

Faces in Disguise And Metamorphosis

By Karin Lipson

LONELY, ANGRY, surprised, self-mocking, edgy, challenging — the faces stare at us, draw us into a dialogue. Because they are portraits, the 33 works now in Hofstra University's Emily Lowe Gallery have an immediacy that's peculiar to the genre. And because they're self-portraits, they raise some interesting questions about the life of an artist, as well as about the human condition in general.

"Self-Portraits: The Message, the Material" has come to Hofstra via Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, where it was organized. Along the way there have been a few additions and deletions, the most notable of which is the elimination of the well-known Lucas Samaras and the Soviet emigre duo Komar and Melamid. (Unfortunately, the show's subtitle, which reads like an unconscious parody of a college essay, has arrived intact.)

While this is not the only, or necessarily the best, exhibition of its sort to have appeared on Long Island in recent years — a 1985 show of self-portraits at the East Hampton Center for Contemporary Art, for instance, was unusually compelling in its psychological perceptions — the Hofstra exhibition has a good deal to recommend it. A variety of mediums, including paintings, prints, photographs, drawings, masks, sculpture and a videotape, have been included. And the work can be thought-provoking and disturbing.

A surprising number of the pieces emphasize the themes of disguise and metamorphosis. (Is this a comment on how the artist survives in society, or is it a reflection of more universal fantasies? The viewer can decide for himself.) In a painting by Charles Parness, the artist is removing (or putting on) a wolf mask — by the light of the moon, no less. Look at Parness' sly, grinning face — it seems a lot more dangerous than the stiff, lifeless, animal mask. We know who the real wild creature is here. The artist-as-crea-



Joan Semmel's 'Self-Portrait on Couch,' one of 33 works on exhibit at Hofstra

ture appears as well in Luis Cruz Azceta's oil/pastel "Mechanical Doggie," and Debra Jackson's "Serpent Mask," made of thread and beadwork on canvas over a wire frame.

Cindy Sherman's large photograph features the artist disguised in pseudo-Arabic garb, looking like a cross between Rudolph Valentino and a street urchin. And Chuck Close's portrait as "mug shot," using his characteristic grid work on nubby handmade paper, disintegrates visually into its multiple component squares as we approach it — another kind of disguise that hides the artist's true identity.

Mirrors, as might be expected, are also a recurrent motif. In some works, the artist looks through a mirror, and we see only that reflection; on the other hand, in Joan Semmel's "Self-Portrait on Couch," the painter herself is shown in a large, frontal view, while an enigmatic naked male torso appears in a mirror in the background.

The most searing work by far is Hannah Wilke's duet of photographs of herself and her mother, both shown nude from the waist up. The elder woman, brutally scarred by a mastectomy, turns her face away from the camera; her daughter, who has placed several small metal objects over her own chest in imitation of her mother's wounds, regards us challengingly, daring us to look again at both sets of stigmata. It's a painful, angry work, at once repugnant and poignant.