



NEWSDAY - LI LIFE Cover Story

Don't wear the face, be the face

How a Baldwin artist works his magic

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Jay Hugues of Baldwin became a Japanese demon. Jeannea Whitely of Port Washington was transformed into a beautiful bird, and 9-year-old John Jerome of Queens became a monkey king - an image from ancient Chinese opera masks. All it took was some skillful brushstrokes and about three minutes each. These are just three of the hundreds of faces painted at Port Washington's recent Bar Beach FamilyFest by Christopher Agostino, his wife, Lorraine, and two employees of his company, Transformation FacePainting.

The words "face painting" usually conjure images of rainbows and butterflies on the cheek. Not so of Transformation Facepainting, where every face is a full-face work of art and every face is different. "We think of face painting as an art and not a decoration," said Agostino, of

Baldwin, founder and artistic director of the 15-person company. "I don't want to put something on somebody that only is a decoration, that doesn't actually change their appearance dramatically enough that you see them as somebody different, or it doesn't actually change the way they feel about themselves."

Inspired by masterworks

Agostino studies the rich history of painting faces and uses the likes of Picasso, Chinese Opera masks, African tribal masks and Japanese kabuki masks as inspiration. Even if asked to paint a tiger, he and members of his company will paint it in a unique style.

"I'm a painter, and I used to paint on canvas," Agostino said. "Now, I paint almost exclusively on people, and they became my canvas." Face painting is an ancient art. "Before we painted a cave wall, we painted ourselves," Agostino said. "One of the oldest images we find of humans on cave walls and the like show humans with markings on their skin or humans wearing things like animal masks." Agostino has written a book, "Transformations! The Story Behind the Painted Faces," that gives the background on the designs he uses. It was published last year by Kryolan, the company that manufactures the makeup he uses. (To order a copy, go to www.agostinoarts.com or call 516-771-8086.)

Agostino, 48, has been painting faces for 30 years. He started off painting clown faces as a young performer in a group called The Young People's Theater Program - an offshoot of the performing arts foundation in Huntington - that used to be an off-Broadway professional house, he said. After painting clown faces for a bicentennial celebration, he and some fellow performers needed extra money, so they painted faces at Adventureland, an amusement park in East Farmingdale. He then went to California and painted faces on Venice Beach. He came back to the New York area and has been painting faces at public and private events ever since. His team charges between \$250 and \$1,000 for an event, depending on the size of the crowd and whether a stage show is included.

"After a few years, I also started focusing more on not just making a face that looks good but thinking how painted faces affect the events I was working at," Agostino said. Agostino studies face painting through books and by going to museums. His work shows his studies. Whether he's painting in the Nuba style from the Sudan or a tiger in the Cubist style of Picasso, every face is different.

Sketches from museums

"New York has great collections of masks and photographs in the museums. I go to them, and I sketch things, and I come home and turn them into face designs," Agostino said. Agostino and his company have been painting faces at the Bronx Zoo every day over the summer for 14 years, charging between \$10 and \$15 a face. That's where Mary Mahaffey, assistant to the commissioner of parks and recreation for the Town of North Hempstead, saw him. "We had to have him" for the Bar Beach FamilyFest, Mahaffey said. "He's ... unique."

The theatrical makeup Agostino uses is water-based, so it can be easily washed off. One of the reasons he wrote the book was to have something permanent from his work. "I'm in a very impermanent art form," Agostino said. "Everything I paint washes off at the end of the day."

