HYPERALLERGIC

FEATURES

Writing My Own Artistic Origin Story

I didn’t speak until I was almost seven. But just because I was not speaking, did not mean I was not listening.

Lynn Hershman Leeson

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Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Pin Cushion" (2010) (all images courtesy Ze Books)

Editor's Note: *The following text has been excerpted with permission and adapted from* Private I: A Memoir *by Lynn Hershman Leeson, published by Ze Books on November 4 and available online and in bookstores.*

I've been absolutely terrified every moment of my life — and I've never let it keep me from doing a single thing I wanted to do. —Georgia O'Keeffe

While reading an old issue of the art journal *Frieze*, I came across the American poet Kevin Killian's 2019 stunning and intimate obituary of the artist Lutz Bacher. His appreciation of this artist's persona prompted me to message Kevin. I conveyed my gratitude for his deeply moving memorial. Then I asked if he might write my obituary, too.

"Oh Lynn," he wrote. "I will email you and it will be obvious that something of the beautiful has been mixed up with the bad, like a Vincente Minelli melodrama."

"Kevin," I replied, "I really do want to commission you to write my obit. I am afraid no one will know who I was or anything about my work." I asked if we could meet when I returned from New York.

Silence.

A few days later his email arrived. "About your offer," it began. "Wow, thanks! But my dear, you are going to outlive me by miles. The last four weeks have proved a trying time. I have been confronted with intimations of cancer.

"I know you are away," Kevin continued, "but I have an idea of how we might collaborate. In the meantime, thank you for showing me how to dream, how to

make work, how to perform activism, and how to stick with things even when everything looks scary and awful. You are our hero in many ways."

Kevin's hero? How could that be? I never even met him. He asked to meet in June. Swamped with deadlines, we pushed the date to mid-August.

That same week the artist Carolee Schneemann invited me to her home to pick out one of her sculptures. For three decades, we had been attempting to trade artworks.

As usual, I had a deadline to meet. "Could it wait?" I joked.

"Sure." She laughed, as if that delay were part of a performance we never wanted to end. But before we could meet, she unexpectedly passed.

Lynn Hershman-Leeson (left) and Eleanor Coppola (right) receiving awards at the di Rosa Center for Contemporary Art's 25th anniversary gala in 2022 in Napa, California

Shortly after Carolee, other friends left planet Earth in quick succession, including my colleagues Jack Burnham, Okwui Enwezor, and Moira Roth. Most recently, my best friend, collaborator, and co-conspirator, Ellie Coppola, passed away.

Take your time or time takes you. Before I could return to San Francisco, Kevin also was claimed. Everything perishes, even time. So, during the COVID pandemic, I began this chronicle of many episodes, assumptions, presumptions, and challenges, some known, many unknown, in the hope that this history will survive. In doing so, I have honored my family's expressed wish that I not feature them in this narrative (although they inevitably make some appearances).

Jean-Luc Godard noted that his films have a beginning, middle, and end, but not necessarily in that order. That is also the case with this autobiography.

In the early 1970s, the mystery writers Richard Stark and Joe Gores conspired to create two characters whose proscribed destiny would be to meet in each other's books. Their characters appear on either side of a doorway and talk for a moment, thereby creating overlapping fictive spaces that trigger the plot in each separate story.

Alfred Hitchcock called this the "MacGuffin." The MacGuffin is a plot device that sets the characters into motion and drives the story. It can be an object, idea, person, or characters who are either pursuing the MacGuffin, or the MacGuffin can serve as motivation for their actions (like the Maltese Falcon, for example). Usually, the MacGuffin is revealed in the first act.

What is the MacGuffin of my life? I am writing this memoir to find out.

Hershman Leeson as an associate project director for Christo's "Running Fence" in Marin and Sonoma Counties in 1976

On June 17, 1941, I became the third child in the Lester family. Stella, my mother, worked as a lab technician and high school teacher of biology, while my father, Samuel, a pharmacist, struggled to manage his drugstore. Two boys had arrived before me: Gerald Arnold, born in 1936, and Arthur Herbert, born 1939. We lived in the bottom unit of my maternal grandparents' modest home at 11507 Temblett Avenue in East Cleveland, Ohio, a downwardly mobile lower-middle-class Jewish neighborhood bordering one of Cleveland's poorest Black neighborhoods.

My maternal grandparents, Rose and Martin (we called him Pa) were born in Hungary and were fortunate to have come to this country many decades before

the Holocaust. They never spoke of their family members who had remained and were very likely murdered there.

In Hungary, Pa was said to have been a colonel in the army. My grandmother earned her living as a professional cook. They mostly spoke Hungarian to my parents, but when they didn't want us kids to understand, reverted to Yiddish.

Pa, born in 1883, in Rzsapatak, now Romania, arrived at Ellis Island and met Rose, whom he married in 1910. Rose, or as I called her, "Gram," was from Kövárkölcse, Hungary, also now in Romania. After my mother was born in Philadelphia in 1911, they moved to the Upper East Side of Manhattan for a short time, living at 304 East 92nd Street, before moving to Cleveland, where Rose had a cousin, Libby, a survivor of Auschwitz.

My paternal grandparents, Louis and Lena (Rubenstein) Lester, immigrated to the United States in 1918. Louis came from Sokal, which is now in Ukraine; Lena was from Neustadt- Schirwindt, Russia, and arrived in Canada in 1917. They married in Toronto when he was 22 and she was 20 and then entered the United States through Buffalo.

I can't say for sure why my relatives came to America, although I assume it was in search of a better life, or more accurately, a life. Even then, it was difficult for Jews in Europe, with state-sanctioned antisemitism limiting where they could live, study, or work. There was always an imminent threat of violence. The United States promised a safe haven and the possibility of a better life.

My father owned a pharmacy, Lester Drugs. As was common in those days, the pharmacy had a counter that served ice cream and sodas. In time, both my brothers and I worked there as soda jerks.

I didn’t speak until I was almost seven. But just because I was not speaking, did not mean I was not listening. I often heard my parents wondering if I was "retarded." Although I didn’t understand that word, I assumed that I was considered defective in some way.

A young Hershman Leeson in 1946

My family were masters of repurposing, which may have been their art form. Like constructing collages, a glass pickle jar with a twist-on lid became our soup tureen. The doorway to the kitchen became a stage where my brothers and I performed magic tricks that entertained my family.

For instance, we would take a glass of liquid brimming with diluted yellow watered-down paint and another glass prefilled with blue water and pour them both into a third empty glass. With a triumphant "Ta da!" we announced the magical transformation that turned the two liquids green.

In our small two-bedroom apartment, my brothers shared one room, while my parents occupied the other one. As for me, I slept in the hallway next to the bathroom. It never occurred to me that it wasn't a real bedroom, except that it didn't have a door, and everyone walked through my space to get to the kitchen. Privacy was non-existent. I never visited other children's homes, nor did any visit mine.

On weekdays, my mother walked Arthur and Jerry to their classes at Chesterfield Elementary School, before heading to her job at a biology lab. Together, Gram and I often embarked on secret adventures. Mostly, we took the bus to Thistledown Racetrack. When the bus stopped in front of the entrance we squeezed through the crowds and then headed to the paddock. Gram insisted on inspecting the ponies. I leaned over the wooden railing and watched as she spoke to the horses. They appeared to understand Hungarian. As she jotted down notes, she could instantly spot wavering eyes, a limp, or a jittery leg.

At the very last minute, we raced to place bets at the $2 window and then caught a ride on the rickety wooden elevator to the bleachers where, stubs in hand, we watched our ponies win. I don't remember my grandmother ever losing. I was

given the treat of collecting our winnings. Standing on my tiptoes I gathered the cash for an instant before my grandmother, with one swift movement, opened the golden hinges of her black leather purse and dropped the winnings inside, snapping the closure securely shut. Her profits were parlayed into shrewd real estate acquisitions such as a farm and our home and also covered my mother's college education.

We traveled by bus to many adventures. I sensed passengers viewed Gram as just another elderly woman running errands with her grandchild. But I knew, even then, that she understood how to conjure multiple secret identities. The disguise of banality was a perfect strategy.


CLEVELAND
INDIANS

The Lester family in 1946, first row, left to right: Lynn, her mother, and her grandmother; second row: brother Gerald, father, grandfather, brother Arthur

At the kosher butcher shop, Gram transformed into an expert at sizing up live chickens. The butcher then demonstrated his murderous expertise by swinging a glistening sharp knife into their throats. The poultry was then defeathered and carefully wrapped in brown paper and tied with a white string. We held these packages tightly while we rode the bus home. Poultry blood dripped, leaving a trail that led back to Temblett Avenue.

My future artistic practice investigating persona was informed by Gram's ability to assume these various identities. Perhaps because I was not speaking, my grandmother confided in me. She knew I would keep our adventures secret.

Pa worked as a grocery store clerk. Gram supplemented the family income by cooking for wealthy families. She was an extraordinary baker who kneaded her special dough, covered it with a wet cloth until it had fully risen, then mashed it with her knuckles. When it was smooth, she rolled it across the dining room table until it was paper thin, sliced it into squares, filled it with farmer's cheese, cinnamon, raisins, chopped walnuts, and sometimes lekvar (Hungarian plum jelly), brushed with butter and egg white and cut into exotic shapes. This wide swath of Hungarian-style origami was placed in a 360-degree oven until slightly brown. Our kitchen simmered with the smell of a happy home. To this day, I make it several times a year, following Gram's recipe.

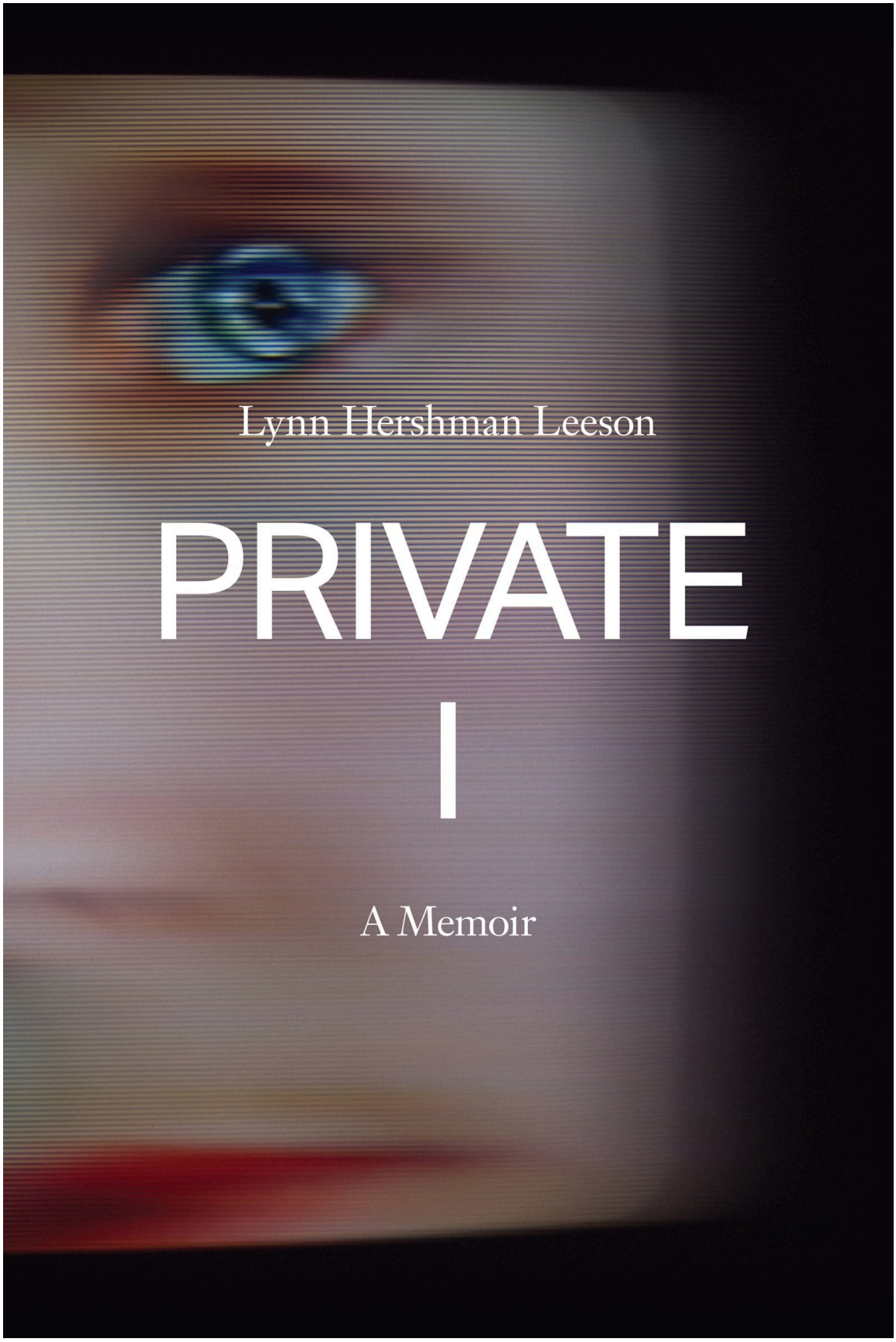
Friday night dinners with these specially baked desserts were the highlight of our week. Traditional Hungarian dishes such as chicken paprikash and schnitzel were served but desserts were the stars, particularly when she made the crepes called palacsintas or delicious somlói galuska. This was done according to tradition, since we kept a kosher home.

After arriving in New York, Gram cooked for the famous entrepreneur Abe Saperstein, the founder, owner, and earliest coach of the Harlem Globetrotters. She became one of the original investors in the team. When Mr. Saperstein came to Cleveland, he gave Gram tickets to see the Trotters train. I tagged along, and loved watching them shoot baskets. But more, I savored each moment I was privy to Gram's many lives. There was magic in her varied identities.

Coincidentally, our house on Temblett Avenue was not far away from 10622 Kimberly Avenue, the home of Jerry Siegel, one of the two creators of Superman. Perhaps being a superhero and having a secret identity was a common trait among East Cleveland Jews. I was brought up to believe we had no other family beyond our small, insular group. When we were young, we were told that all our other family members were lost or had disappeared. There was never any mention of Nazis or the Holocaust.

When a new deli opened in our neighborhood, I noticed that the owner had numbers tattooed on his arm. I told my grandmother, who rushed to meet him. Remarkably, he was my grandmother's nephew, who survived the Holocaust, alone among his family.

My father's parents, Louis and his wife, Lena, were also immigrants. A few times a year, my brothers and I visited Lena in her dark apartment, where we were fed cookies, listened to records, and had to act as if we didn't notice her crying. Louis, an insurance salesman who was always immaculately dressed in a tailored suit and hat, occasionally stopped by Lester Drugs. We never knew when he might appear or how to contact him. At some point, he stopped coming and I never saw him again. It was only many years later I learned that Louis was murdered. We were never told why or how, just that it had happened.



Cover of *Private I: A Memoir* by Lynn Hershman Leeson (Ze Books, 2025)