

ART

# JEFFERY BYRD

## TAKING DISTORTED SELF-PORTRAITS

**A**s a child in rural Alabama, photographer Jeffery Byrd was a stubborn nonconformist. "In the first grade," he recalls, "we made crafts for Easter. All the boys had to make bunny ears and the girls made bonnets. I wanted to make a bonnet, but everyone laughed at me. So I bowed to peer pressure and made the floppy ears, but mine were the only ones with a bow between them and I was the only boy bunny with a cotton tail." His open defiance of those backwoods, prepubescent bullies now pervades his photography, which conveys the same unwillingness to bend to tradition.

Currently an assistant professor of art at the University of Northern Iowa, Byrd produces images that are both evocative and provocative. He frequently uses masks and gloves in his work, covering what are customarily the most visible parts of the body while leaving the genitals exposed. One critic said Byrd's work "quotes and mocks the high-art tradition," while another pointed to the artist's "ambiguous sexuality, candid secrecy and ornate minimalism." Heady stuff for the boy who once insisted on attending a funeral wearing a pineapple-shaped pitcher lid as a headdress.

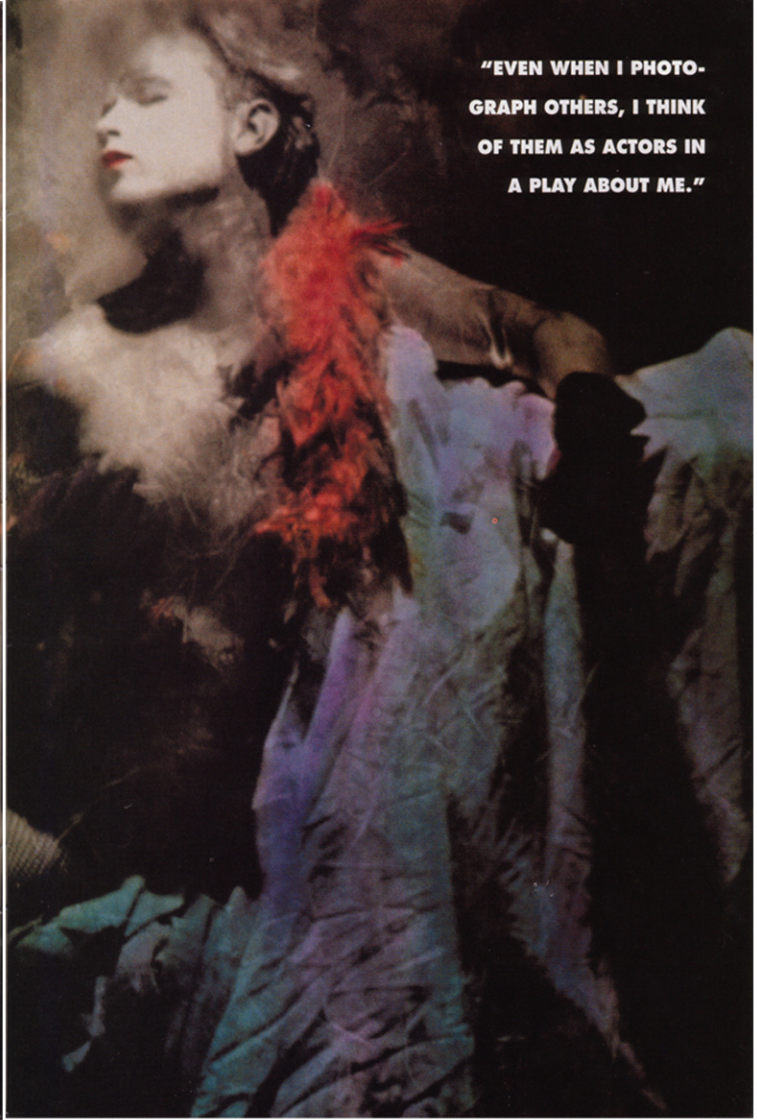
Byrd's first New York City solo exhibition, held December 1-23 at The Leslie-Lohman

Gay Art Foundation in Soho, was both a critical success and a coming-of-age for the 27-year-old Southern photographer. Although he has participated in numerous group and solo exhibitions around the country, breaking into the cliquish New York gallery world is a major step for Byrd, who finds himself something of an anomaly in Iowa. "My work is implicitly political," he says. One of his most poignant images, "Everything Became Shadow," speaks directly to the AIDS crisis. Two gloved nudes touch one another lightly with their fingertips, while their heads, bound tightly in the same long scarf, connect them. The figures are held together by the very barriers that keep them apart.

Byrd draws his inspiration from his own life and translates it to film by physically and chemically manipulating his prints, distorting and reinventing reality. "I used a lot of self-portraits in my work," Byrd says, "although I always thought I was ugly. The photographs fascinate me because they exercise power over me. All my work is basically self-portraiture. Even when I photograph someone else, I think of them as an actor in a play about me."

Reed Massengill writes for *Connoisseur* and *Interview* magazines.

GENRE 14 FEBRUARY



"EVEN WHEN I PHOTOGRAPH OTHERS, I THINK OF THEM AS ACTORS IN A PLAY ABOUT ME."

**GENRE**  
FEBRUARY/MARCH 1993 ISSUE TEN