

# ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

BIENNALES RETURN:  
VENICE, WHITNEY, SYDNEY

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Sontag were rendered meaningless, their text corrupted by an invention meant to secure financial assets.

Smith's chaotic, makeshift-looking constructions knock against the popular image of tech-optimized sheen and the slick confidence of blockchain jockeys, effectively materializing the latter's sloppy logic (to be fair, Smith's work has always looked like this, but here his aesthetic found new purchase). In its disorienting muchness, the show offered a vision of a postlapsarian world in which language has not so much broken down as been willfully discarded, its degradation a marker of pride among a cohort of finance captains who think they've unlocked some essential truth but are mostly just trying to fleece one another. The dream was perverted, like most everything else, by money. This is really nightmare stuff, but as Smith inferred here, it stands to get worse.

—Max Lakin

## Eleen Lin and Tammie Rubin

C24 GALLERY

Eleen Lin and Tammie Rubin insightfully reinterpreted fiction and history in "Mythodical" at C24 Gallery. The title parses the show's themes of personal and cultural mythologies—both the making and undoing thereof—and how each artist brings method to that madness. The curatorial pairing of Lin (painter) and Rubin (sculptor) was a complementary one, with each presenting work that spanned several years, demonstrating how their individual practices have evolved and deepened over time.

Rubin's broad coterie of serialized objects—more than a decade's worth—were an exploratory index of lineage, lamentation, and groupings. Among the works on display, the Austin-based African American artist presented a recent iteration of nineteen variously glazed cones from the series "Always & Forever (forever ever, ever)?" 2016–, made out of pigmented porcelain. The verdigris-colored helmet-like forms vary in width and height, but all share textured patterned surfaces created via sgraffito, braille-like extrusions, and inlays. Their hooded shapes and cutout eyeholes called to mind Philip Guston's grotesque cartoon Klansmen. Rubin's objects are affecting: There is something

View of "Eleen Lin and Tammie Rubin," 2022. Photo: Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao.



both somber and sardonic about their motley un-sameness; the funnel shapes also resemble dunce caps, religious contrafraternity headgear, and stupas.

There's an ebullience to much of Rubin's sculptures as well, as in *A Joyous Ripening*, *Salaam*, and *The Beauty of Insignificance*, all 2014—three bulbous stacks of spherical forms in glowy earthen colors. These elegantly assembled agglomerations seemed delightfully animate. *Silence Magical Thinking*, 2009, comprised several mobile-like aggregations strung from the ceiling in one corner of the gallery, tilting at attentive angles. They were not merely perky but had a communicative quality akin to antique hearing trumpets, gramophone speakers, or satellites. Across each series, Rubin's forms were dexterous shape-shifters that could be playthings one moment and quiet reliquaries the next.

Lin's vivid, large-scale, and dreamy oil-and-acrylic paintings, made over the course of a decade, riffed on wonky Mandarin translations of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851). Her backgrounds, made from thin washes of acrylic, literalize the novel's nautical setting—the liquescence is also a nod to the fluidness of Chinese ink paintings. Lin's compositions are swimmy and relentlessly bright. Based in New York, the Taiwanese-born painter engages many facets of culture and history. What's lost (or added) in translation is not a quandary for Lin, but a chance to delve further into odd serendipities while inventing new morphologies.

These reworkings of the novel's scenes and themes show something both retro sci-fi (as fanciful as Jules Verne's 1870 novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*) and hypercontemporary. The suspenseful and doomy *Perils of Life*, 2022, shows an inflatable boat, crowded with people, adrift. One face is skeletal, a death's-head, while a lonesome figure sits atop an upturned rowboat nearby. Another vessel is unoccupied, tied up with rope or fishing line. On the water's surface is a white whale or a jellyfish with outstretched tentacles—an oozing, ectoplasmic blob, a thing of horror and fantasy all at once. The work's title echoes *Moby-Dick*'s language: "All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life." The artist out-Melville Melville with polychromatic ocean beasts, transcontinental and transcultural crossings, and intergalactic geometries that all collude to form a new fiction born of lacunae. Seeing the work of Lin and Rubin—together but separate—made for adventurous viewing, each artist rewriting the narratives at every turn.

—Charity Coleman

## SAN FRANCISCO

### Lynn Hershman Leeson

ALTMAN SIEGEL

"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



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

who had been invited to the dinner that followed. A few weeks later, I returned on a Saturday afternoon, and the gallery was pretty much empty, as were 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 non-profit 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 cat that had been genetically engineered with a jellyfish gene, is as much an avatar for Hershman Leeson as her iconic *Roberta's Construction 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.

—Dodie Bellamy

## Cathy Lu

CHINESE CULTURE CENTER OF SAN FRANCISCO

"Interior Garden," Cathy Lu's exhibition here, offers a temporary respite from the empty promises of the American dream. Nestled on the third floor of the Hilton San Francisco Financial District hotel—a Brutalist monolith that borders the city's Chinatown—Lu's project is aptly served by the location. Four interconnected installations, all developed over the past two years, hug a corridor of floor-to-ceiling windows. The artist based each sculptural arrangement on elements commonly found in traditional Chinese gardens: rocks, waterfalls, ponds, and borrowed scenery. Together, Lu's works demonstrate the porous boundary between interiority and exteriority.

The exhibition opens with *Pile*, 2022, a heap of scorched and misshapen clinker bricks Lu salvaged during a 2017 residency with San Francisco waste-management provider Recology. Visible on the exteriors of Chinatown's oldest buildings today, such materials date from the aftermath of the 1906 earthquake and fire, when the Chinese community rapidly rebuilt the neighborhood from the rubble as developers closed in. Since 2011, Lu has cast ceramic fruit to represent cultural hybridity and resilience. Scattered among the debris, Lu's overripe gourds, persimmons, and bitter melons appear to melt into the amorphous bricks, belying the hard reality of her inedible harvest. Born in Miami to a family of Chinese and Taiwanese immigrants, Lu frequented Asian markets as a child, noticing that even though certain climates within the United States provided conditions for foreign produce to grow and thrive, mainstream grocery stores failed to carry it. Encircling the wreckage, five shiny porcelain traffic cones remind us of the insidious boundaries that continue to confine Asian American communities.

*Peripheral Vision*, 2022, comprises fourteen pairs of large ceramic eyes that curator Hoi Leung describes as "the artist's eyes, Nai Nai's eyes, Ruth Asawa's eyes, the Yellow Power Ranger's eyes." The giant oculi become a constellation across the gallery's three cobalt walls, reflecting shared experiences of hypervisibility and invisibility among

Cathy Lu, *Nüwa's Hands*, 2022, ceramic, gold luster, steel cable, 101 × 84 × 10".

