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Leslie Wayne
De Anima
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WOMEN BY WOMEN

Elizabeth King by Leslie Wayne

A thing one moment, and a being the next.

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Detail of Elizabeth King, *Pupil*, 1987–90, porcelain, glass eyes, carved wood (Swiss pear), brass, half life-size, dimensions vary, eyes and all joints movable. Courtesy of the artist.

I came up in the New York City art world in the late 1980s, an abstract painter engaged in the legacies of abstract expressionism, minimalism, and geometric abstraction. It

was a much smaller community then, and we felt we knew everyone, if not personally, then all about them and their work. Somehow, however, Elizabeth King eluded me until years later when I attended a lecture she gave at the National Academy of Design. She blew me away. A singular artist with an idiosyncratic vision, King spoke about her passion for the mechanics of movement in a language that was poetic, scholarly, and highly personal. From the images she showed, her work had an astonishing level of engineering, craftsmanship, and beauty. Since then, I have come to know and admire her more at every turn, and it is an honor for me to interview her on the occasion of a two-person exhibition in which her work is included at the Swiss Institute in New York City, entitled *De Anima*.

Women by Women, a series of interviews between women visual artists, is supported in part by the Deborah Buck Foundation with additional funding from the Judith Whitney Godwin Foundation.

Leslie Wayne

Elizabeth, congratulations on this timely and fascinating show. Before we dive into the premise of the exhibition, I want to acknowledge the recent Getty publication of *Miracles and Machines*, a book you researched for

years and co-wrote with W. David Todd about a sixteenth-century automaton. Your fascination with this remarkable “first robot” feels like you were reaching out to a ghostly progenitor of your own work. Can you talk about the drive that led you to become the artist you are today?

Elizabeth King

I arrived in San Francisco in 1969, blinking and clueless, a dropout from Kalamazoo College. Abstract expressionism in its West Coast iteration filled the galleries, but artists like Alvin Light and Bill Geis, two of my teachers at the San Francisco Art Institute, were taking it into uncharted sculptural territory. Seminars were held in the room where Jay DeFeo’s *The Rose* hung. H. C. Westermann was a visiting artist. Bay Area Funk. Indie film, Canyon Cinema. R. Crumb and the comics underground. Crown Point Press. Tom Marioni’s Museum of Conceptual Art, Alan Scarritt and the Site gallery, the 80 Langton Street gallery—all artist-run. Dance and music at Mills College. Terry Fox. The early performance artists. Bruce Conner’s uncanny sculpture. The figure, such as Judy Linhares and her preternatural women. Clay alone: Pete Voulkos, Jim Melchert, Bob Arneson, Viola Frey, Richard Shaw. In spite of, or maybe because of, the political turmoil of the early ’70s, with the Vietnam War still raging, so much was going on in the arts. It’s bracing to think of it now.

“What the body is made of and how it moves have been my preoccupations since I can remember.”

— Elizabeth King

LW

A veritable cauldron! I was at the University of California, Santa Barbara at that time and recall the strong influence of artists like Paul Wonner and Nathan Oliveira. But I, too, was clueless and had no idea what was going on in LA and south: Ed Ruscha, the Light and Space movement. Vija Celmins at UC Irvine and John Baldessari at UC San Diego. It's like the Bay Area and SoCal were two completely different states! What I think tied them together, then, and still does, is an interest in phenomenology and a supreme respect for process, materials, and craft, particularly as it relates to clay; Ken Price comes to mind. So, at what point did engineering enter into your studio practice as a way to animate the figure?

EK

What the body is made of and how it moves have been my preoccupations since I can remember. A stranger on the bus reaches for the overhead rail, and I am floored by the miracle of the arm. Eye, spine, thumb: How do they work? The only sculptural precedents I knew of that modeled not just the form but the active motions of the body were objects that art history gave but a nod to, such as lay figures, manikins, puppets, anatomical models, automata. A broken nineteenth-century character automaton, painted face and hands intact but body stripped of clothing, the mechanics of joints exposed—yet the figure still acts on you! The contradiction makes it strangely more alive. I want to capture both form and motion in a sculpture, but each keeps insisting on its own end. Form alone makes only a statue. But too complex a mechanism—for where do you stop?—and you get an emotionless robot. My best problems come from making one kind of representation collide with another.



Detail of Elizabeth King, *Idea for a Mechanical Eye*, 1988–90, cast acrylic, carved wood, brass, springs, 10.75 × 2.25 × 2.25 inches including stand, eyeball diameter .75 inch, eye, eyelids, and socket independently movable; eyeball made in collaboration with ophthalmologist Earle C. Schreiber. Courtesy of the artist.

LWI would be remiss in not also mentioning your mother, whom you've freely spoken about in the past. Your mother was wheelchair bound since you were a child, and this desire to give movement to your sculptures is inextricably

linked to your wish to give movement back to your mother. Was this initially a subliminal drive or always a conscious thought?

EKI'm stunned by how long it took me to see the connection. She was struck in the last year of the polio epidemic, before the vaccine. Our house was full of prosthetic appliances and machines. Her legs were paralyzed, but she could hold a room with her animated face and hands.



Elizabeth King, *Untitled articulated figure*, 1974–78, porcelain, copper-plated steel, bronze, glass eyes, hair, Alaskan cedar frame, 21 × 6 × 4 inches, as posed, all joints movable. Courtesy of the artist.

LW

It's not surprising it took you so long, but it was a gift in a way. Your inner drive found its voice through artmaking so that both processes of discovery—art and intention—

could develop in tandem. That your house was filled with prosthetic appliances and machines also explains your natural inclination toward engineering. So, animation is a key to understanding your work. You've also made stop-motion films of your figures moving and gesticulating, giving life to the sculptures, which are often on display but not moving. Tell me how this all started.

EK

I love posing the sculptures from one show to the next. Everything—all the engineering, as you put it—leads up to this performative moment. Have I made something finely tuned enough that it can capture the subtler emotional signals the body delivers? It's a form of improvisational choreography with the sculpture as my instrument. Film animation came later, though when it did, I found I had spent many years making the perfect stop-motion figure. With the still poses, I'm never sure if the viewer sees the sculpture *and* the pose. On film, the choreography is front and center. Stop-motion preserves all material reality and light, manipulating only time. So wood is wood. But motion is motion. The contradictions are intact.

We seem to see ourselves as a thing one minute—made of bones and blood—and a being the next: a “someone” with memories and plans. Holding these two perceptions

in mind at the same time is what I am after. You mentioned the book I co-wrote, *Miracles and Machines*, about a small, fierce automaton made long ago, animated by hidden clockwork, that walks about and gesticulates on a table, making eye contact with you. How did onlookers see it then, with so little precedent? Looking at it now, in our robot-haunted age, we see—not something that would fool anyone into thinking it is alive, but something that induces our innate response to an alive thing.



Installation view of *Louise Bonnet and Elizabeth King: De Anima*, 2025. Swiss Institute, New York City. Photo by Daniel Pérez. Courtesy of the artist.

LW

That's a beautiful observation. The very first stop-motion film you ever made, with the wonderful film animator Mike Belzer in 1990, was recently on view at the Grey Art Museum in New York City in a show celebrating fifty years of Anonymous Was A Woman grant recipients. Which brings me to the two-person show you are in at the Swiss Institute with painter Louise Bonnet. Curator Stefanie Hessler's interest in pairing your work with Bonnet's centers around notions of life and lifelikeness, and the ethical questions concerning animacy, along with the increasingly blurry boundaries of life and nonlife in relation to art and technology. That's a lot to chew on, but it's true that we are at the forefront of technologies that can make it hard to distinguish reality from illusion. I just saw a television commercial advertising virtual doctor visits with a hologram! What I love about your work is not the illusion of life, but the questions you pose about what gives a form its life.

EK

For all our radical differences, I think Louise and I both ask what gives a solo body its sentience and autonomy. Our works are grounded in the shock and awe of sheer anatomy. In the face of near-universal experiences of pandemics, migrations, climate disasters, mined personal data, AI, and the ways these are changing our definitions of what is human, what are we as individuals now? Stefanie's vision in pairing us is remarkable.

Louise Bonnet and Elizabeth King: *De Anima* is on view at the Swiss Institute in New York City until September 7.

Leslie Wayne is an artist and occasional writer and curator. She lives and works in New York City and is represented by Jack Shainman Gallery. Her solo show *The Unintended Blues* will open next summer at Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's The Arts Center on Governor's Island and run through the end of September, to coincide with Climate Week.