

Williams reveals self in sculpture

"Glasses were always a mask for me," confides Marjorie White Williams as she helps a photographer by moving in beside "We Become the Masks We Wear," one of 22 works in the comprehensive exhibition of her sculpture that opens Friday at Albany Center Galleries.

As the face-off demonstrated, there WAS a striking resemblance between the wall-hung sculpture in painted wood and its creator.

Intentionally, said Williams, "I tried to make it look like me." In her own mind, obviously, eyeglasses — "I've worn them since fifth grade and, naturally, always hated them" — are the key to her identity and the "mask" that hides her real personality.

The self-portrait she made for auction at Center Galleries' fund-raising "Masque" last year has two sets of double doors in the sections around the huge eyeglasses and smiling mouth. The doors open to reveal an angular, hollow-eyed skull.

The implication here may not be as grim as it seems, but rather merely impersonal. The Marjorie White Williams that we know is the one with the eyeglasses and the broad smile. She's not about to give us a revealing portrait of the person within.

Not in this particular sculpture, anyway. But there isn't a piece in this exhibition — her first solo effort in seven years — that doesn't say something about her personality, her thoughts, her wishes and worries.

Williams' figurative sculpture, most often made in layers of laminated plywood, is autobiographical, expressing experiences of childhood, marriage and motherhood. She reacts as well to homelessness, a threatened environment, and death.

She reveals a fear of isolation, pressures to conform, a need for security, and yet a longing to escape from the monotony and problems of everyday life.

The last theme "was pretty strong in my earlier work," she observed in reference to the largest sculpture in this show, "A Psychological Study," done in 1981, and to one of the small-



By PEG CHURCHILL WRIGHT

est, a maquette for another large piece — the 1988 untitled sculpture which stood, nine feet tall, on the outdoor deck of Albany Institute of History and Art's Rice Gallery for months.

In that, a female figure is enclosed within a second, black figure, indicating such conflict between the warring needs for "security and freedom from what we're stuck in that death could be a release," Williams said.

Compromise surfaces in "Roots," which could be a ridiculously bulbous female reclining (or floating) on a bed of roots (or tentacles). The point, said Williams, is that "we never have 100 percent but are actually happy with 50 percent." She added, practically, "A horizontal figure had to have legs, so I thought, why not make them roots?"

In these and other sculptures of laminated plywood, the differing bands of natural color sweep around the shapes like contour lines on a topographical map. Some of the works incorporate welded steel, cast Lucite

and paint. The figures include those of women holding infants, children clutching dolls, torsos and heads opening to reveal masses of smaller figures within.

Lately, Williams has begun leaving the wood that she works with "more in a crude state or painting it," incorporating into her sculptures a rough-hewn barn beam, hand-split firewood, sections of the trunks of dead birch and willow trees and a "tamped elm."

In "Hands Off," a large human hand has been carved lightly on the naturally finished stump of a birch tree. The stump stands on a black-painted pedestal built in layers of pointy, keep-your-distance protrusions. Said Williams, "I wish trees could protect themselves — shoot back at men and bugs."

"Motherscape," a piece built on the fat, five-sectioned willow trunk and including little "kids" made by turning firewood splinters on the lathe, "is a play on landscape and the idea of escape," she explained. "Children escaping from the mother, and vice versa."

Though she says she "hates exercise," Williams "loves" the labor intensity of plywood. "It's hard work that tires you out. When you're done you feel like you've accomplished something that day."

Besides, it counters depression, an emotional state that often afflicts Williams, and which she depicts in a sculpture of that name. Depression, she said, "runs through my father's side of the family. A lot of it is genetic. And a lot has to do with what you do to get over it ... like going down in the cellar and pounding wood." Similarly therapeutic, she indicated, is "the turning of the lathe ... it's very soothing."

The laminated sculptures are painstakingly built in many, many layers from patterns designed on graph paper. The wood working is done with power tools (lathe and sabre and band saws) and hand tools

including chisels and gouges. "It's fun to just pick up a piece of wood and dig in," she said.

Williams went to welding school so that she could add steel elements to her work, and she learned about casting Lucite while working on her master's degree in sculpture at State University of New York at Albany.

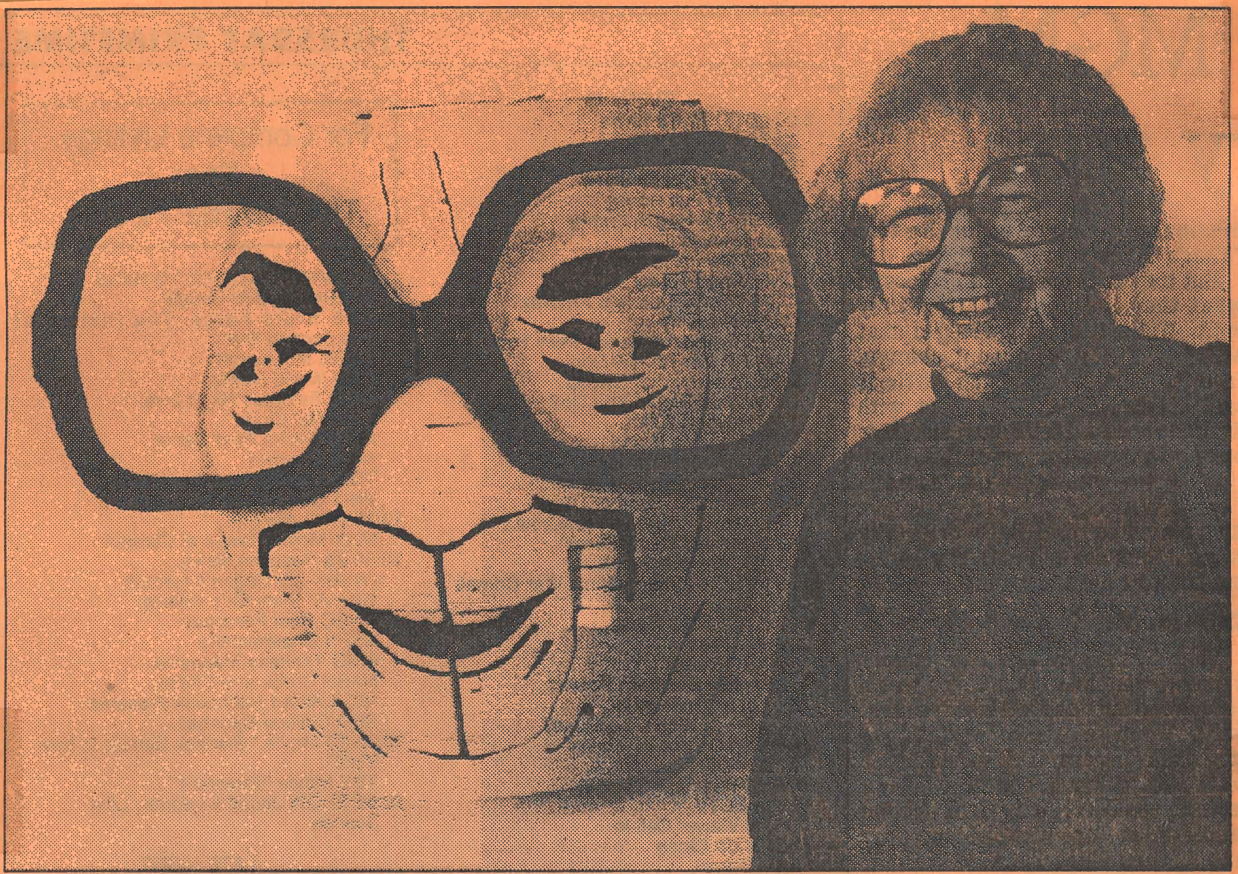
She had always loved to build things anyway. "As a kid I dug clay from a pit near our house," she recalled. During undergraduate years at Skidmore College, however, she thought of herself as a painter. "I thought it was a higher art form. But by nature my painting was very literal in a tight way ... not the kind of painting that I've come to like."

Working in wood, she said, "doesn't permit me to be literal, even though my carving is realistic."

As young wife (of Altamont attorney Frank Williams) and mother (of three children, now grown), she had renovated a house and built toys for the kids. "Then I took a course in sculpture with Bill Wilson, and he loaned me his wood working tools. I just loved it."

She began sculpting in laminated plywood in the late 1960s while teaching at Albany Academy for Girls. The impetus was a doll-making project in conjunction with teaching early American history: "I had the students make porcelain heads, but porcelain doesn't lend itself to doll bodies. We needed bodies to support 15-pound heads, so we made them of plywood ... and my sculpture really took off."

Williams will discuss her work at a Sunday brunch April 12 from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Albany Center Galleries, 23 Monroe St., Albany. Her exhibit opens with a reception Friday from 5:30 to 8 p.m., which also marks the start of an exhibition of Andrea Sal-kowe's paintings in the Orange Street Gallery, upstairs at the same address. Both exhibits continues through May 1.



Sculptor Marjorie White Williams poses with a 1991 self-portrait, "We Become the Masks We

Wear," from her exhibition opening Friday at Albany Center Galleries.

JIM CASSIN Gazette Photographer



This 1981 sculpture, "A Psychological Study," by Marjorie White Williams is laminated plywood, cast acrylic and mild steel. The seated figure, which is seven feet tall, contemplates a small figure Williams identifies as herself.

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