
Lynn Hershman Leeson: Myths and machines at YBCA

By Charles Desmarais | February 10, 2017 | Updated: February 10, 2017 1:08pm

0



Photo: Lynn Hershman Leeson, Anglim Gilbert Gallery

IMAGE 1 OF 7

Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Reach," from the series "Phantom Limb" (1986)

The exhibition “Civic Radar,” a retrospective of the work of San Francisco artist Lynn Hershman Leeson, opened this week at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. It is required viewing for anyone attentive to pioneers of feminism, the development of digital and performance art, or the cultural history of the Bay Area. It is, as well, a reminder that legends are part historical, part mythic — distilled narratives, best told free of muddling detail.

Any good exhibition is an argument for a point of view with regard to quality, timeliness or significance. “Civic Radar” was organized by the German museum ZKM/Center for Art and Media and adapted here by YBCA Director of Visual Arts Lucía Sanromán. It makes a thorough case for Hershman Leeson’s political and media prescience.

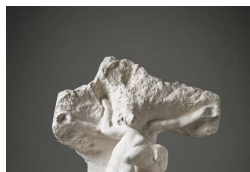
The theme of identity and the search for self-awareness spans the artist’s entire career, beginning with drawings like a Mylar-headed figure (“Mirror Face Woman,” 1966) who exists as a reflection of others, who is alive only on the viewer’s terms. Objects such as “Self Portrait as Another Person” (1965), “Thinking Woman Dreaming of Escape” (1965) and “Giggling Machine, Self Portrait as a Blonde” (1968) — sculptural masks of wax, sometimes with recorded sound, boxed into Plexiglas containers — develop the idea of woman as invented persona.

It is carried forward in time with works that revolve around the idea of the cyborg — the digital descendant of the automaton doll, spookily human and mechanical in equal proportion, invariably female in Hershman Leeson’s work. She has pursued these avatars in a variety of media, including film, interactive video and Web-based projects.

There are intriguing side roads that might have become central artistic courses for other artists. A series of photo-collages called “Phantom Limb” (1984 and later) envisioned machine-human mutations. “Room of One’s Own” (1993) is a nonlinear narrative controlled by choices the viewer makes about where to look.

“America’s Finest” (1990-94) is among the most chilling works of art I know: An AK-47 assault rifle is fitted with a modified gun scope, rigged so that squeezing the trigger

MORE BY CHARLES DESMARAIS



Legion of Honor rethinks Rodin sculptures for centennial



Good things in threes: New S.F. galleries bloom



At Fort Mason, the intense works of Sophie Calle

inserts into what is seen in the viewfinder (including anyone in the gallery at whom the gun is pointed) a momentary recorded video image of violence.



But Hershman Leeson returns again and again to the topic of self as observed from without — self seen as other. A years-long,

intermittent “private performance” as a blond and glamorous alternative to the brunet intellectual artist (the “Roberta Breitmore Series,” 1973-78) is one of her best known actions. Those of us who came late to the piece know it from a few manipulated photographs and the story of the artist leaving home in another’s makeup, wig and clothing. She eventually added further elements: a Breitmore driver’s license and checking account, an apartment, potential roommates — a parallel life.

Performance grew into obsession. The only way out, ultimately, was a formal exorcism, held at the crypt of the 15th century sex symbol Lucrezia Borgia.

Truth be told, I had been satisfied with the myth, and I don’t know that we need to see the whole Breitmore wardrobe, laid out in vitrines and hung on a mannequin — much less a transcribed conversation with a creepy guy, a psychiatrist’s notes or vials of (simulated) urine and blood samples — to get the point.

Likewise, while the artist’s undoubtedly early embrace of new technologies of presentation is remarkable, including in the show what seems to be every outdated, now-clunky experiment gives it something of the air of a prep school science fair in places. One gallery is a sea of library cases full of texts one feels one should read.

I spent nearly three hours in two visits to the exhibition, and two more hours with the exhaustively complete catalog (384 pages, 12 essays and interviews), yet I feel I have only scratched the surface. On one hand, it should surprise no one that a lifetime of thought and creative energy is not easily condensed into a few hours of consideration.

But the role of the curator and the editor is both interpretation and distillation — to be the intermediary between the artist or specialist, who is all information, and the curious audience with ordinary limits of time and patience. (We are told, good Lord, that the San Francisco presentation is an abbreviation of the show in Germany.)

Never mind. The exhibition opens and closes with a dazzling contemplation on bioengineering and its social implications that, on its own, will convince and excite the most skeptical among us. “The Infinity Engine” (2014-17) feels very today and, with all the problems this implies, tomorrow.

A disorienting mirrored corridor, widened and extended by life-scale films re-creating a modern laboratory, leads us to a high, large room. It is spacious to the point of nearly empty, clean in the sterile sense. A black-and-white mural confronts us, depicting two syringes, set en garde in opposition. Two walls are papered, floor to ceiling, with colorful images of life science experiments and their results; scientific papers in file folders, tablet computers and a video monitor serve as records of still more research.

Centered on the longest wall is a standard home aquarium holding half a dozen fish, each genetically modified to glow with a different luminescent hue.

A wall label claims that “the artist poses the question as to how far human intervention in DNA is ethically acceptable and what social and political impact it has.” Not so. The pretty, lively strokes of color moving before our eyes do not frame a question about our future, but an answer.

Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle’s art critic. Email: cdesmarais@sfgchronicle.com Twitter: @Artguy1

Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar: 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday, until 8 p.m. Thursday. Through May 21. \$9-\$10. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 701 Mission St., S.F. (415) 978-2700. www.ybca.org



Charles Desmarais

Art Critic

