Lowell Milken Center for Unsung Heroes
ARTEFFECT

Impact Statement

Maria José Aguirre, Grade 12
Beneath the Spotlight, 2026
Oil, paper on canvas board, 15.75 x 23.62 inches
Picacho McGregor School, Baja California, MEXICO
Unsung Hero: Hedy Lamarr

I give you Hedy Lamarr, an icon of 20th-century beauty and cinema. Hedy Lamarr is a figure who not only inspired generations of young women through her long-standing career in the spotlight but also laid the groundwork for technologies that would later contribute to one of the world's most revolutionary inventions: Wi-Fi. Never would I have pictured a Hollywood film actress among the brilliant minds behind this innovative masterpiece. That particular thought made me wonder: Why exactly is that so hard to believe? Why do we so often reduce people to a single accomplishment?

Hedy Lamarr was born Hedwig Eva Maria Kiesler, in Vienna, Austria. Her acting talent and widespread success eventually brought her to America's entertainment industry, where she became a major Hollywood star. You may know her from films such as; Samson and Delilah, Algiers, Ecstasy, among others. Despite the importance of her artistic contributions, Lamarr's other accomplishments, however, are arguably just as remarkable.

During World War II, Hedy Lamarr and composer George Antheil developed a frequency-hopping communication system intended to prevent enemy forces from detecting or jamming radio-controlled torpedoes. The concept of spread-spectrum communication was later recognized as an important finding and contribution to what we know as wireless technology, becoming a foundation for wireless technologies such as GPS, Bluetooth, cellular networks, and Wi-Fi. Despite the invention's significance today, Lamarr and Antheil's project was initially rejected by the U.S. Navy. Although the exact factors attributed to this rejection remain unknown, speculation has centered on the possibility that Lamarr's glamorous and seductive roles may have made it difficult for others to view her in a serious intellectual light. For this reason, rather than supporting the war through her intellectual innovation, Lamarr was encouraged to be just that: a celebrity, and to use her influence as her only asset. This lack of recognition continued for decades, until 1997, when she received her first major public recognition, just three years before her passing.

Lamarr's experience raises a question that became central to my artwork: Would the world have looked at her scientific proficiency differently had she not been a beautiful Hollywood actress? Lamarr lived in an industry where her appearance was emphasized above nearly everything else, transforming her beauty into the foundation of her public identity. The same image that contributed to Hedy Lamarr's success as an actress also made it easier for the world

to reduce her to it.

Upon creating this piece, my intent was to portray the duality of Lamarr's career through this unequal lens. Lamarr’s figure shimmers under the spotlight, her posture performative and assured, her presence delicate and undeniably beautiful. At first glance, one sees a star in her totality. However, as the viewer delves deeper, they might be able to notice what's been left behind: stacks of technical schematics and patent drawings across the stage floor, partially covered by the Hollywood star’s translucent gown. These objects are not intentionally hidden, yet they are inevitably outshined by the spectacle of Lamarr's fame. This duality is central to my vision and thoroughly emphasized.

I do not consider Lamarr's Hollywood career secondary to her innovations as a scientist, nor do I want to suggest one side is more legitimate than the other. My work mirrors reality: A look at Hedy Lamarr through the lens of her public image at the very height of her fame. Hedy Lamarr’s talents were not mutually exclusive. Both existed at the same time, yet only one of them gleamed under the spotlight.