

ALTMAN SIEGEL

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# MUSÉE

VANGUARD OF PHOTOGRAPHY CULTURE

Çil, Çisemnaz, " Veiled Presence: The Hidden Mothers and Sara VanDerBeek | Norton Museum of Art,"  
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## Veiled Presence: The Hidden Mothers and Sara VanDerBeek | Norton Museum of Art



Artist Unknown, (American, 19th century), *Untitled*, 1860s, Tintype, 1 7/8 x 1 1/2 in. (4.8 x 3.8 cm), Collection of Lee Marks and John C. DePrez, Jr., Shelbyville, IN, Public domain

The exhibition *Veiled Presence* at the Norton Museum of Art unites two extremely differing yet closely connected collections of photographic practice: 19th-century children's portraits from families with the so-called "hidden mothers" and contemporary works by American artist Sara VanDerBeek. In the confrontation, photography is not only introduced as a documentary tool but also as a means that inscribes the signs of care, work and loss along the passage of time.

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Artist Unknown (American, 19th century), *Untitled*, 1860s, Tintype, 1 7/8 x 1 1/2 in. (4.8 x 3.8 cm), Collection of Lee Marks and John C. DePrez, Jr., Shelbyville, IN, Public domain

The "hidden mother" was a strange 19th-century practice of studio photography. Because long exposure times worked against what could be kept still, mothers or care providers were often hidden—veiled, covered by furniture or cropped out—while holding their children in place for the photograph. The resulting photos are eerie and poignant all at once: maternal presence is essential, yet systematically erased. Their uncanny nature stems from this tension—what is concealed is the work of care, and what is revealed on the surface is the quietness of the child.



Sara VanDerBeek (American, born 1976), *Mother*, 2023, UV print on plexiglass, anodized aluminum, 24 x 10 in. (61 x 25.4 cm), Edition 1 of 3, Courtesy of the Artist, Altman Siegel, San Francisco, and The Approach, London. © Sara VanDerBeek



Sara VanDerBeek (American, born 1976), *Mother*, 2023, UV print on plexiglass, anodized aluminum, 24 x 10 in. (61 x 25.4 cm), Edition 2 of 3, Courtesy of the Artist, Altman Siegel, San Francisco, and The Approach, London. © Sara VanDerBeek

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Sara VanDerBeek (American, born 1976), *Mirrored*, 2023, Two silver gelatin prints mounted on aluminum, 24 x 16 3/4 in. (61 x 42.5 cm), Edition 1 of 3, Courtesy of the Artist, Altman Siegel, San Francisco, and The Approach, London. ©Sara VanDerBeek

VanDerBeek responds to this history in her own series of photographs and installations, such as “Veils” (2025), “Mother” (2023), and “Hidden Mothers” (2025). Rather than literal concealment, her work borrows the metaphor of veiling for how women's labor, and most significantly maternal labor, is ubiquitous and imperceptible. Through the positioning of lace, fabrics, mirrors and broken images, she refigures absence as a condition of loss and remembrance, connecting previous practices of photographic deception to contemporary questions of visibility, reproduction and loss. In works like “Mirrored” (2023), VanDerBeek illustrates how photography serves as an intermediary between originals and copies, bodies and their leftovers, repeating within itself the very slide found in 19th-century instances.

The program does more than highlight visual affinities. The Norton also features historical studio equipment: the Scovill Tailboard Camera, baby posing chairs and even birdie props formerly used to attract children. These objects contextually anchor the invisible mother photographs to their material and technological contexts, reminding us that mother invisibility was not a happenstance but central to the very mechanism of photography.

Thoughtfully restored, *Veiled Presence* recontextualizes objects that might otherwise be dismissed as antique curiosities as a strong reflection upon visibility, gendered labor and politics of memory. The ghostly concealments of the 19th-century portraits already point to photography's complicity in erasure. VanDerBeek's interventions make visible how similarly these same powers function today, in which women's work in reproduction—of life, of memory, of images—is indispensable and hidden.

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Artist Unknown (American, 19th century), *Untitled*, 1860s, Tintype, 3 1/4 x 2 in. (8.3 x 5.1 cm), Collection of Lee Marks and John C. DePrez, Jr., Shelbyville, IN, Public domain

Lastly, the series provokes viewers to reconsider what it means to be hidden yet central, hidden yet necessary. By comparing historic objects to VanDerBeek's own practice in the present day, the Norton Museum proves that the "hidden mothers" were never truly absent. Instead, they haunt photography's past—an imperishable reminder of how care supports every single image, even when unseen.

**Sara VanDerBeek, Norton Museum of Art**

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Lynn Hershman Leeson, Double Click (2020). Photo courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

## The Art of Identity

Born in Cleveland in 1941, Hershman Leeson has lived in the Bay Area since the 1960s, when she moved there to pursue her MFA at San Francisco State University. Today, we might literally be able to alter our own DNA, but Hershman Leeson has long had an eye to various other ways in which we might reinvent or fictionalize our identity. These early projects also betray an audacious willingness to merge art and life, at times allowing the two to become nearly indistinguishable.

The most famous example is surely Roberta Breitmore. The performance art piece, which lasted most of the 1970s, saw Hershman Leeson create and, where necessary, become a blonde character who was brought to life as much by her distinctive beauty rituals as her bureaucratic records. As well as having particular mannerisms, Breitmore had her own bank account and even put ads in the local newspaper to rent a room. Her existence, over nearly a decade, raised the question of what qualifiers make anyone real. The conundrum lives on in 2025, with Breitmore inspiring the “[Roberta Look Alike Contest](#)” by Altman Siegel and di Rosa SF on October 4.

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Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Roberta's Construction Chart #1* (1975). Image courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

Hershman Leeson has described a long struggle to convince institutions to recognize her work as art. After all, it had no obvious precedent. It may be that work as daringly experimental as Hershman Leeson's could only have been made outside the glare of the mainstream market, but now it is now time for her to receive her due. Today, most discourse—positive or negative—around technology in art centers on A.I., but Lynn Hershman Leeson seems to think that the bigger story is our ability to reprogram our genes. With her track record for prophesy, we should probably sit up and listen before it's too late.

*["Lynn Hershman Leeson: About Time"](#) is on view at Altman Siegel, 1150 25th Street, San Francisco, California, through October 11.*