, which is chronicled in this publication of photographs taken during 2020.

Calling herself a social activist/photographer, Gutierrez’s goal for this undertaking was simply to create a sense of community—a much needed endeavor by all in the initial stages of the pandemic. Individuals were asked to quarantine, to stay at home. Stores, restaurants, and other places of business were closed. People had nothing to do, nowhere to go. Most, if working, were doing so remotely. Many were lonely and despondent. With lots of free time on their hands, people jumped at the chance to do something creative and Tina provided that outlet. The project also gave Gutierrez a direction to channel her own creative energies.

Generally a very directorial photographer, Tina needed to be hands-off for this project. The Corona Virus demanded it be so, but she also wanted those who chose to engage with her to delve into their own psyche. What did it mean to them to be quarantined? How did it make them feel? What were they doing with their time? How were they dealing with these sudden restrictions? Each individual was asked to wear attire that expressed their feelings about the pandemic. Using materials at hand, the garments they created often resulted in fantastical results—a tale of each person’s experience in isolation.

Taking photographs at the beginning of the pandemic, when little was known about the virus, many of the ‘costumes’ created by the participants were nightmarish and convey feelings of death, fear, and being alone. They are disquieting. Some are shot in cemeteries and include skulls or are images of their own version of the Grim Reaper—a shamanistic response to the pandemic. Some forecast or chronicle the end of their small business, holding the tools of their trade. Almost all the images portray individuals wearing a mask or protecting their face in some way—whether it be with a conventional mask, swathing the face with fabric, or wearing a hood, a disguise, or a veil that obscures their visage and hides their identity. Perhaps this anonymity, and the eagerness to dress up, was a way of disassociating themselves from the pandemic; a way to uncouple from the reality of their present lives; an opportunity to break away and express themselves.

Perhaps most striking in each of these images is a sense of power. Most participants look squarely into the camera. Despite the fear or sadness they might convey through their invented ritualistic garment or their body language, they are brave and strong. In some instances, those who are photographed become another creature or another person, but it is clear they believe they will come out the other side of the pandemic stronger and more resilient. They replicate the Statue of Liberty or hold the world in their hands and celebrate life—a life they know they will return to. They will make it through this time. They clad themselves in ‘power clothing.’

This visual narration of the pandemic was created in the hope that people will make a connection. Perhaps it will foster a conversation, a discussion, or just an understanding of how the Corona Virus has affected us as a society. We will be different as we emerge from this pandemic. Perhaps more fearful but always brave, in spite of ourselves, in the face of what might come next. The individuals in these photographs are us.

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