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REVIEWS SAN FRANCISCO

## Lynn Hershman Leeson

Altman Siegel

By Dodie Bellamy



Coco Fusco, *Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word*, 2021, HD video, color, sound, 12 minutes. From the Whitney Biennial 2022: "Quiet as It's Kept."

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Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Self Portrait as Another Person*, 1965, wax, wig, glass eyes, makeup, tape recorder, Plexiglas, wood sensor, sound, 20 × 15 × 12".

“About Face” was an intimate, career-spanning exhibit, comprised of approximately forty pieces that explored Lynn Hershman Leeson’s passion for masks. The major tropes associated with her art—mirroring, replication, projection, cyborgs, screens, avatars, humor—were represented here, in a questioning of the divides between fantasy, the virtual, and the real. Arranged nonchronologically, each artifact acted as a sort of hologram that references the whole. This work suggested someone deeply familiar with ungroundedness. It exuded the brilliance and caginess of the hypervigilant. The artist’s rigorous experimentation and attention to detail are impeccable, but, even at its most abstract, her work delivers visceral and emotional punches.

It was a treat to view “About Face” in the city it was made in, the same city that has so shaped my own creative output. The exhibit’s Thursday-evening opening was sparsely populated, mostly with curatorial types who

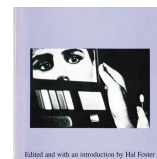
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the galleries in the nearby art mall, Minnesota Street Project. I first encountered Hershman Leeson's work a couple decades ago in a group show at New Langton Arts, a seminal San Francisco nonprofit gallery that closed in 2008, which featured documentation of her Roberta Breitmore project, 1973–78, in which she lived an alternate existence as the invented character Roberta. The event was so packed you had to battle your way to the art. The contrast between that memory and the Altman Siegel exhibit's white expanses, which grow vaster each time I think about them, for me is tragic, pointing to larger issues in San Francisco's struggling art scene. But then there is an aura of the tragic to all of Hershman Leeson's work.

In 2019, impressed by the quirky obituary my husband, Kevin Killian, wrote for artist Lutz Bacher, Hershman Leeson wanted to hire him to write an obituary for her. He replied with a long email in which he declined her offer because he himself was dying. They never got to meet in person. Several months later, at Kevin's memorial, Hershman Leeson read his email in its entirety. It was beautiful and intense and weird—but only after I watched the artist's confessional video *First Person Plural, The Electronic Diaries of Lynn Hershman Leeson 1984–1996*, just before going to "About Face," did I realize that her interaction with Kevin was part of her vast multigenre project. The obituary she proposed was yet another form of portraiture, another mask to don for an artist obsessed with personas.

Her willingness to be vulnerable, to put herself on the line, instills each of Hershman Leeson's avatars with a libidinal charge. A sculpture with a sound element, *Self Portrait as Another Person*, 1965, features a face cast in wax that is actually the artist's own, although much of it is obscured by a long brunette wig. From an accompanying audiotape player we hear her breathing—this sound was recorded when she was hospitalized in an oxygen tent due to complications from a pregnancy. Her work always links back to the personal, even if the connection is obscured or projected onto a double. From *The Electronic Diaries*: "I always told the truth for the person that I was."

Like all the best personal art, Hershman Leeson's points beyond itself. "About Face" explodes preconceived notions of what constitutes a self-portrait. *The Infinity Engine: Glo Cat*, 2013, a photo of a luminous green

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Chart 1, 1975. It's no accident that both works were hung on the same wall. Here, the difference between makeup, plastic surgery, and genetic engineering was but a matter of degree. When your art production originates out of the paradigms of one century, then continues into another century with its very different paradigms, you either ossify or look around. Hershman Leeson utilizes whatever culture offers up to her, eagerly engaging with the local tech industry. Thus, not only has she managed to remain relevant, but her art is also still ahead of its time.

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