

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

VARIABLE WEST

Blue, Max, "Who Do I Think I Am? Lynn Hershman Leeson at Altman Siegel," *Variable West*, June 2022



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Make Me Look Natural*, 2019. Archival digital print, watercolor, pen, ink. Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

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Visiting Lynn Hershman Leeson's career-spanning exhibition *About Face*, which was on view at Altman Siegel Gallery in San Francisco during March and April of this year, I began to wonder seriously about the discomfort I feel when looking at the artist's work. Why does my skin begin to crawl, when I'm presented with her affronts to any sense of coherent identity? Perhaps I've just answered my own question.

The thirty-nine works in the show encompassed more than five decades of Leeson's life and included paintings, sculptures, and photography—though Hershman Leeson's practice extends to film, performance, and installation, as well—a breadth that complemented the focus of the show: the depth of the artist's interrogation into the construction and enactment of individual identity.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Roberta's Reconstruction*, 2005. Chromogenic print. Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

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Hershman Leeson's seminal creation, a character called Roberta Breitmore whom Hershman Leeson embodied in a series of performances, is a necessary starting point when unpacking the artist's conceptual interests and methods. The project began shortly after Hershman Leeson graduated from the MFA program at San Francisco State University in 1972, as an attempt to create a fictitious character who might come to exist in real life. To legitimize Breitmore, Hershman Leeson manufactured several legal documents, such as a driver's license and birth certificate. By the end of the project six years later, Breitmore could be said to be as good as real, having left behind all the same traces of a living person.

Hershman Leeson proposes that identity is constructed and maintained through presentation and documentation, rather than some innate authenticity. Her work is strikingly resonant in a time and place where most people affirm their identity through ephemeral documents, such as text, image, and video posts online. We all possess tenuous links to existence.

One of Hershman Leeson's early sculptures included in *About Face, Self Portrait as Another Person* (1965), was the nucleus around which the rest of the pieces in the show swirled. The title alone emphasizes the way we define ourselves in relation to others. A mannequin head wearing a dark wig sits above a tape recorder playing conversational audio based on the viewer's proximity to the plexiglass case housing the piece. Get too close, and the disembodied voice asks you to get closer with a series of too-personal demands, such as to recount in detail your first sexual experience or to confess your deepest fears. The experience is reminiscent of a session with an analyst or a conversation with a nosy stranger, highlighting the narrative drive behind the ways in which we present ourselves. Here, Hershman Leeson suggests that our identities are the product of our performance, as well as other's perception of that performance.

One photograph from the original Breitmore project, *Roberta and Irwin Meet for the First Time in Union Square Park 2* (1975), reminded me of the kind of snapshot a private investigator might take. In it, we see Breitmore's face over the shoulder of a man in the middle of the crowded park. Ask anyone if Breitmore was there, then, and the answer would have to be, Yes. This is an early, sterling example of how Leeson presents identity as mediated by documentation. It's a concept she's continued in recent work, too, extending her explorations to technologies newer than film photography.

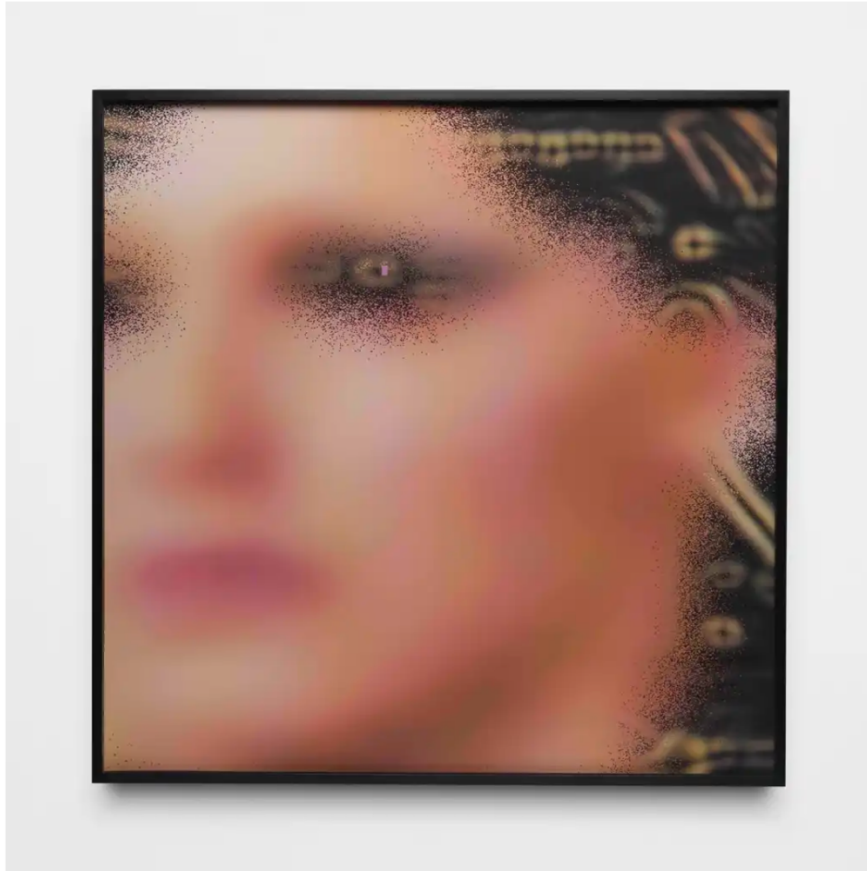
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In *QR Identity Finder* (2022), Hershman Leeson has imposed a QR code over a photograph of her face, which is linked to the artist's website, furthering the idea that we are defined by what we present: the artist's own identity formed by the works she makes public in a sort of negative feedback loop of identification.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Transgenic Cyborg*, 2000. Digital print. Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

Evidence of A Faulty Algorithm No. 1 (2021) brings this line of thought to its logical conclusion through an artificially generated portrait of a missing person. As a document of someone who may or may not exist or exists only in the context of an image, the piece emphasizes the way identity is so often created in and through images to begin with. Taken at face value, who's to say the individual pictured here is any less real than any other image one selects to represent themselves online?

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There's something a little unsettling about someone who is willing to play so fast and loose with identity. Hershman Leeson's work highlights the fact that we engage in identity's fluidity regularly, both on and offline, in all kinds of verbal, textual, and visual exchanges—both with strangers and those who know us intimately. Hershman Leeson uses the artist/viewer relationship as a working model: if art is an act of relating to another individual across time and space, then she undermines the whole affair on both sides, refusing to expose her true self—leaving us wondering if there even is such a thing—and denying viewers the comfort of their own identities.

I visited *About Face* twice, and both times left less certain of who I was. But this disturbance isn't solely self-alienating; there's an empowering side to it. Hershman Leeson's work serves as a reminder that, through every conscious act of presentation and re-presentation, we always already create ourselves.

"I'm anxious to get to know you," *Self Portrait as Another Person* (1965) told me. I'm anxious to get to know myself, too.