

Haunted (or stalked?) by VertiGhost

Fine Arts by Sura Wood



Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Ghosts Have No Reflections (VertiGhost)" (2017). Photo: Courtesy Anglim Gilbert Gallery and the artist

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There may be no movie more closely identified with San Francisco than Alfred Hitchcock's "Vertigo," a labyrinthine tale of obsessive love and murder that takes advantage of scenic city locations from the Golden Gate Bridge and Fort Point to Dolores Park and the Legion of Honor. With its story of a wealthy, cheating husband who orchestrates a Machiavellian plan to murder his wife by transforming his mistress (Kim Novak) into a look-alike of his spouse, and its themes of multiple identity, authenticity and the projection of male fantasy, the twisted psychological thriller was fertile ground for Lynn Hershman Leeson's "VertiGhost," a layered, multi-component installation in Gallery Six at the Legion, where Hitchcock shot a scene for the 1958 film.

Commissioned by the Fine Arts Museums to create a piece alluding to works associated with their collection, Leeson, a versatile feminist artist and experimental filmmaker, chose two paintings shrouded in mystery: Modigliani's "Pierre-Edouard Baranowski" (ca.1918), once thought to be a fake and consigned to storage for three decades before being authenticated; and "Portrait of Carlotta," a fictional prop and plot-point from "Vertigo." The museum helped track down a copy of the counterfeit Carlotta painting, which was so ugly, Leeson recalls, she blurred her own rendition of it. Where its eyes had been, she embedded GoPro cameras that project images of visitors inside a black box, allowing the watchers to be watched in real time. (The footage is simultaneously transported to a sister box at the de Young.) The work includes a 15-minute film shown at both venues that features 35 sequences from "Vertigo" that Leeson meticulously recreated and reshot with angles and lighting eerily similar to the original; interviews with three ringers for Kim Novak; excerpts from a British Film Institute conversation with Novak herself; and commentary from FAMSF curator Elise Effmann Clifford, who maps the Modigliani's rocky road to legitimacy. The connection between the artworks, Leeson explains, "is authenticity, and how you treat something you think is fake.

"Almost all of Hitchcock's films deal with obsession and violence toward women and decapitation of their psyches," she notes, but "Vertigo," which film historian David Thomson has called "Hitchcock's finest moment as a master of cruelty and torture," was particularly suited for Leeson's latest brainchild, not only because it was shot on location in San Francisco and the museum, but because it represented an opportunity to revisit the ghost of the production, revise it on her own terms, and "turn everyone into a performer."

Objects of voyeuristic desire and attention, many women have been forced to reconcile who they are inside with onerous societal expectations that dictate how they should look and behave, while others feel pressured to alter their appearance to satisfy an elusive ideal. It's a subject that has long intrigued Leeson and one that's taken to a pathological extreme in "Vertigo," where Novak's character, tormented by Jimmy Stewart's compulsion to remake her in the image of another woman, plaintively asks: "If I become her, will you love me?"

Dating back to the 1960s, the Bay Area multimedia artist has been prescient in her merging of art and new technologies, probing issues of morphing

identity, violence, gender, privacy and pervasive surveillance, and the invisibility of women. Sharp, tough-minded and original, Leeson's work is informed by a formidable critical intelligence. "Ever since I first met her, I've been impressed with her unique blend of imagination, ingenuity, wisdom and tenacity," observes film critic and scholar B. Ruby Rich. "She continues to extend her domain – art, science, feminism, film history, futurism – and makes it look easy. There's nobody like her."

Leeson was among 100 women artists, curators and writers who crafted "Not Surprised," an open letter protesting sexual harassment in the art world. It was sent out in October, translated into five languages, and garnered 10,000 signatures in the space of two days. "Since my generation, in the 70s, when women first became aware they had been left out of history, there's been a steady drip of information, protest and action that's erupted into a new generation who won't accept this kind of behavior anymore. I think it's wonderful to see women standing up for their rights."

Reasons for optimism aside, Leeson has faced her share of professional obstacles due to a number of factors, from being ahead of her time to the scarcity of exhibition space allocated to the work of female artists compared to that of their male counterparts. "Civic Radar," her first comprehensive career retrospective, which was organized by ZKM and toured Germany, received laudatory reviews but was taken by only one American institution, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, which presented a quarter of the show's 800 works in 2017.

Over the last few years, though, things have been breaking her way. She has upcoming exhibitions in Latvia and Basel, Switzerland; Novartis Pharmaceutical is naming an anti-body after her in response to an installation that forays into genetic engineering; and MoMA acquired over 40 artworks, some of which are included in "Being Modern," an exhibition at the razmatazz, Frank Gehry-designed Foundation Louis Vuitton in Paris.

Leeson credits her recent good fortune to younger women critics and curators who understand and champion her work. (Neither female nor young, New York Times art critic Holland Cotter has also been one of her most vocal supporters.) "I needed the millennials to be born," she says ruefully, adding she's "finally out of debt." But there has been a valuable upside to the decades of struggle. "I've gotten to do exactly what I wanted, nobody told me what to do, and I haven't had the economic pressure to repeat myself, like some artists," she says. "I've had a life of freedom."

