Lynn Hershman Leeson has spent the last 50 years creating boundary-pushing, provocative works that merge technology and feminism. This year, a flurry of institutional recognition has come her way, culminating in a two-museum installation in San Francisco this December. Sarah Thornton pays the artist a visit.
At San Francisco’s Legion of Honor, in the room where Alfred Hitchcock shot Vertigo, you can sit on the bench on which Kim Novak sat and gaze at a portrait that has a GoPro camera hidden behind its eyes. The piece is part of a complex installation by pioneering artist and film-maker Lynn Hershman Leeson, which is on display from December 16 to March 25. Titled VertigoHost, the work explores the shifting relations between fact, fiction, surveillance and identity—themes that Hershman Leeson has been investigating for more than 50 years. Asked to come up with a site-specific work that made reference to the collection, the artist thought it would be exciting to deal with the museum’s Hollywood history. “In an era of fake news,” she explains, “mistaking false information for truth is a topic whose time has come.”

Another component of VertigoHost is a 15-minute film that explores two paintings—Portrait of Carlotta, a movie prop, and Portrait of Pierre-Édouard Baranowski, a Modigliani painting of an androgynous bohemian with empty eyes that was put in storage for 30 years because it was wrongly thought to be a forgery. In the documentary-style short, we see three Novak impersonators—a silent blonde, an engaging brunette and an articulate African woman with beads tied in a French knot. The latter is an actress who watched Hitchcock movies to gain insight into the “American mind” while growing up. “It existed in our minds as photography, but it intrigued me to the point that I wanted to spend time with it.”

Hershm an Leeson's installation opening at San Francisco’s Legion of Honor on December 16; above, her 1976 Portrait of Pierre-Édouard Baranowski.

For many years, Hershman Leeson had only one collector—Donald Hess, the Swiss owner of many vineyards including Napa’s Hess Collection. A friend to many artists including Francis Bacon, Hess visited Hershman in the 1980s when she was a single parent, living in a basement. “I felt intuitively that Lynn was an important artist,” he explains. “She had a deep awareness of social issues such as privacy, gender, and surveillance. I may not immediately have understood her work but it intrigued me to the point that I wanted to spend time with it.” Hess bought almost everything she had made—over three hundred pieces—and then continued to support her by acquiring the first edition of her photographs and interactive works for decades afterward. “I admire outsiders,” admits Hershman Leeson. “And people who have a political point of view.” As such, her art historical inspirations are as varied as Jean Tinguely (with his kinetic mechanical sculptures), Lee Miller (a war photographer who started out as Man Ray’s model) and Tina Modotti (an artist-activist who began her career as Edward Weston’s assistant). Still the question remains: what made Hershman Leeson so ahead of the curve, so ambitious to merge art and technology? “It was about understanding that I couldn’t compete with the past,” she explains. “To have any impact, you have to use the tools of your time.”

“Lynn always engendered the feeling of being on the edge of new ground.” —Tilda Swinton