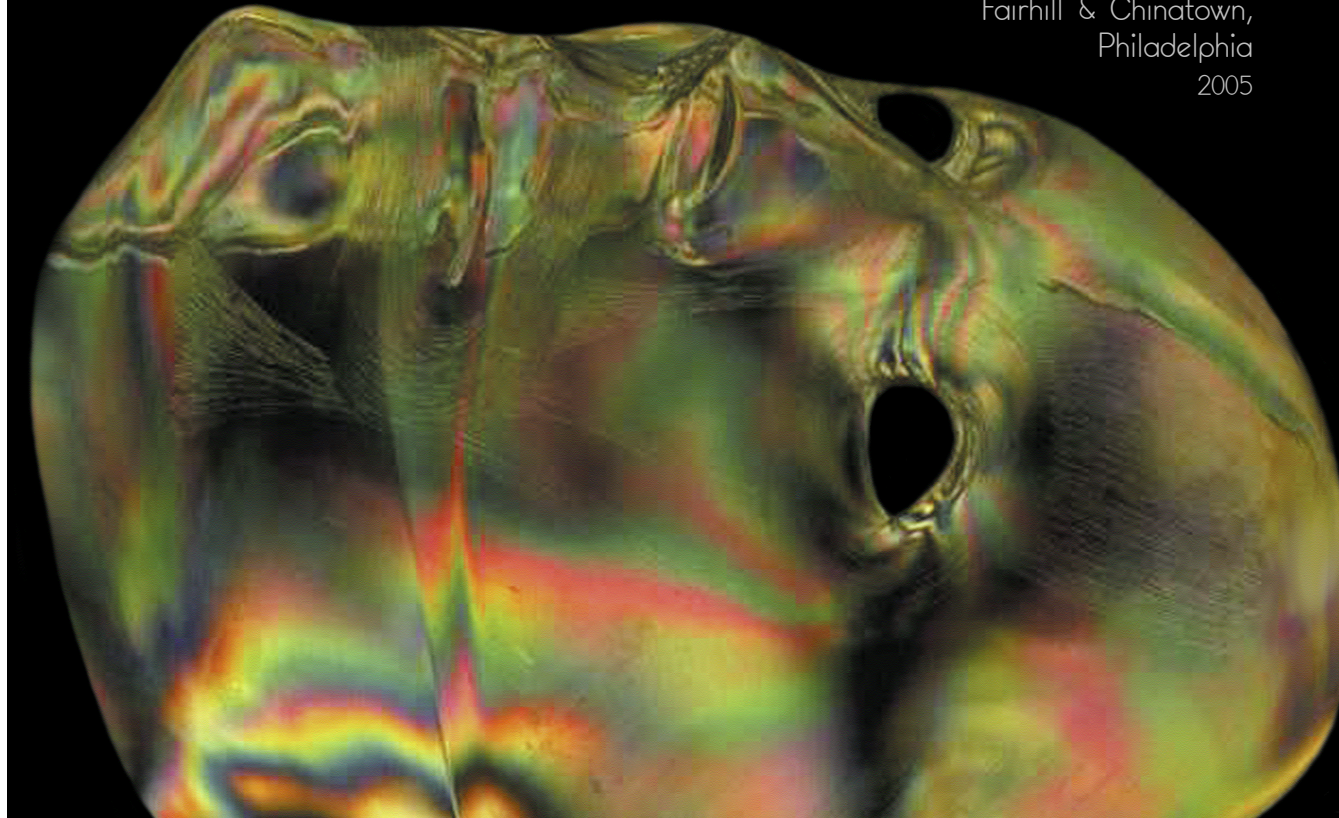


Dit Wah Deng
& Pedro Ospina

Mask & Metaphor

a community exploration of mask-making, art & identity
a project of COSACOSA art at large, Inc.

Fairhill & Chinatown,
Philadelphia
2005



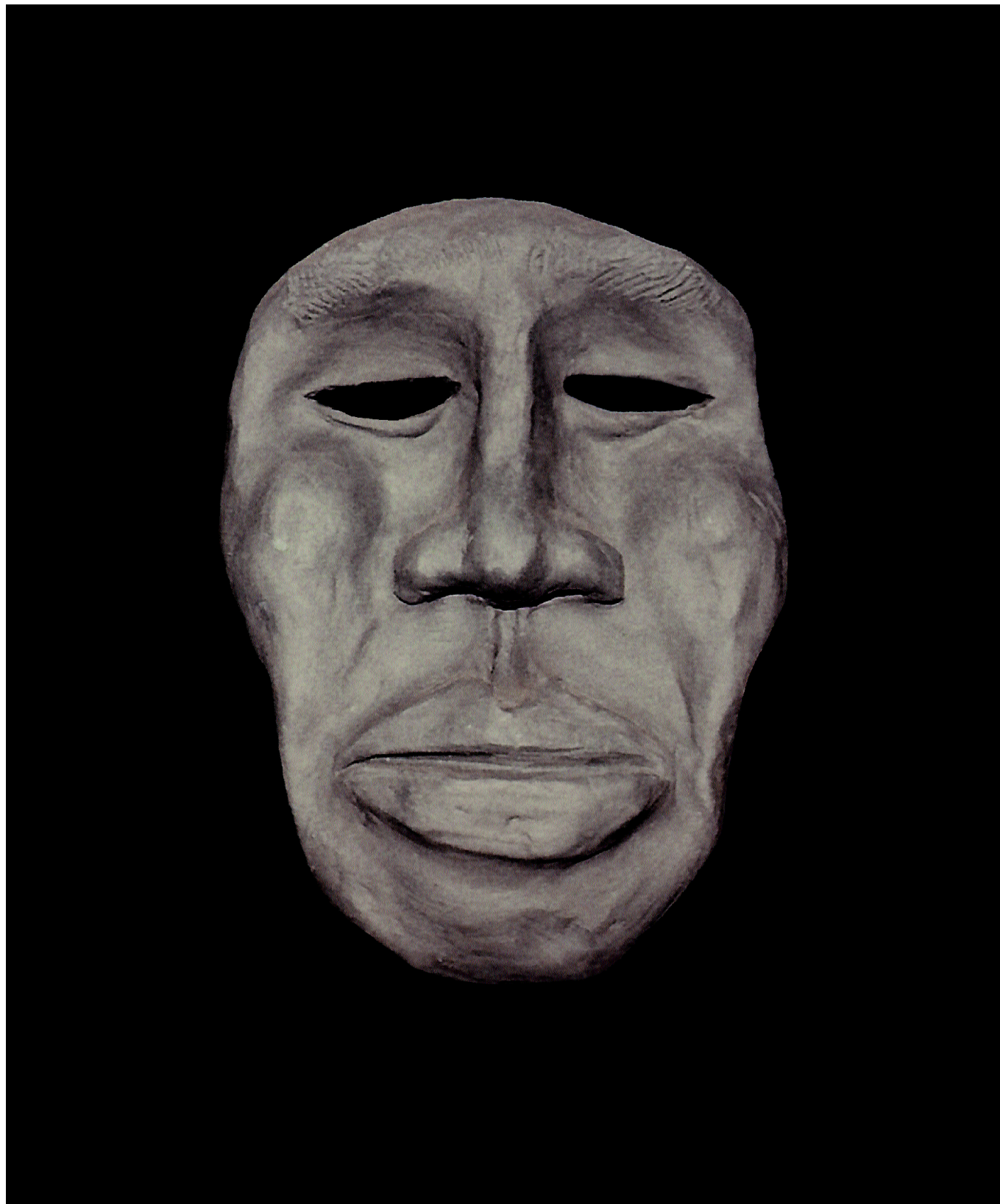
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Art & Identity by Dit Wah Deng

With our minds we create the world. In every new situation we encounter, we are bound by our particular perspective. True objectivity does not exist. Direct knowledge of the world is masked by the filter of our history and cultural context. This being the case, how can we ever hope to bring together differing points of view? How can we truly create peace on our streets and in the world?

We all wear masks – contrived, created, constructed by our imaginations and experiences or postulated, prejudged, and presumed by others. How well these masks confine or define us depends on our conception of identity and of our place in the world.

When I look at my own multicultural, multi-layered identity, it's hard to choose who or what I really am. Philadelphian, American, Asian, Chinese, Shanghainese, Macauan, Hong Kongese, British (a one-time subject if not citizen), artist, chef, engineer, husband, father, cancer-survivor, youth mentor, Buddhist, Unitarian, optimist. Nationality, ethnicity, occupation, lifestyle, experience, and belief blend to create the me that other people see.

On the surface, my identity is fluid. I can slip conveniently from one identifier to another – changing faces, changing masks – whether to forge an alliance or to keep my guard. These markers of my history and memory are useful tools as daily I face a world of uncertainty. Still, I want to look beyond the masks and understand what lies at the core.

We all long to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. Without such a connection, we suffer in isolation. Unfortunately, all too often what connects us to some, masks us from others. Cultural conceits, belief systems, even sports team favoritisms divide as much as they gratify.

So what truly connects us to each other? Where are the critical junctures: the concepts, struggles, cares and hopes that we have in common? And how best may we seize these points of convergence – of possible reconciliation – to create positive change in our own lives and for our communities?

A Chinese sage once said, "Break down the walls and be surrounded by the garden." In our incessant, insistent labeling of people, places, and contexts, we've lost sight of the whole. We play at democracy, inclusiveness, but, in truth, we are only a cacophony of separate voices, each promoting our individual wants and desires. We can advocate, instigate, and/or legislate for justice. But ultimately, all lasting change first occurs within oneself. It is up to each of us, alone, to overcome the masks.

I believe that we are saved or condemned, both as individuals and collectively, by the degree to which we give ourselves in service to others. Consider this: such service begins with truly seeing, if only for a moment, each person you meet as a tragic and heroic spirit, a singular consciousness emanating from the same source as your own. Such service continues with honest dialogue that freely reveals and dissects the masks – stereotypes and our responsibility for them – and honors all those participating. Finally, based on my years of collaborative work with people all around the world, such service is renewed again and again in creative community action.

The ultimate art is insight, our one true connection to each other and to our common birthright as children of the universe. So it is with our minds – and open hearts and willing hands – we create the world.

Dit Wah Deng is a community-based artist and youth mentor creating for cultural change in North Philadelphia.

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Masks as Community Metaphor

For over a year, interdisciplinary artists Dit Wah Deng and Pedro Ospina worked with residents of Philadelphia's Chinatown and Fairhill neighborhoods to explore relationships among masks, ritual, cultural history, and healing. Intergenerational and intercultural groups of community members examined traditional African, Chinese and Taino mask-making techniques and symbologies and together decided how they best may be applied to the current needs of their neighborhoods. Hundreds of individual masks were created and combined into brilliantly-colored neighborhood altars by the project participants, in direct collaboration with the resident artists.

From the earliest of times, masks and the act of mask-making have connected and transformed individuals in the context of a larger community. In every culture, masks are powerful representations of the duality of human experience – that of the self and the other. Masks embody our search for identity and place – as individuals and as communities – and enable us to experiment with new roles and differing views. Today, our society typically understands masks as concealments, hiding our true natures, even terrifying those around us. This idea runs counter to the ancient healing and transformative role of masks and mask-

making. Participants in COSACOSA's Mask & Metaphor project investigated archetypal masks, myths and symbols from around the world to reveal their similarities and to celebrate their differences.

- Mask-making forms explored included:
- shamanic masks taken from ancient cultural myths, representing departed ancestors, spirit beings, and hidden powers.
 - commemorative masks celebrating or memorializing past encounters and community stories, and honoring individual contributions to a larger community.
 - kathartic/theatrical masks directly exploring identity and place, inviting community gatherings and evoking healing experiences.

Residents of Chinatown and of Fairhill, a predominantly Latino neighborhood, came together in tri-lingual workshops to expand traditional forms of mask-making to encompass issues affecting their communities today, including shared ideas of language and cultural assimilation. The project resulted in two mixed media altars permanently installed at schools in the heart of each community, symbolizing a continuing connection between the two groups. In Fairhill, the community altar is entitled *Facing the Future*; in Chinatown, the installation is entitled *Becoming One*.

Community Participants

Nelson Acevedo
Milly Adorno
Tyisha Adorno
Genesis Alejandro
Alexis Aponte
Giovannie Arboleda
Jennifer Ayala
Victor Boria
Samirah Brogdon
Taina Bultron
Miguel Burgos
Jonathan Camacho
Oswaldo Carrasquillo
Crystal Carter
Hok Bun Chan
Billy Chen
Christine Chan
Yuchung Chen
Stephen Cheung
Ford Chu
Ashley Cintron
Jeyshla Claudio
Joshua Claudio
Anthony Colon
Kayla Colon
Amanda Cordero
Dante Cruz
Marguerite Cruz
Melissa Cruz
Rolando Davila
Hendi Deaza-Rios
Naisha DeJesus
Mia Deleon
Ghum Deng
Joshua Diaz
Priscilla Diaz
Derrick Dixon
Gloria Domenech
Anthony Douglas
Sasha Duran

Alex Garced Rivera
Jasmine Garcia
Michelle Garcia
Raymond Garcia
Malcom Garland
Terrence Gary
Jennifer Gonzalez
ZeZhong Guo
Leroy Harris
Zuheiley Hernandez
Francisco Herrera
Xaviel Hinojosa
Kahliyah Hudgen
Iris Irizarry
Darren Johnson
Noel Jones
Bryan Jordan
Yanelee Jordan
Robert Kennedy
Kevin Knuckles
Jason Kourk
Christopher Lai
April Law
Henry Lee
Jonathan Lee
Peter Li
Lizhi Liu
Katlin Luu
Henry Mark
Edgardo Martinez
Giovanni Martinez
Luis Martinez
Eumeka McNair
Yesenia Medina
Ashley Mejias
Christina Mendez
Telisha Medez
Alex Mendoza
Joshua Mendoza
Keishla Mendoza
Zoraida Millan

Victor Miranda
Donte Moore
Juan Muniz
Alexandra Navaez-Pellot
Samantha Navarro
Michelle Nazario
Danny Ng
Chen Hui Ni
Angel Otero
Yesenia Ortiz
Ana Padilla-Diaz
Nelson Pagan
Danielle Patterson
Jamar Perez
Marcos Perez
Santiago Perez
Benjamin Quach
Leishla Ramirez
Ana Reyes
Alexis Rivera
Ana Rivera
Eduardo Rivera
Leonell Rivera
Stephanie Rivera
Alex Rodriguez
Emmarie Rodriguez
Jordan Rodriguez
Miguel Rodriguez
Olga Rodriguez
Victalicia Rodriguez
Damaris Roman
Eric Rosario
Israel Rosario
Kiara Rosario
Mallorie Ruiz
Veronica Salva
Ashley Sanchez
Ernesto Sanchez
Jesus Santiago
Luis Santiago
Gabriel Serralta

Angie Serrano
Leslie Serrano
Ming Shi
Bryan Smith
Ronald Smith
Johathan Sosa
Grace Tang
Dereck Tompkins
Jenny To
Christopher Torres
Lisa Torres
Thomas Trinh
Tykeema Tucker
Rohnie Vails
Leisa Valentine
Joshua Valle
Mariely Vargas
Juan Vazquez
Alfredo Villanueva
Melissa Viruet
Ciara Wilson
Peggy Wong
Kyle Young
Jesenia Zambrana
Mahxian Zhang
Lyndsey Zhao

Organizational Participants

Challenge Learning Corps
Harmony Partnership
Holy Redeemer School
Julia de Burgos School
Latino Partnership Initiative
North City Youth Association
Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation
Temple University Children's Medical Center
St. Christopher's Hospital for Children



IMAGES (left to right, up and down): Mask & Metaphor participant photographs of their communities, Fairhill and Chinatown; town meeting and community needs and assets workshops; mask creation; details of final community mask installations.



a community altar by residents of Philadelphia's Fairhill neighborhood
in collaboration with artists Dit Wah Deng and Pedro Ospina
mixed media on wood, 16' x 8', 2005.
Julia de Burgos Bilingual School, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Facing the Future

"Beauty in darkness, no color at all.
Longing to be different, to be brave and stand tall.
Asking for strength not to shatter and fall.
We join in the new dawn, ready for whatever
Life will give. We'll face it together
In a rainbow of days we will spend forever."

- Kahliyah Hudgen and Juan Muniz
project participants, 8th graders at Julia de Burgos Bilingual School

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Becoming One

"We must unite as one & make peace with each other
For together we are stronger than when we are alone.
We must be patiently ready to hear each other
And be responsible for every seed we have sown.
With love & respect, we must meet each other
Until forgiveness & joy are all that is known."

- Christine Chan, Jonathan Chung, and Lyndsey Zhao
project participants, 8th graders at Holy Redeemer School



a community altar by residents of Philadelphia's Chinatown neighborhood
in collaboration with artists Dit Wah Deng and Pedro Ospina
mixed media on wood, 8' x 4', 2005.
Holy Redeemer School, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

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Collaborating Artists

Dit Wah Deng explores issues of adaptation and integration in the face of cultural change. Born in mainland China, Deng completed apprenticeships in sculpture, fiber art and architectural engineering before arriving in Philadelphia. This unusual and broad experience of multiple cultures, environments, and disciplines – the combining of Western and non-Western images and ideas, and issues of cultural identity – informs Deng's art. Over the last decade, he has developed numerous projects in Philadelphia neighborhoods investigating traditional cultural expressions and healing practices. He has designed a wide variety of art installations for healthcare settings, including a gigantic operational sun clock created with patients at St. Christopher's Hospital, the symbol of COSACOSA's Healing Art Project. Deng previously led *International Appropriations/Cultural Assimilations*, a year-long project creating a visual nexus of common cultural artifacts linking Chinatown and the Italian Market along Philadelphia's Ninth Street. His recent public works also include *Connection*, an 80' x 5' ceramic mural joining Terminals C and D at Philadelphia International Airport. *Connection* celebrates themes common to all of our human experience in over 1,200 small sculptural objects created with community youth city-wide. Deng is the recipient of grant awards from the Five County Arts Fund, the Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Philadelphia Arts in Education Partnership.



Dit Wah Deng, *Embrace*, ceramic, 18" x 18", 2003.

Dit Wah Deng, *Monkey King*, ceramic, 7" x 8", 2001.

"A vast similitude interlocks all...
All nations, colors, barbarisms, civilizations, languages,
All identities that have existed or may exist...
All lives and deaths, all of the past, present, future,
This vast similitude...shall forever span them and compactly hold and enclose them."
—Walt Whitman, *On the Beach At Night Alone*

Pedro Ospina examines the human search for identity and assimilation across societal barriers. Ospina has redefined disciplinary boundaries many times in order to better understand and communicate issues of community identity. Trained as a printmaker, Ospina's visual vocabulary has grown to include photography, painting, sculpture, and multi-media installation. A veteran community-based artist, Ospina designed COSACOSA's *Safe Harbor* installation with North Philadelphia residents, a sculpture incorporating hundreds of milagros, small metal amulets created to symbolize individual participants' experiences of healing and transformation. His previous public artworks also include *Voices Beyond the Wall*, a series of expansive tile mosaics created with residents of Philadelphia's Chinatown designed to protest encroachment on the community by outside developers. A recipient of grants from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and the Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation, Ospina's work has been featured in venues including the African-American Museum and the Painted Bride Art Center. As an arts educator, he has taught at the American School in Brazil, and locally at Aspira and Taller Puertorriqueño. Ospina holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Printmaking from SUNY Purchase and an Master of Fine Arts in Interdisciplinary Art from Maryland Institute College of Art. He is Founder of the Casa de Cultura Santa Teresa, a multidisciplinary arts center in Sao Paolo, Brazil.



Pedro Ospina, *Agua*, mixed media on carved wood, 12" diameter, 1999.

Pedro Ospina, *Emergence*, ceramic, 12" x 15", 2002.

COSACOSA art at large

Art creates cultural change.

Founded in 1990, COSACOSA art at large, Inc. creates new art specific to Philadelphia neighborhoods and public spaces. Through collaborative art workshops, artist residencies, and media projects, we enable dialogues among our city's disparate cultures and communities. COSACOSA projects assure a sense of equality among people of diverse backgrounds and differing abilities, while building participation in local communities as well as in society-at-large.

Interaction COSACOSA art workshops engage people of differing backgrounds to create a common project. Each workshop identifies a community theme to explore through one of many possible artistic disciplines, from painting to theater, from quilt-making to ceramics. COSACOSA has brought together thousands of citizens from over thirty Philadelphia neighborhoods to learn about art, about each other, and about how to work together. As our participants grow in mutual understanding and respect, their community – our city – grows with them.

Interpretation COSACOSA artist commissions and media projects expand upon ideas evolved in our public workshops. Again, our approach is multi-disciplinary – from tile mosaics for a school to interactive sculpture for a hospital, from audio work examining changing city neighborhoods to theatrical journeys through Philadelphia's public monuments filmed for the Smithsonian Institution. COSACOSA interpretive projects provoke accessible, insightful dialogues, while building collaborative forums in which to address the common and uncommon challenges of living together.

COSACOSA continues to design and apply new models to deliver innovative and interactive "dialogues through art" directly into Philadelphia neighborhoods. For more information about COSACOSA, and to learn how to participate in our programs, please visit our website at www.cosacosa.org.

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Research Associate
Community Coordinators

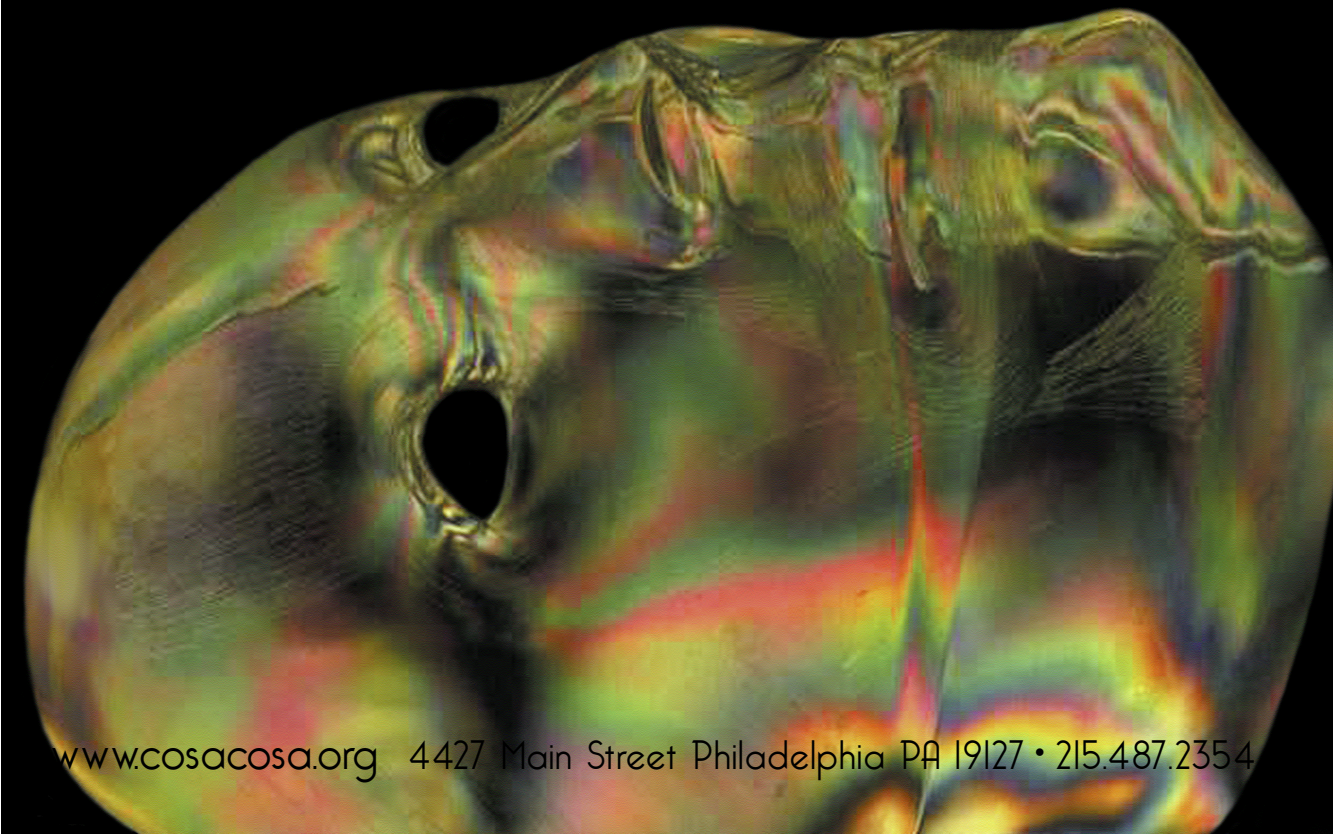
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