



SPiRiT GiRL

Marnie Weber's ghostly clowns and dancing animals venture to the otherworld.

BY ANNIE BUCKLEY

Marnie Weber's fascinating world of singing flowers, masked mermaids, wise bears, and ghostly clowns walks a fine line between dream and reality. Weber has made a career of weaving together diverse media through the use of surreal narrative, and if each story line is the conceptual glue, costumes are the physical mainstay. A spectacular array of costumes winds through Weber's multimedia work, appearing in her films, sculptures, videos, collages, performances, and installations.

A former member of the Los Angeles band Party Boys, Weber incorporates music and performance into her art. Since her earliest performance, *Of Marnie, Of Rat, Of Caryatids* at Rebel Art Gallery in Hollywood (1987), costumes have been central. She recalls, "I only did one performance not in character, and it was such an uncomfortable experience that I thought, 'I better go in character,' and it really freed me up." Freed her up, indeed. In the 20 years since, Weber has developed a highly original and complex body of work where costumes continue to play a vital role, from gallery to theater to screen.

Weber uses thrift store castoffs and basic craft materials like fabric and fur, glitter and glue, and papier-mâché, but the key ingredients are her vivid imagination, sensitivity to character, and eye for possibility. A basketball piñata, child's animal mask, and jar of modeling paste are put together to become a bear, possum, or bunny. On seeing foam trophy heads in a taxidermy catalog, she thought, "It would be so great to wear those on top of a helmet!" and she figured out how to do it. The resulting totem-like headgear, worn by characters in her 2007 film, *A Western Song*, encapsulates

Weber's striking combination of realism and fantasy.

One of the most evocative things about the costumes is how they so effectively transform their wearers, including Weber, who dons them in her live performances, videos, and films. She refers to them not as costumes but as characters. "It's hard for me to think of them as nonliving things," she explains. "Even when they're on a mannequin, they seem to carry a spirit with them, and you get a feeling for the personality, even if it's not moving."

The wizened face of the possum is a perfect example, a recurring favorite since its first appearance in her 2001 video, *The Forgotten*. Its head is made from the combination of two masks — a giraffe and an old woman. More recently, the Dandy Clowns, which began as masks "picked up in a costume shop," are transformed into expressive faces that feel more like people than masks.

Though they have evolved over the years, from simple to more complex, each character retains a dreamlike sense of fantasy moored in reality, a hallmark of Weber's work. Earlier characters were made primarily from thrift store finds. For *Coquette Circus Girl* (1993), Weber wore a drum majorette top and a skirt tinged with Christmas tree tinsel. She carried a child's blue guitar and impaled herself through a large stuffed pony. As her work progressed, Weber began to make more elaborate costumes, expanding her ingenuity more than her shopping list. In her studio, she is constantly playing, piecing together new combinations, seeing what works, and unearthing a style of crafting as straightforward as her work is otherworldly.

Costuming and crafting came early to Weber,



PREVIOUS PAGE: Weber and the Dandy Clowns CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Coquette Circus Girl*, 1993; *A Western Song*, production still, 2007; *Songs That Never Die*, production still, 2005; *The Bunny*, 2001.

who retains fond memories of making elaborate Halloween costumes as a child with her father. "All girls [dress up], but I think the difference was that I had my dad helping me with my costumes from an early age, and it's just one of the things that we did together. He used to put a lot of work into my costumes, and I think that was the inspiring part — that I saw them from scratch to finish. I thought, 'Oh, I could do this myself probably, eventually.' And so I did."

She recalls winning an award for a bush costume (attaching branches to a green leotard) that sounds like a precursor to the flower-women in her 2005 rock opera, *Songs That Never Die*, in which enormous petals, made from fabric dipped in glue, frame the faces of women wrapped in gauze.

The bush costume may have won a prize, but it's

the love of invention and make-believe that's had a lasting influence. Even as Weber rises in status in an international art world that often favors slick over homemade, technology over craft, it's important to her that the work maintains a DIY sensibility.

"I want to inspire people," she explains. "And I don't feel like you can inspire people if the work is so extremely technically crafted and professional that it would make people just feel like, 'I should never bother doing anything like that 'cause I couldn't get it together,' you know? So I try to make people feel like they can do it themselves." ✕

Annie Buckley is a Los Angeles-based artist and writer. Her essay "Lighting the Labyrinth: Marnie Weber's Spirit Song" was published in the catalog accompanying Weber's 2007 exhibition at Patrick Painter Gallery.