



## Through a Lens, Darkly BY NORM POWERS

Eight years ago, photographer Rick Cary was attending a conference of art educators in New Orleans when he got bored and decided to go exploring across the Mississippi River from the city's French Quarter. There, he found a number of warehouses in which the elaborate floats that form New Orleans' Mardi Gras parade are assembled, and where they are dismantled after the event. Piled helter-skelter were the papier-mâché oversized heads and bodies that are recycled every year by the floats' builders.

"A visually fascinating, maybe even scary scene," Rick recalls, "much like being in an archeology museum with shelves full of giant tribal masks. There were dark corners and the few overhead lights were harsh and directional." It was, in short, the perfect setting for what would become an ongoing series of eerie images. One exhibition curator attached the term "ambient surrealism" to encompass the disturbing effect of these naturally occurring objects.

"I don't stage or rearrange the figures," Rick notes. "I compose the shots by working around clusters of them and responding to what I see." Rick has given the series the title Post-Portraits, considering the accidentally arranged figures as ghosts of their former public selves, waiting to be reborn in some other context.

A member of the arts faculty at Mars Hill College since 1987, Rick's devotion to fine art photography happened almost by accident itself. After earning an MFA in ceramics from the University of Tennessee and taking up a teaching position in the craft at a small liberal arts college, he was asked to create the school's first curriculum for a forthcoming new arts major. In the ensuing process of educating himself about media other than ceramics, photography began to attract his attention as an art form.

A second MFA in photography soon followed from Vermont's Goddard College, and Rick has produced work in both media ever since. "I get energy from the contrast between the two art mediums," Rick says. "One is messy, deals with form and surface and requires hard physical labor and difficult to acquire hand skills. The other is clean, precise and deals with shape, value and texture."

The Mardi Gras series comprises studies in contrast — between the viewer's idea of beauty and the subjects' grotesqueries, and between the careful composition of the images and the anarchy that seems to loom just below the surface. Heads separated from their bodies, limbs removed from torsos — even if they are all papier-mâché — leave the viewer with a sense of unease at this threat to the natural order. The images' mysterious power may lie in our innate desire to restore that order, a satisfaction given to the designers of the Mardi Gras floats who have that advantage every year with their new creations made from bits of the last year's. Rick's photographs, depriving the viewer of that ability, leave the observer in a visually disjointed limbo.

"My work is unconventional in the sense that the objects or scenes themselves would not typically be regarded as beautiful," Rick says. "I see my job as an artist as first to render the scene beautifully in a visual sense, and secondly to present the subject in a way that can become meaningful or relevant to human experience."

If there's one point of contact between Rick's photography and his ceramics (both are represented by Asheville's Bella Vista Gallery in Biltmore Village), it's the handcrafted process common to both. Rick's pictures are captured on traditional black-and-white film, often using large-format cameras, and are developed and printed as archivally processed gelatin silver prints in his own studio, without the aid of computer technology.

"I sought a full tonal range with maximum black and maximum white, and with textured details in both tones," Rick says of the Post series. "I wanted the figures to loom up out of the darkness and into the harsh light."

Rick cites as one inspiration the early Renaissance painter Caravaggio, whose extreme chiaroscuro produced such highly emotionally charged canvases of traditional religious subjects that many of them were rejected outright as blasphemous by the religious orders and churches that commissioned them. No such outrage has plagued Rick's work, to be sure. But, still, his images are powerful and unnervingly involving, a little stroll on the wild side of photography.

"A camera isn't like a copy machine, as I tell my students," says Rick. "The artist must consider and shape how a scene or subject will look as a picture. It's like the difference between taking dictation of the boss' letter and writing a song or a poem. These images simply evoke visual wonder, art's first requirement."