

## ART REVIEW

# Inside-Out Meditations On the Poison of Racism

By HOLLAND COTTER

The subject of race has prompted some of the most mettlesome American art in the 1990's. And much of that work owes a debt to Adrian Piper, an artist who helped introduce identity politics into Conceptualism nearly 30 years ago.

Ms. Piper, 50, came to the theme as both insider and outsider. A light-skinned black woman from a middle-class background, she was raised in Harlem but educated in private integrated schools. She is usually taken for white in social encounters, and this "passing" status has been the springboard for much of her art.

From this vantage, she has experienced racism firsthand: she remembers being regarded with suspicion by other black children as a child, and later by white adults when she had made her background clear. Her response has been to explore the peculiar dynamic of the in-between.

In her art she plays the dual role of

*"Adrian Piper: The Mythic Being, 1972-75" remains at Thomas Erben Gallery, 476 Broome Street, SoHo, through Jan. 16.*

cultural eavesdropper and provocateur. And she has tenaciously prodded and dissected the concept of race itself to suggest its contradictory guises, whether as a pretext for economic oppression, as a source of psychological challenge or as a resistant, divisive fact of everyday life.

Two traveling retrospectives of Ms. Piper's career are to appear later this year, one in March at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the other in October at the University of Maryland in Baltimore. But a compact mini-survey of some of her earliest and most prescient work can be seen now at Thomas Erben Gallery in SoHo.

Under the umbrella title "Mythic Being; 1972-1975," the show brings together a group of hand-altered black-and-white self-portrait photographs that represent a breakthrough moment for the artist.

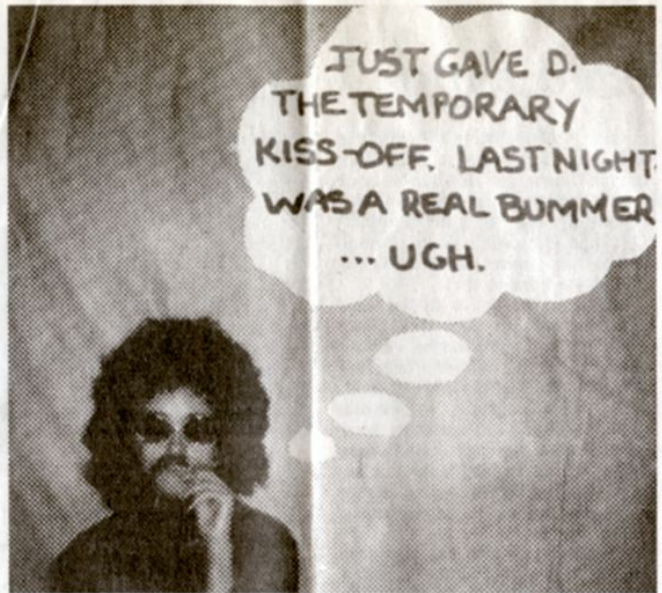
In the 1960's, after attending the School of Visual Arts, she was producing and exhibiting abstract Conceptual work, inspired in part by the example of Sol LeWitt. It was only in 1970, when she was studying at City College, that she seems to have made an emotional connection to the black power movement, which led to a change of direction in her art.

visually based on the day's icons of racial militancy, like the Black Panthers and Angela Davis. But the chatty diary entries, which include breathless reports of adolescent crushes, diffuse any sense of macho threat and underscore the androgynous nature of the performance.

The work toughens up in the 10-part series "I/You (Her)" from 1974. Here her face is joined by the collaged face of another woman, a white friend with whom she had quarreled. The harsh, bitter words Ms. Piper assigns herself announce the end of the friendship and imply that racism was a factor in the estrangement. Significantly, she gradually transforms her face (with the help of a felt-tip pen) into that of the Mythic Being as the piece progresses.

Thereafter, race became the main focus of the work. In 1975, while a graduate student in philosophy at Harvard, Ms. Piper took her performances into the street and had herself photographed in male guise "cruising" white women in Harvard Square, staging a fake mugging in a nearby park, and walking through crowds of unheeding pedestrians thinking murderous thoughts and itching for a fight.

The pictures suggest a certain style of 1960's guerrilla theater that blended klutzy absurdist humor and goading ideological contempt. Its flavor is perhaps best distilled in a single 1975 photo piece in which the Mythic Being, seen in dramatically shadowed close-up, seems to exhale the words "I embody everything you most hate and fear," written in a puff of cigarette smoke.



Thomas Erben Gallery

In an undated "Study for Village Voice Ad," Adrian Piper dons a disguise to become the Mythic Being and adds words from her diary.

This produced a series of politically charged performance pieces, staged in private and in public and documented in photographs, in which she played the central role. Disguising herself in dark glasses, a spectacular Afro wig and a handlebar mustache — a kind of 70's version of blackface — she created an alter ego as a young, working-class black or Latino man.

To the earliest shots of herself in male drag she added cartoon-style speech balloons filled with quotations from diaries she had been keeping since she was in her teens. She then paid to have the pictures published among the advertisements in the art pages of *The Village Voice*.

The images, with their scrambling of race and gender, are hilarious and weird. The Mythic Being seems to be

By this point, artist and alter ego had effectively merged. In the later images in the show, the Mythic Being sits at a typewriter surrounded by quotes from Immanuel Kant, the subject of Ms. Piper's dissertation. (She now teaches philosophy at Wellesley College.) Her use of blackface — as a means both to distance herself from and to claim a racial identity — had, one suspects, served its psychic purpose.

Much has happened in art and in politics since 1975, though certain things remain little changed. Racism, despite some contrary signals, just won't let go, inside or outside the art world. Surely that's why Ms. Piper's work from the early 70's makes almost as much sense now as it did then, and why her link to younger artists seems so evident and immediate. The "Mythic Being" series anticipates much contemporary art, from the text-intensive paintings of Glenn Ligon, to the emblematic photographs of Lorna Simpson, to the smart, sharp cross-gender work of Lyle Ashton-Harris. And it clearly has a place in the current, often rancorous debate on use (or misuse) of black stereotypes in art.

Such questions of precedence and influence will be easier to evaluate when the retrospectives appear. But much of what makes Ms. Piper an important figure can be found in bud in the Erben show. It reveals an artist who has been from the start a witty and aggressive controversialist, one who believes that art can be an effective vehicle for ideas, and that ideas can spark self-examination and social change.