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SEARCH + DESTROY!

Johanna Went’s New Wave Performance Art

LOS ANGELES — The first time I saw Johanna Went I was hit by a whiff of panic. She tiptoed onto the stage of the Hong Kong Cafe. From that moment on I knew I would be haunted forever.

Johanna Went is a rock and roll performance artist. She wears this kickin’ tuxedo pantsuit, a red bow tie, and a beaded necklace. She ambles onto the stage and begins to sing. Her voice is high-pitched and screechy. She then takes off her clothes and begins to dance. She spins around on the stage, kicking and twirling, as the audience watches in amazement.

Her performance is both shocking and surreal. She is a true master of the craft, and her ability to captivate an audience is truly remarkable.

As she continues to dance, she begins to speak, her words weaving in and out of the music. She speaks with a magnetic voice, and her words are both captivating and thought-provoking.

Her performance is a true masterpiece, and one that I will never forget.

By Mitchell Schneider

Photos by Alan Peak
At your performances I often get the feeling that you slip into a state of semi-consciousness anywhere where anything can happen. Don't you feel that way?

Sure. I get worried at some shows. But I laugh, too. I like the balance somewhere between humor and horror. That's what entertains me. Sometimes I get into a trance-like situation where I realize I did not see the audience. And when that happens, I feel really good. It's something I want to achieve. It doesn't happen in every performance, but it happens a lot. I don't trust that I'm going to have control. I believe that I'm actually going to kill somebody or cut my hand off by accident.

Have you ever hurt yourself during a performance?

One time I slashed myself good with a razor blade. But it hasn't used any since. It's because I got too excited. I didn't purposely cut myself.

Many commercial products are incorporated and prominently displayed in your shows. Are your performances part product or performance?

They're the result of consumerism. I didn't make those little green plastic strawberry containers. I just found them.

Do you have a close relationship with your props?

People feel inferior to them. I know they're toys and I like to use them up. I don't like to have stuff sitting around forever, no matter what it is. I like to get rid of stuff. A lot of times I put my shows together by going around on the streets and finding trash. Other times I check in my house and see what I want to get rid of—whether it's all the pastels. I have this hole in them or I go through my cupboard and see some pancakes mix I've had for three months. People are always giving me stuff. There's always something you can get rid of. People have more stuff than they want.

Is there any religious significance to your fascination with wearing masks?

I don't think so. I connect masks not with religion but with shows. And with my masks I feel like I'm creating my own myths. Today or for our times. I think myths are important. My masks are like creature and mythological heroes and I feel a degree of possession when I put them on. I feel like they're not necessarily primitive but the future or simply right now—really pop.

In a recent show you destroyed a male inflatable doll, then ripped apart the head of a pig. Two female friends of mine believe the act to be an indictment of male chauvinist pigs. It wasn't. No, No. That's very funny. I never thought about it at all. But it's fair if that's what they saw. That's okay. It's like a dream. People who interpret dreams can only interpret them for themselves. You can't tell me what my dreams mean. So what your friends saw was what they saw. It came out of themselves.

The possibilities for performance art seem endless in places like supermarke...

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