

Title: Autistic Unmasking in the Time of COVID-19

Artist: Venus Underhill

Screen printing and digital printing on paper and vellum, hand saddle-stitched

20 pages, 8.5 inches by 11 inches

2020-21

Texture: When you open the cover of the zine, the texture feels similar to a magazine. It is glossy and smooth to the touch, with a golden- yellow border to match the title. The binding of the zine is hand saddle-stitched with thread weaving through at five points along the spine. The inside of the zine is printed on vellum on the first and last page. Vellum feels similar to tracing paper. It is thin, translucent, and snaps to the touch. The remaining pages are printed on a soft, luxurious paper similar to construction paper.

Cover Page: Title text reads: Autistic Unmasking in the time of COVID-19

Image Description: Set against a black background is a collage of bizarre photo cut-outs. In the collage the viewer's eyes are drawn to a pair of smiling, masked, jesters that could either be lifelike sinister looking dolls, or people in costume. Above the jesters hovers images of a collection of statues, varying from humanlike and suffering to monstrous and mischievous. Thick columns of light and black marks obscure some of the statues. Pieces of horror images —the underside of an insect, a zombie's gnarled hand, pointed horns, and a shadowed figure with guns—curl around the rest of the collage. The collage itself almost resembles the shape of a hand.

Page 2:

A hairy demonic face hand-drawn in black ink, sits gape-jawed in the top-centre of the page. Its eyes are closed; its long tongue protrudes, dripping. Pointed horns curl above its head. Two long, hairy tails grow out of each side of the face and bend, adjoining below to create a ring. The page is see-through paper the colour of worn, weathered paper. It appears as if it were a photograph from an antique book. The black paper of the next page can be seen through it.

Page 3:

This page begins a series of five spreads within the zine. On the left of these two-page spreads are collages made of pen-drawn images so carefully selected and placed that the images, at first glance, appear to be a single drawing rather than a collage. On the right side of the spreads are brief poems.

On this page, disconnected, hand-drawn masks—clowns, monsters, and a laughing man—are arranged around the doorway of a triangular structure like a half-built barn. A closer look reveals the building is an optical illusion with panels of wood crossing each other in impossible ways. To the right of the entrance stands a robot-like person who appears sad. The robot-like person seems to be made of tin, their torso cut open and their inner mechanical workings are exposed. Their top hat, in contrast, is beset with a

single flower. At the top of the entrance hangs a cheery banner surrounded with smiling clown faces. Text on the banner reads: Now smile.

Page 4:

A bold white heading reads: I Only Feel Like Myself When I'm Alone.

Below the heading is a poem, which reads: 'You don't look Autistic,' always expressed so earnestly. As if 'high functioning' is a badge to wear with honour instead of a state I occupy within only certain moments, places. Masking is a temporary disguise I use to survive the economy masquerading as our society. I lose spoons like a saucier who just can't get the recipe right. Cooking to impress a crowd of palettes whose tastes differ while I forget to feed myself.

Page 5:

On this page is an image of the interior of a roofless, eerie structure with classic Greek archways. Wooden, wheeled, and weapon-like equipment reminiscent of medieval catapults collapse into the archways, while wooden doors lay flat on the floor, far from any wall. A small group of robed figures resembling the dress of ancient Greece point at a glowing figure in the archway that could be a vengeful angel or a harbinger of doom. Massive figures—a deep-sea diver in a vintage, cage-like helmet, a floating clown face, and a monkey-like creature dressed in a wooden barrel and a smokestack hat—tower above the whole structure as if peering down at a chaotic scene of their creation.

Page 6:

At the top of the page are illustrations of grey theater masks inside an ornamental circle. White text on a black page below reads: Pushing through exhaustion for a chance at validation, that's forgotten the moment I collapse alone. In my bed lies another meltdown I call atonement, as if suffering in silence makes a martyr of those who 'really need support.' So far such willful self-sufficiency has only led to gritted teeth, clenched jaw and a pit of nausea that hits like a gut punch. Been riding a ferris wheel of perpetual burnout so long, getting off feels woozy and unnatural with cautious steps on solid ground.

Page 7:

The hand-drawn face of a crying child, oversized and floating, is partially obscured by a mask with horns and large fangs. Behind the face is a stone building—an ancient temple, perhaps, or a dungeon. To its left is a tall column decorated with a stack of cartoon faces, each with a different stilted, 'not-quite-right' expression: frustrated, mischievous, happy, anxious, silly, and mocking. Inside the building, a boy in overalls and a striped shirt looks at a floating television: the face of a menacing clown resembling Ronald McDonald emerges, untethered, from the screen. In the bottom right corner, devil figures loom over a bed, prodding their pitchforks at a lump under the covers.

Page 8:

At the top of the page are the illustrations of grey theatre masks inside an ornamental circle shown earlier. Text reads: Familiarity will try to convince me that if I ride the wheel long enough I'll build resistance and figure out that trick all the other passengers seem to know. But all I'm really doing is ignoring my discomfort, refusing myself safety so I don't feel left out. I still feel left out.

Page 9:

The page is filled with a detailed white and grey pen drawing of a smooth, stone building with arched windows and an optical illusion of stairs that lead nowhere. A series of clown figures occupy the space of the building: at the top-centre floats a large clown face with a pointed hat. Its eyes and mouth are cavernous and hollow, each filled only with the words "cut out." Just below, two smaller clowns with striped outfits perch precariously at the edges of two windows, each balancing a ball on a stick propped up on their nose. At the bottom of the image, two floating clowns—one wearing an angry mask and pyjamas, and the other wearing a pom-pom hat and a ribboned clown suit—converse from either side of a full length mirror. They reach their arms through to one another, but the arms do not touch.

Page 10:

Here the theater masks return, underneath the text reads: Unmasking is a conscious effort, it's painful unpeeling the layers I've donned in protection. I don't want to preserve this diluted sense of self anymore, I'm not certain I could anyway. Forgoing my own comfort to make others more comfortable and avoid rejection, has made me hate myself. Resenting all the parts of me I can't change. Covid has been isolating but masking has made me intimately familiar with isolation.

Page 11:

Another hand-drawn structure with optical illusions nearly fills the page. This one is more noticeably disjointed than the rest: separate staircases lead up and down to nowhere; columns supporting nothing dot the stairs in odd places; and an ill-connected doorway and window dot the back wall, facing impossible directions. A human spine, photographic rather than hand drawn, emerges from the back-left of the structure at a jarring angle, while something else—bonelike but incomprehensible—somehow enters a window much smaller than itself. A clown face hovers at the top of the structure and appears disconcerted, while a dismantled body lays strewn across the stairwell in the foreground: tin legs; a handless, headless torso in a tattered sweater, and what might be a shiny black hat. Is this the clown's body?

Page 12:

We see the dramatic masks again. Text reads: I don't have to force myself to speak through shutdowns for a paycheck. I no longer need substances to push through sensory overload for fear of missing out. Right now my time is wholly my own and this year has been hard but I have felt more exuberant joy than I can ever remember. The process is on-going, I am nervous for what comes next, and I am finally starting to love being me.

Page 13:

Hand-drawn black ribbon intertwines and circles a poem that fills the page. The page is see-through vellum, the colour of worn, weathered paper. The yellow paper of the next page can be seen through it. The poem, written in black text, reads: Removing thy mask, an arduous task. Though certainly worth the wait. I whittle in vain, while wasting away. Carve a face to change fate. New person, new mask, another unfinished task. I quickly begin to feel blue. Caustic adhesive dissolvent stings too much, despite unsticking the glue. I only feel myself, with my masks on my shelf. Home all alone in my room. I start to untwine, then gather my shrine. Fed up, I know what to do. I burn the façade, feel less like a fraud, then, from the ashes I grew.

Back Cover:

The back cover is a black page featuring a digital collage of cut-out photographs similar to the front cover. Each photograph is only a small section of its whole. The pictures are difficult to decipher, and together, they form a dense cluster. A shape near the top may be the torn and rotting jaw of a demon, its red-streaked and orange-brown skin reminiscent of the underside of insects under a microscope. Other images appear to be an illustration of a headless astronaut, a painting of a face, its eyes cut out to reveal a complex black-and-white mass behind it, a small ticket reading "just new releases", and the hand of a small fetus, red and jellylike, tenderly resting on a larger hand that appears relaxed, but sickly yellow. In the bottom-centre of the page is a logo: a hand-drawn moth, with a smaller reflection at its tail, surrounded by a soft filigree border and a complex, checkered border around that. The logo reads: Venusian Press 2020.