

The Nezahualcóyotl Hall



The Nezahualcóyotl Hall was the first building constructed in the University Cultural Center in 1976. Planned specifically for symphonic music, today it is home to the UNAM Philharmonic Orchestra, Mexico's oldest symphonic ensemble, and is considered one of the world's most important concert halls. Recently renovated, it has dedicated its lobby to presenting temporary exhibitions of different genres of work in small and medium-sized formats. But never before had this space hosted an exhibit as fascinating in its visual scope and the unsuspected concatenations it unleashes as the one described below.



Juan Antonio López/Gaceta UNAM

“By thy mask I shall know thee” The Revelation of the True Face

Estela Alcántara*

For three months (January to March 2011), audience members at the Nezahualcóyotl Hall were surprised by a feeling of estrangement and wonder as they wandered through the lobby before the “curtain going up” announcement: assaulted by the arresting faces of Danish artist Torben Eskerod’s exhibition “By Thy Mask, I Shall Know Thee.”

Fifteen figures refuse to look back at the viewer determined to comprehend them. It seems like, dazzled or frightened by the flash of the camera, they have all decided to close their eyes to the light in different ways: the tensest stiffly and uncomfortably show the wrinkles around their eyes, the



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Photos courtesy of UNAM’s Press and Cultural Outreach Department.



creases around their mouths and on their foreheads; others manage to negotiate with the moment to eek out a smile.

The viewer immediately decides to go beyond the petrified faces. Who are they? Are they alive or dead? Up to then, any deduction is just part of a phantasmagoria. The figures were never in front of the photographer’s camera; only their masks were. But the observer cannot get away from the optical illusion and continues to fantasize about the identity of the “people” in front of him/her: they are living, dead, phantasmagorical faces. They are like Maeterlinck’s *The Blind*, a hive of faces with closed eyes, suspended in a vacuum and

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in silence, in the profound darkness of a landscape. We are comforted by the soft, silver light that makes their faces shine, but the absence of sight is what unleashes the conflict and triggers fragility and fear of them.

THE SPIRIT BEHIND THE HUMAN FACE

At one end of the gallery, lit in blue so we can ponder the faces bathed in silver emerging from a black background, the face of a woman with a warmer expression is the first friendly wink at the viewer. It is Danish writer Karen Blixen (*Out of Africa* [1937], *Babette's Feast* [1952]) immortalized by dentist and artist Holger Winther, who made the plaster mask while the writer was seated in his dentist's chair.

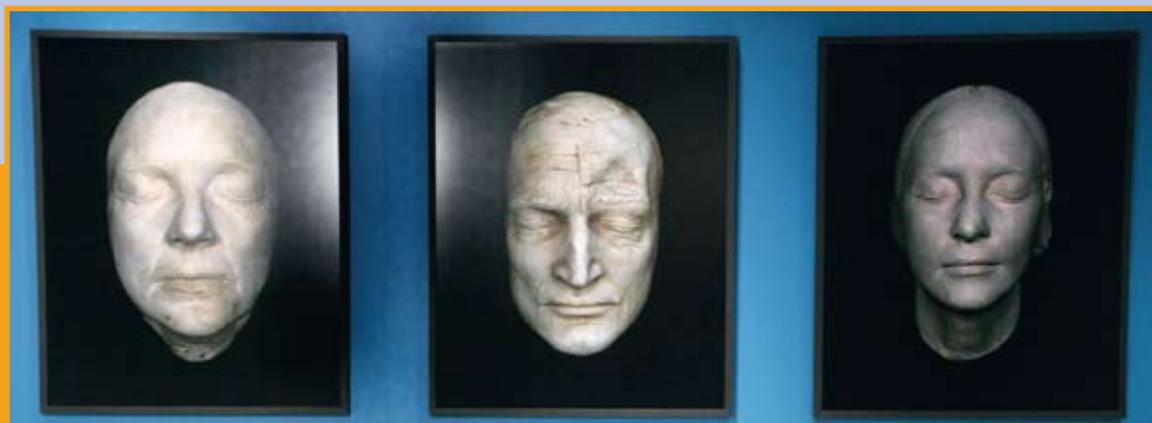
Blixen's mask, plus the faces of other celebrities of mid-twentieth-century Danish life like Niels Bohr, Nobel laureate for physics (1922), and Johannes V. Jensen, Nobel laureate for literature (1944), are part of Winther's collection, currently housed at the Frederiksborg Castle Museum, north of Copenhagen.

This is where Danish artist Torben Eskerod first saw the collection and decided to make 15 large-format, black and white photographs of the masks Winther made in the 1940s and 1950s in Copenhagen.

At that time, many celebrities let Holger Winther, known as the dentist of Copenhagen's high society, make masks of them. Once his patients were in the chair, he would ask them to stay a few minutes more to make a plaster mask that he would then add to his private collection.

Eskerod discovered the masks in the exhibition "100 Years of Lifeless Portraits" at the Natural History Museum in Copenhagen. As he walked through the exhibit, he was stupefied by them because they had a particular expression, something he was looking for in his portraits of living persons. He immediately asked the curator if there were more of these faces, and together, they discovered in the museum's attics a hidden collection of 67 life and death masks. Based on this find, Eskerod did a first series of works that were images of the masks, but inside their plastic bags, just as he had found them in the attic. When he saw the semi-transparent bags on the faces, they seem to contain each person's last breath.

He decided to take off the bags and photograph the second series. It seemed to him that the difference between a life mask and a death mask is that one theory says that at the very moment of death, a person's true face is revealed, perhaps that of his/her soul and spirit.

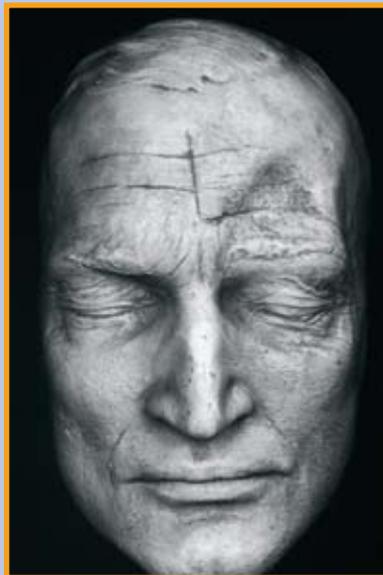


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According to Cecilie Mejer, Torben Eskerod's photographs of plaster life masks explore the expressive potential of the human face and open up questions about the degree to which the human mind can be portrayed on the features of the face. These images remind us of the point of view—commonly shared in the past—that photography was more objective than any other medium and that, therefore, it could show the true image of a human being.

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THE PLACE OF BEAUTY AND THE SINISTER

In the gallery, attracted by the visual force of what is coming together before your eyes, you, the viewer, cannot avoid a certain sense of estrangement and wonder. You return to each face, linger over every fold and wrinkle, twice frozen: first by the plaster of the mask and then by the photograph.

You note that the fascination caused by these masks-cum-photographs stems from a certain proximity between the beautiful and the terrible. The death masks taken from persons “in life” lead you to that same indeterminate zone of the sinister where art appears. And, as Eugenio Trías says, aesthetic pleasure emerges before the imminence of a form that should remain hidden. In each photograph that has captured the perfection of the human face with all its geography and expressive plenitude, beauty covers something else: the presence of death. So, as Rilke wrote, “Beauty is the beginning of a terror that we are barely able to endure.” **MM**

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