‘VertiGhost’ re-creates Hitchcock film at Legion of Honor with Kim Novak twist

By Sam Whiting  |  December 11, 2017  |  Updated: December 13, 2017 11:34am

The three “Kims” in “VertiGhost”: Natasha Boas (left), Yuliya Slepukhina and Nkechi Emeruwa.

The video rolls with that familiar Hitchcockian soundtrack, and there is the backside of Kim Novak as she steps from a luxury sedan and gracefully walks toward the Legion of Honor.
But this is not “Vertigo.” This is “VertiGhost,” a clever video installation that employs exact re-creations of the San Francisco scenes from that famous 1958 film to explore questions of double and hidden identity.

Multiple media artist Lynn Hershman Leeson hired a film crew of 15 or 20, plus three models to play the Novak role, to create “VertiGhost.” The original San Francisco locations were shot with the same angles and lighting used by Alfred Hitchcock. The result is spooky in how precise it is.

Spookier still is the setting for Leeson’s installation. It opens Saturday, Dec. 16, at the Legion of Honor in the same gallery that Hitchcock used for the scene in which Novak sits on a bench and studies a mysterious painting called “Portrait of Carlotta.”

The only thing about “VertiGhost” that is not a reproduction from “Vertigo” is that bench. It was used in the filming and is a permanent fixture in Gallery Six — where “Vertigo” was shot and “VertiGhost” is on view.

The exhibit “is about not knowing the truth in something,” says Leeson, 76, who watched all 129 minutes of “Vertigo” several times in her research. “The film is all about copies and fakes. Only the ghosts of the truth knows what the truth is. Once the truth is told then the ghosts can rest.”

Photo: Lynn Hershmann Leeson, Courtesy Anglim Gilbert Gallery

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Slepukhina pays homage to Kim Novak’s “Vertigo” role.
“VertiGhost” comes 50 years after “Vertigo” and was a commission by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. The only stipulation was that the artwork reference the Legion of Honor or the de Young Museum, or both.

Leeson dissected 35 scenes from “Vertigo,” reshot them and sliced them into 10- or 15-second film clips. The location shoots — the Palace of Fine Arts, Fort Point, the streets of Nob Hill and the Brocklebank Apartments — turned some heads.

Yuliya Slepukhina, a former model from Ukraine, was one of the women who portrayed Novak for “VertiGhost,” and “people wanted (her) autograph because she looked just like her,” Leeson says.

If Leeson just wanted a Novak look-alike, she would have stayed with Slepukhina, but she wanted a more nuanced portrayal. So from scene to scene, Novak’s character switches from a blonde to a brunette portrayed by curator Natasha Boas, to a black Kim Novak portrayed by Nkechi Emeruwa, a Nigerian immigrant who once studied American behavior patterns by watching movies such as “Vertigo.”

In on-camera interviews, the three “Kims” give their interpretations of the character. Then comes the real Kim, Novak herself, giving her interpretations in a recent interview with the British Film Institute.

The subplot of “Vertigo” about the mysterious “Portrait of Carlotta” is paralleled in “VertiGhost” with the story of a mysterious Modigliani painting in the collection of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Thought to be fake, it was eventually determined to be real. That story is told by museums curator Elise Effmann Clifford, the only person on camera not channeling Novak.

The film lasts about 15 minutes, with a score composed and recorded by George Freedland. There is also a viewer participation aspect.
A person sitting on the Novak bench can either face a wall where “VertiGhost” is screened or turn around and face a remade “Portrait of Carlotta.” Her eyes have been replaced by cameras, which will then project the viewer from a black box within the gallery and make the viewer part of the story.

“When people come and sit down on the gallery, they are imitating Kim Novak, too,” Leeson says. “The whole piece is about how we really can’t tell what is fake and what is authentic.”

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