

Only Skin Deep

By Silja J.A. Taki



Photos: (RIGHT) "Klanswoman," by Andres Serrano; (LEFT) Andres Serrano photographing a Klanswoman in Georgia, by Richard Sudden.

How American photography creates and reinforces concepts of race and national identity.

The image

around the corner stops visitors in their tracks. Museumgoers come face to face with a hooded member of the Ku Klux Klan. An oversized photographic portrait, frightening on the one hand, disturbingly matter-of-fact on the other. The pointed and carefully stitched Klan hood is a starched, bright white; one eye peers out, surrounded by a halo of light skin.

This distant gaze comes from a person who looks to be no older than 30 years old. A cold stare? A lost look? A hint of sadness, perhaps? Visitors cease talking and gather around at a careful distance. Jarringly, it becomes apparent: The person under the hood is a woman.

"Klanswoman," a 1990 cibachrome print of a KKK Grand Kaliff is Andres Serrano's contribution to *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* a traveling exhibit most recently on display at the Seattle Art Museum.

In this groundbreaking photographic collection, nothing is as it initially seems. The powers of the individual photos are indeed in the eye of the beholder. But the collective power of the assembled images speaks to us as a society, raising questions about why we cling to the concept of "race" and pointing out that bigotry still lives and breathes in our midst, fueled in no small part by the media images that saturate Americans' day-to-day experiences.

Yet *Only Skin Deep* is emphatically *not* an exhibit about the evils of racism. A provocative photographic collection, the show bypasses easy targets and speaks complex truths about the construction of nation, race, selfhood and ethnic identity.

"We need to get away from the view that you make [art] shows about either racist depictions or triumphalist counter-narratives

Continued on page 31