

March 21, 2020

## A Chat with the Business Witch

*“Face to Face” with Virginia Lee Montgomery*

Standing and drawing as well as sleeping and dreaming are all in a day’s work for video artist and “mind-map scribe” Virginia Lee Montgomery, or VLM, as she tends to be called. She does both for more hours straight than you thought possible (six and sixteen, respectively), as research for the content of her “radically serene” video work.



*CUT COPY SPHINX*, 4k Digital video, 03:30, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

As a mind-mapper, or graphic recorder, the artist visually synthesizes presentations at conferences, talks, and company meetings into a series of whiteboards—sometimes in front of audiences of hundreds of people—an occupation which has flecked her language with corporatese, though her speech is not without its own vocabulary of philosophy and metaphysics mixed in. She speaks about her art as if she were pitching it—her descriptions are straightforward, comprehensive, and rehearsed—something I appreciated, as it ensured I could follow her explanations of it. (She does, after all, describe herself as the “Business Witch.”)

If you take one look at the artwork itself, which she calls “moving image sculptures,” however, it’s immediately clear you’re dealing with no suit. Her videos range in subject from moths shedding cocoons to hotel rooms inhabited by a disembodied blond ponytail (not unlike VLM’s own), all set to an ASMR-like soundtrack of dripping water and distant bell chimes. Other frequent motifs include drizzling honey, whirring drill bits, and the artist’s flawlessly manicured hands. The action unfolds slowly, as if to inspire a trance, or perchance, a dream...

Don’t expect a narrative from this work, as it is meant to evoke a feeling. As the artist is “aware that video art is time intensive,” know that you won’t necessarily have to strap yourself in for the long haul if that’s not what you’ve come for. The artist often asks herself, “how can I make a work where if someone only sees ten seconds of it they still have an affect?”

Much of the answer to that question is connected to the desired outcome of her practice, as she insists hers is “a visual art practice of philosophical metaphysics.” This means she is interested in you, the viewer, interacting with the processes of her mind. (Metaphysics, after all, is the study of reality—how and why things are; therefore, put simply, VLM’s personal metaphysics are trying to communicate how she experiences reality.)



Film still from *Pony Hotel*, 4k Digital video, 05:17, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

This might feel a bit too jargony for you, but don’t worry. If VLM needed you to have a philosophy degree to understand her work, she would have written “academic papers.” Rather her intention has always been simply to “produc[e] through sight and sound.”

And while she does describe her three minute video of a hand holding a moon dripping with honey, as “a metaphysical moment of negation,” this philosophical language did not deter thousands of passersby (the majority of whom did not study philosophy) from watching it play on the jumbotrons in Times Square, as part of Times Square Arts’ February 2019 “Midnight Moment.” Like all metaphysics, we don’t have to know Aristotle by heart to simply experience our realities—though life can be the richer for it.

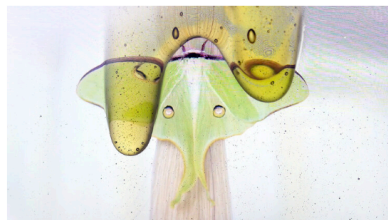
What is most intriguing about *Honey Moon* is that it does not point to Philosophy as its main mover, but rather uses word play to get us to think about philosophical themes. We can engage with the work on a base level, simply smiling at the literal translation of a common phrase, bemused by our multifaceted language. Or we can use this as a point of departure for something deeper, such as an investigation of semiotics. (Oh *no*, not Saussure!)



Virginia Lee Montgomery. *HONEY MOON* at Midnight Moment, Times Square Arts, New York City, NY, February 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

VLM grew up dyslexic and could not read and write properly until the age of nine. She therefore has an unusual relationship with language, free from the typical marriage of signifier and signified. As a child, words were purely sounds that related to objects, effectively eliminating the middleman of symbol-based signifier from this linguistic equation. Her work does something similar by removing the temptation for a direct translation of the work. Instead it seeks out the “metaphysical baselines” of human life, such as the “desire to feel safe, the desire to be heard” and a “connection to the natural world.”

Okay, okay—I can tell I’m losing you again.



Film still from *Pony Cocoon*, 4k Digital video, 05:05, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

Really the point of all this is to give the viewer agency to feel rather than to be told how to feel, and in many ways, shifting the power to the viewer means taking it away from the artist. As VLM is a lucid dreamer, she is much more aware of her mind’s

functioning than we are and therefore much more aware of how little she is in control. The role of dreaming, as a space where decision making is most distant from the dreamer's mind, is essential for coming up with her videos' sequencing. "I'm a spirit inside a system. I don't really know what's going on, but I can behold the movement," VLM says of her dreamworld, where she feels as if she is watching her "subconscious build a puzzle." It is the pieces of the puzzle that she incorporates into her work.

The metaphor of the puzzle is convenient because it seamlessly blends with one of language, as words fit together to form a sentence the way pieces do a puzzle. And while each of these words/puzzle pieces/motifs (like butterflies, ponytails, or drills) don't *mean* anything per se, they certainly assemble and reassemble in variations to create the feeling that there is meaning there.

This is all to say something quite simple. Watch the videos. Feel something. Repeat.

More on Virginia Lee Montgomery [here](#).