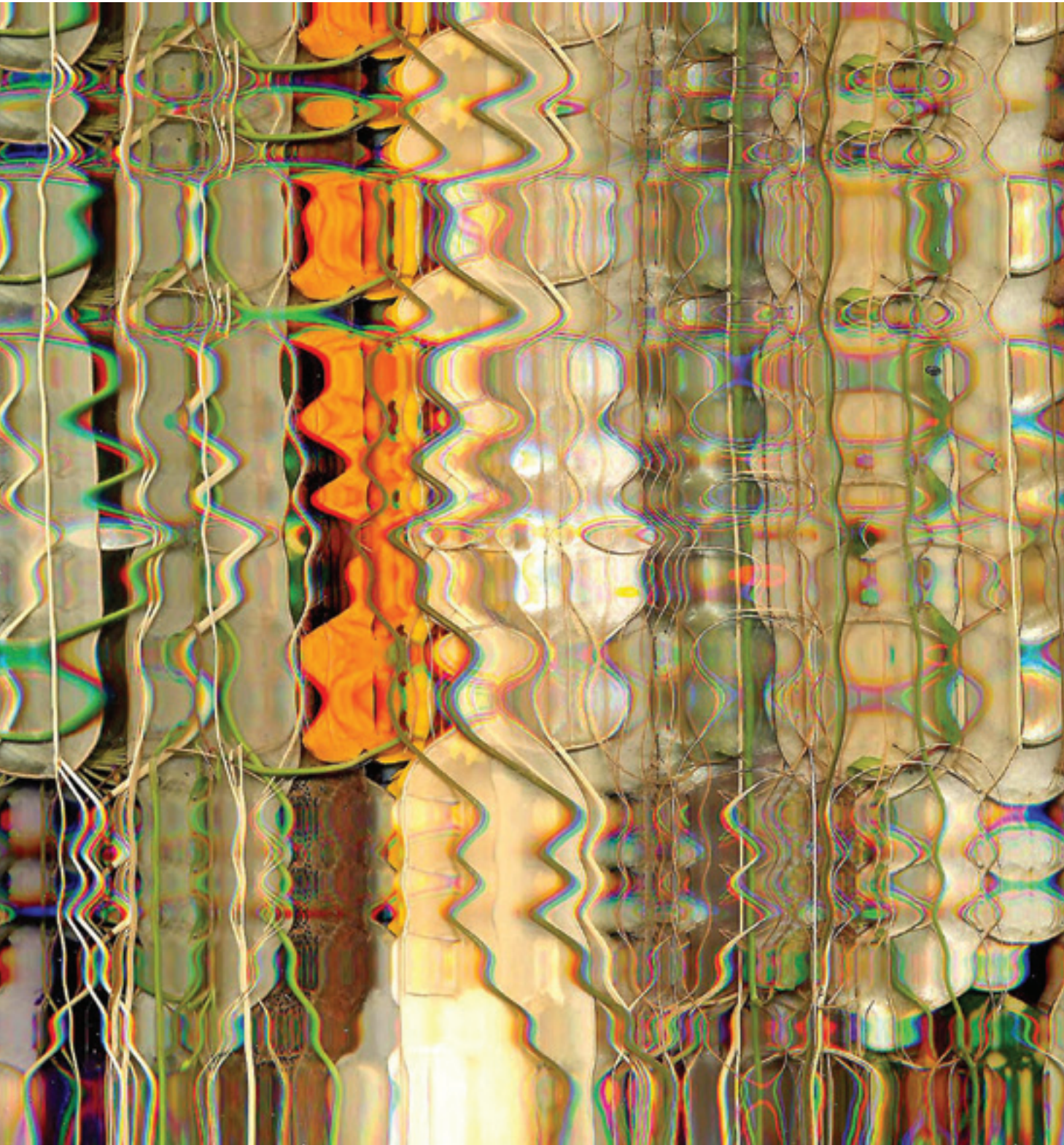


ROBERT BHARDA

Architect's Dream, 2018
Digital image from organic collage, 36 x 36 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

LARA MARKSTEIN

A Romantic Like That

Mine is your typical boy-meets-girl love story, set against the walls of a pyramid beneath an alabaster sky.

I was a young artist in those years. A photographer who dreamed in black and white during the days of HDR-filter algorithms on mirrorless phones. It was a futile fight for a dying art, fueled by small-time gigs: designing logos for nonprofits, posters for bands yet to make it big. That day, I worked on a more lucrative contract, shooting pictures for a tech firm that specialized in supporting families as they transitioned aging parents into end-of-life care. I'd chosen the Miller crypt at Mountain View Cemetery as my canvas, in part because the Olmstead-designed avenues perched above Oakland with views of the Golden Gate Bridge made for an exquisite property to place your bones—in part because it was close to home. So focused was I on reading the light exposure that I almost didn't notice my foot was warm. When I glanced down, I leaped back—a hairless ferret of a creature had urinated on my shoe.

“Major Paws!” A woman stood before me aghast. “I’m sorry.” She doused my already wet feet with her water bottle, her thick lashes resting on pink, mortified cheeks, and I knew I was in love.

I didn't even know her name.

My name is Ashton—A5he5_77 on the forums, although I wasn't on the forums then. I was trawling for commissions, hawking my work to local galleries. On the side, I ferried passengers around the city in a beat-up sedan. That night, idling outside a club, I flipped through the social media on my phone and found myself searching every picture as though I might find the ghost of the girl I'd seen. A hopeless pastime in a city with half a million inhabitants, so as I drove home across the bridge, I tried to push her from my mind. But she haunted my thoughts, and in bed later, I discovered myself typing in the Facebook search bar: “Major Paws.” Only one military canine lived in Oakland and had a snaggletoothed grin. In photos, the Major was tagged with Rebecca Palanjan.

When I closed my eyes, I dreamed of Rebecca, Becky, Bex. We lay on the Crocker mausoleum beneath a fishbowl-blue sky, Major Paws nestled in the space between our ribs.

My friends did not appreciate my new infatuation. “You've never met her,” Hans, a German sound musician

who worked at a speaker factory, protested. Lakshmi laughed. “A fantasy’s just right for him. No one in real life is good enough.” She’d been bitter since we’d hooked up the year before. DeShawn said, “Hell, throw the guy a bone. He picks up tech bros for a living.” As though DeShawn’s administration of a nonprofit gallery for the mentally disabled was so special. He’d only just gotten the job; there was still time for him to screw up. The previous year he’d been smoking a jay and bussing tables like the rest of us.

Still, my friends had a point. Even pining knights in old romances did not languish in their bedroom forever; they sought out lost love. I had to hunt down Rebecca’s whereabouts and prove to her my devotion—or cure this all-consuming want.

For an artist, I am methodical; I work in series. So I scoured online message boards about tracking people down. Hours later, I stumbled into an active forum debating the risk of remote vacuum cleaners. “If your phone knows where it is, the company does, too—and so does THE GOVERNMENT,” Freedom_789 wrote. DanP5423 urged parents to mount a camera on the machine, “Keeps my family safe from turds like you.” Clithungr10001 said, “Nothing can keep them safe, dude.”

While most users insisted I comb through the board’s twelve-year history for techniques, these three pounced on my request for help as though I were fresh blood. They quickly assigned me my first of many labors. Brimful with purpose and passion, I did not flinch and by noon the next day, I’d cross-referenced Bex’s usernames on all the major sites. By plotting her check-ins on a map, I had narrowed her location to a three-mile radius. “Good,” Dan wrote. “If you hacked, you’d have her nailed,” Freedom said.

I passed out to a vision of Bex and the Major walking in circles around the Ghirardelli tomb. The granite turned to chocolate, which melted and flowed like tears from the statue’s eyes into the bay. For days, I would have the sensation that the highways were twisting to accommodate these new rivers and I had to rely on my GPS to steer through the streets I knew as I deposited drunks and travelers home.

I did the math: Rebecca likely lived within a seven-square-mile stretch of streets; my odds of lighting upon her were poor. But here was my second chance to demonstrate my resolve.

Since this section of the city had just two groceries, one

of which I frequented, between the hours of four and six, I lurked among the shelves of the other store, which stocked organic mixes and whole grains at prices I could not afford. My kitchen filled with bulgur and amaranth and barnyard-flavored bio-wine that had been on sale. After three days, I was losing faith. I demolished a Wendy’s combo meal each night. But then, as though to reward me for my trials, on day four I discovered her debating dairy-free milks.

“The hazelnut has a pleasant texture,” I said. She smiled, with a slight droop to her left eye that only made her more exquisite. “Uh-huh,” she said. Then she selected the oat milk.

Bex had not recognized me. The realization whacked the breath from my lungs. While I had pursued the very specter of her presence across the city, letting her inhabit my dreams, she had forgotten my existence entirely. Humiliated, I abandoned my basket and unlocked my bike.

Even now I don’t know what I intended, following her. Perhaps, having spent such energy to pinpoint her location, I had to know her address. Perhaps in my misery I still bore hope she’d call me to mind. In any case, I cycled after her vehicle for half a mile—more—pumping my legs over the hills, careening around corners, until she pulled into a drive.

At home, I collapsed on the sofa, soaked in sweat. My anguish had burned away and in its place was something smooth and cold. I was pleased—no, elated! Give me a mystery and I could crack it in my palm. I merrily groveled on the phone to some asshole who was mad I’d missed a deadline.

So our love affair should have ended. But, aching for the joy I’d felt just days before, I couldn’t escape Bex. In the following week, I visited her street, my rideshare tags ensuring my idle car avoided suspicion. I recorded the time she left for work, when she returned. I even traced her route to her office at a small press. I suspected this madness was “the muse.” *She*, Rebecca of the crypt, was my latest *objet d’art*. But when I photographed her, I was disappointed. The pictures weren’t special. The light was flat and the photos reminded me of courtroom evidence.

I visited the forum again. “You need a surveillance system,” Freedom said. “You need to hack her,” Hungry wrote. I read long blog posts on miniature devices designed for stealth and DanP sent me encrypted installation guides.

A labor of love. That would be the title of my performance as an overalls-wearing plumber, ringing the call box on a Wednesday at eight in the morning until someone buzzed me in. I’d gleaned Bex’s apartment number from packages that had been left at the front gate and picked the lock on her door swiftly thanks to video tutorials I’d watched.

As an artist, with a drill and bit of paint, I was able to conceal delicate cameras and microphones throughout her four small rooms—by light fixtures, the router, appliances: items that had collected a fine pelt of dust. Not two hours later, I rotated my shoulders and swept up the shavings of particleboard. Then I opened my computer and logged in. The browser toggled quickly between each room.

I slammed the laptop shut, my heart beating at the bones in my chest. My throat suddenly felt dry and I struggled to swallow.

In the car, I changed and turned on my ride app, driving for twenty hours straight. Eyes on the road, the GPS, anything but my computer in the footwell of the passenger seat. When I returned home, I flopped into bed and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

When I woke, the previous day seemed an illusion played out beneath a soft-focus lens. I made myself a coffee and then, with stale breath still, lifted the laptop. The apartment filled the screen. I shut the computer quickly again and proceeded to run a shower so hot the water scalded my skin as I jerked off.

That afternoon, I tried to focus on the contract I’d promised to finish. But instead of fiddling with Photoshop, I studied the apartment feed, my pulse quickening. That weekend, I barely ate, exhilarated and unwilling to miss a single moment of her life.

“We never see you anymore,” Lakshmi said. “You planning something fantastic?” DeShawn asked, jealously. Hans wanted to know if I was okay.

I mumbled some excuse. My friends had not wanted to know about Rebecca. So why should I share my secret with them now? That at the press of a button I had the most beautiful woman in the world and her ugly mutt at my fingertips. On the forums, I announced the success of my mission. “Congratulations,” Freedom wrote. “You have to hack her email next,” Hungry said.

I was fired from my freelance gigs for breach of contract.

But now I didn’t search through listings online. I still had my driving and I hardly noticed my passengers’ tedious conversations around IPOs. My mind was elsewhere—in the little living room, where Bex liked to drink a bottle of wine on her worn couch while scratching the Major’s silken ears and chatting to her mother about work.

I stood before the bathroom mirror (was I really so thin?) and practiced greeting her, properly this time. I entered the apartment, opened a bottle of champagne, pretended not to know in which cupboard the glasses lay.

Only, I was not the man Bex had invited inside. Inevitable, really, Hans would have said, since I hadn’t talked to her. The fellow was ordinary, but I hated him; he ruined her pretty apartment with his bulk. And I hated her for choosing someone so horribly normal to show her little rooms. I threw my computer across the room in disgust, denting the aluminum. A spiderweb of cracks fractured the glass. I was not some sick voyeur getting off on watching others screw. I was *in love*. I was an errant fucking knight whose heart had been ripped out and pounded until it was so thin and flat, I could wrap myself in the tissue like it was a flimsy cape that wouldn’t warm anyone.

I had been a fool.

I cycled straight to Hans’s apartment and with hands clumsy from the cold pulled a bottle of bourbon from his closet. “She has a boyfriend,” Hans said. He matched me glass for glass. “Yes,” I moaned. “I didn’t know they were serious.”

Lakshmi and DeShawn couldn’t resist dropping by to gloat at my suffering. “You still haven’t met her,” DeShawn marveled. “Shouldn’t you stop drinking now?” Lakshmi asked. I was slurring my words. “You wouldn’t understand,” I said. How could they? My friends never *committed* to life. They maintained an ironic distance from the world so they could judge its inhabitants and never face how they’d failed. Hans had given up on his ambitions of being a musician to pay off his girlfriend’s debts. Lakshmi had never admitted she yearned for me, so sure was she that she was a lesbian, though her lovers were always unsatisfactory. And DeShawn had only ever loved himself, so he was incapable of knowing what I felt. My heart felt so heavy in my chest.

“Call me when you get your shit together,” DeShawn said. Lakshmi followed him to the door. “Have you even

showered lately, dude?” Hans kept drinking until he passed out.

I hadn’t been on the forums in a while, but with a throbbing head, I returned. “Welcome back,” Freedom said. “You were right,” I wrote. “It’s time to hack.” DanP couldn’t help and for once Freedom wanted to know why. Hungry typed, “DM me, mate.”

According to Hungry, there were many ways to solve a problem, but only one was elegant. Only one had the feeling of the divine. With hacking, you could control a man. Make him act according to the invisible hand of ones and zeros; it was, he claimed, sublime.

“You have to work up to that. You’ll be clumsy when you begin. Reach for low-hanging fruit.” I devoured online classes, read articles on digital architecture, passwords, command lines. “Let me know if you need help,” Hungry said. “There’s always dirt to dig up.”

And dig up dirt we did. Mountains of dirt, filth, excrement. What we didn’t find, we easily made up. This man was unremarkable, his secrets everyday. He downloaded music, streamed sports games illegally. And porn. He’d built quite the collection of smut.

And that perfectly ordinary activity of men and women from Timbuktu to Taiwan was how we caught him. We spoofed a law firm representing a porn company and charged him a ridiculous sum for copyright infringement, threatening to take him to court if he didn’t cough up. He was terrified. And ashamed—he didn’t breathe a word to Rebecca, anyway. I soon fixed that, anonymously sending her the pertinent facts.

“You traffic in porn?” Our phrase, of course. She was sobbing, made hideous with the news. “A hundred and fifty thousand in damages?” He’d have to sell everything he owned. His credit would be ruined. They could quit planning that vacation to Greece.

“How could you?” she asked. Then, “What type of women did you watch?” He didn’t bother answering. Rebecca hiccuped her way through a bottle of chardonnay and deleted the dating apps from her phone.

“Congratulations,” Hungry said, proud of my progress. “You could make something of this.”

I hadn’t planned to continue training on terminals. With Rebecca alone, after all, I could swoop in. But I *didn’t* cycle straight to her house. I don’t know why, except maybe

that I did not want to disturb the peace of her apartment with my heavy boots either. I found watching her routines each day peaceful. Her habits, the order to her life, calmed me. They had their own gracefulness. And perhaps, too, I felt a seed of triumph at what I, by the sheer force of my will, had achieved. Who would want to taint that magic with the stickiness of flesh?

Hungry then could not be ignored. I’d have to protect her as well from other men. So I practiced what I liked to consider my newest form of art. I hacked into her emails, read every chat she’d ever sent, tapped her phone. I monitored the websites she browsed. And those of her family and those of her friends.

The next time Rebecca had a boyfriend, I was occupied with a business I was building and allowed him to hang around a while. When I finally turned my attention to the intruder, I knew I couldn’t pull the same trick again. Rebecca had lamented her previous breakup and revised her opinion on porn. Sometimes she even masturbated to videos herself. So I planted some underage girls in the man’s collection and tipped the cops. My execution was flawless.

But Rebecca cried on the phone to her mother, what were the chances? I have always been open to constructive criticism and took the hint. The next man I caught in a tax evasion scheme. Another I set up with her friend.

Mostly though, I didn’t intervene. These relationships ran their course. There were more pressing issues I had to manage, such as her applications to jobs out of town. It pained me to plant negative references and fudge her background checks, but I had no choice. Rebecca would stay in that little house on that narrow street above the rose gardens her whole life. When her landlords tried to evict her, I bought the property. Don’t say I never did anything for the woman. By this time, my business was successful. I’d gotten into surveillance; some government contracts—sorry Freedom—but mostly in the private sphere.

“Sellout,” DeShawn had said when I moved into a large, light-filled apartment in the city. This was one of the last times I saw my friends. Hans, whose girlfriend had dumped him, moved back to Berlin shortly afterward. I forgot to return Lakshmi’s calls. I had a wife, children—the usual.

Except that I could open my computer and summon the greatest art project the world had ever seen: a woman

drinking wine and reading literature alone in bed, growing more bitter by the year. I’d made her like that. Conjured this creature out of thin air. I loved her for this.

Yes, I love her. After sitting through board meetings and solving my children’s uninteresting dilemmas, a tingle creeps into the back of my throat and I sneak into my office to check on her, seated like a stone sculpture in bed. I enjoy these moments we have together. Sometimes, if she’s feeling bad, I send her a small gift. Chocolates. A necklace once. When I ran Major Paws over with my car (he’d almost mauled a microphone), I sent her a crate of wine. It’s the little things that make her life worthwhile. I keep her happy, this Rebecca of mine. I’m a romantic like that.

Lara Markstein is a South African-born New Zealander who has lived the past ten years in the United States. She graduated from Harvard University, where she studied English, and received her Master’s in fine arts from the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. Previously, her stories have appeared in *Glimmer Train*, *AGNI*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and *Chicago Quarterly Review*, among other journals. She currently serves as the program officer at the University of California, Berkeley, Center for New Media.