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Thin as Thorns In These Thoughts in Us: An exhibition of Creative AI and Generative Art
Honor Fraser Gallery
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by Jody Zellen



What is AI? Artificial Intelligence, or AI relates to “the theory and development of computer systems able to perform tasks that normally require human intelligence.” AI employs machine learning to improve the fulfillment of any task. How scientists, technologists and the entertainment industry employ AI is well documented and it comes as no surprise that artists are also exploring what is possible with this technology. A compelling exhibition organized by curator Paul Young and Kenric McDowell of Google, brings together robotic and code-based, as well as analogue works that look at the myriad possibilities of machine learning. Included are a diverse group of international artists: Memo Akten, Sougwen Chung, Harold Cohen, Chris Coy, YACHT, Holly Grimm, Joanne Hastie, Agnieszka Kurant, Annie Lapin, Allison Parrish, Casey Reas, Patrick Tresset, Christobal Valenzuela, Roman Verostko, Siebren Versteeg and Tom White.

In the entryway of the exhibition and functioning like a prologue or introduction to AI is Memo Akten’s mesmerizing seven-channel video installation *Deep meditations: A brief history of almost everything in 60 minutes* (2018). To produce this work, Akten amassed tens of thousands of images from *Flickr* that were tagged with words like life, love, faith, ritual, god and nature, and created custom software that composited these images so that an ever-changing sequence was produced in which they morphed and flowed into one another according to a specific algorithm to become a meditation on the expansive and wondrous nature of the universe. Though located in a darkened room in the back of the gallery, selections from Casey Reas’ recent project *Compressed Cinema* serves as a conceptual bookend to Akten’s video display. Projected are three short loops: *Untitled (Not now. No, no.)*, *(Two dead!)* and *(I withdraw)*, (2020). To create these works, Reas used General Adversarial Networks (GANS) and programmatically sequenced mutated stills from a range of different films spanning numerous genres into a new cinematic experience. These ambiguous and haunting pieces are accompanied by an equally chilling sound track by Jan St. Werner.

No AI exhibition would be complete without a functioning robot and in this exhibition, Patrick Tresset’s robotic drawing machine, *Human Study @2, La Toute petite Vanité au coquillage* (2020) becomes a central attraction. In this sculptural work, Tresset explores not only how machines can draw in real time, but also how they begin to exhibit human-like behaviors. It is hard to turn away from the progress of the robotic arm as it skillfully replicates portions of a still life. A different kind of AI robot is presented in video documentation of Sougwen Chung’s

performance, *Flora Rearing Architectural Network (F.R.A.N.)*, (2020). In this work, Chung records a human/machine duet where a robot creates drawings and paintings in a style similar to hers. Holly Grimm and Joanne Hastie have also trained machines to emulate their drawing and painting styles. Grimm's machine creates figurative works, whereas Hastie's makes abstractions. Hastie worked for decades as an R&D engineer while painting during the evenings and on weekends. In 2017, she began to combine these interests and applied her knowledge of robotics and AI into the process of machine painting. On view are selections of painted brushstrokes made by a robotic arm. While Chung, Grimm and Hastie have trained robots to paint, Allison Parrish uses AI for poetry. She feeds data sets into the computer and creates algorithms that dictate the output of words. Her many zines and animations document these experimental practices.

The exhibition also includes works by Roman Verostko and Harold Cohen, pioneers in algorithmic art. Harold Cohen's acrylic *Athlete Series* (1996) is an example of his automated painting process. This large acrylic work was created by AARON, one of the first AI robots programmed to produce artworks. Roman Verostko began to write computer software for plotter printers in the 1960s and his enigmatic artworks opened up new ways of both creating and thinking about computer-based art.

Thin as Thorns, In These Thoughts in Us: An Exhibition of Creative AI and Generative Art is a fascinating exhibition that brings together works from the past and the present, created both locally and internationally and is a solid introduction to how artists are using AI to meld art and technology.

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