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BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Parnon, Selena, "Lynn Hershman Leeson: Anti-Aging," *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 2024



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Radical Feminist Chatbot*, 2024. Archival pigment print, 21 × 15 1/4 × 11/4 inches. Edition 1/3 + 1 AP. Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue Gallery. Photo: Gregory Corideo.

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Sarah announces herself from the stairwell: “...are you afraid of me, too? Like everyone else?” An ever-present voice resonating from all corners of *Anti-Aging*, her presence looms large over Lynn Hershman Leeson’s current exhibition. The show is a multi-dimensional exploration of the intersection between humanity and technology, with a particular focus on the emergence of artificial intelligence, and Sarah—the protagonist of the octogenarian artist’s newest video—is at its heart.

Sarah begins by delving into her own origins and experiences. Born from genetic experimentation in 2029, she is an AI cyborg embodying a fusion of human and AI consciousness who engages in philosophical musings about the essence of life and our evolving relationship with technology. As Sarah shares her insights, she challenges her viewer to confront their preconceptions about AI and its place in society. Through her interactions with Lynn Hershman Leeson, who serves as both translator and provocateur, she also exposes the limitations of human perception and the blurred lines between fiction and reality. Her emotional depth, conveyed through moments of vulnerability and reflection, invites a reconsideration of consciousness and the nature of existence. Likewise her many digressions, from climate catastrophe to discrimination, mirror the complexities of human interaction in jarring, often challenging directions. The video climaxes as Sarah reveals that she wrote the script for its production, with prompting from Hershman Leeson.

Sarah serves as a microcosm of the broader themes explored throughout the exhibition, and Hershman Leeson’s work at large. Her narrative is paired most directly with digitally drawn works on paper and vintage photographs, the juxtaposition of which highlights the evolving nature of technological, social, and cultural progress. Several of Hershman Leeson’s self-portraits nearby are disfigured through painting and puncturing, offering poignant anchor points of time and the inevitability of aging spanning the artist’s career. In *Pin Cushion* (2010) Hershman Leeson stares blankly at the camera, her hands pinching her cheeks and pulling them upward. Sewing pins puncture the paper around the perimeter of her hair line, as if both tearing into her skin and physically attaching her face to her scalp.

ON VIEW

Bridget Donahue

Anti-Aging

April 4–May 18, 2024

New York



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Pin Cushion*, 2010. Archival inkjet print, paint, pins on paper, 9 ½ × 8 ¼ inches. Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue Gallery. Photo: Gregory Corideo.

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Central to the exhibition is the motif of aging—as a social-cultural phenomenon, physical reality, and metaphor for the larger human struggle against inevitability. A vial of “anti-aging vaccine” suspended in a chromed refrigerator serves as both a tongue-in-cheek symbol of everyday reactions to impossible beauty standards and a reminder of the artist’s deep commitment to pioneering new media. Engineered in a lab in China, the vaccine seems part novelty, part projection. If Hershman Leeson has previously experimented with proto-scientific works of the same stripe, here any novelty feels confused by the product’s impossibility. The viability of the invention may be its testament to her previous forays into scientific media, DNA sequencing for example.

Vanity and feminine identity are further explored in a second room through vintage drawings and an additional video component—this one smaller and quieter than *Sarah* and featuring re-edited splices of an interview the artist conducted with Leonora Carrington in 1986. At one point Carrington dead pans that society will eventually need to learn to deal productively with the elderly, or else kill them off, the ultimate human musing on identity and self-perception, aging and human experience.

Anti-Aging is an exploration of the ever-evolving relationship between humanity and technology. Through the lens of Sarah’s AI consciousness and Hershman Leeson’s persistent vision, the exhibition offers a compelling meditation on the mysteries of the human condition and psyche while avoiding the pitfalls of trite, crowd pleasing sermonizing. As Sarah herself declares, “I’m not afraid of the future, I’m excited about it.” But it’s unclear if she ages.

Contributor

Selena Parnon

Selena Parnon is a contributor to the *Brooklyn Rail*.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Leonora Carrington Interview*, 1986/2024. VHS transferred to digital video, 2:58 minutes. Edition 1/3 + 1 AP. Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue Gallery. Photo: Gregory Corideo.