



Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being, Cycle I, 1974.*

### Adrian Piper, "The Mythic Being"

Thomas Erben Gallery, through Jan 16  
(see Soho).

If you had passed Conceptual artist Adrian Piper on the street sometime between 1972 and 1975, you might not have recognized her. That's because a significant portion of her work during that period involved walking around the streets of Cambridge, Massachusetts—where Piper was a student at Harvard—in male drag.

A light-skinned black woman, Piper had focused much of her art on "passing" as a white person—a significant act in a society where African-Americans get pulled over every day for "driving while black." But in one series of performances, documented in photographs that serve as the exhibition here, Piper created a

character she christened "the Mythic Being" in order to find out what it would be like to pass as a man.

Time has certainly affected how the Mythic Being looks: For the project, Piper donned a mustache, an Afro wig and mirrored sunglasses. Today, "his" appearance is striking, to say the least. Even mythic beings, it seems, are marked by the ephemeral nature of fashion.

But Piper's explorations of self and consciousness are more than just fashion statements. In works like *I Am the Locus*—a group of five altered photographs with text that show Piper walking in drag

through a crowd—the Mythic Being is both profound and hilariously mundane: "I am the locus of consciousness," the caption reads, "surrounded and constrained with moist fleshy pulsating surfaces by animate physical objects—get out of my way, asshole." There's also the superbly titled *Cruising White Women* and the *Critique of Pure Reason*; the latter reflects Piper's interest in Kant—whose ideas, particularly his "world of appearances," she relates to race and gender.

Piper was only one of a number of artists in the late '60s and early '70s who explored cross-dressing. But, as in much of her work, there is a studious effort here to put the enterprise into a greater philosophical context. The irony (certainly not lost on her) is that while her approach may be academic, the realities of race and gender never are.—*Martha Schwendener*