

Automata: Contemporary Mechanical Sculpture
January 16–March 14, 2010

While on vacation in 1989, metalsmith Michael Croft wandered into a dimly lit arcade in London's Covent Garden district. He was greeted by a life-sized moving skeleton, then proceeded to have his ticket stamped by an automated guard who controlled the entrance to the central exhibition hall. To Croft's delight, he found himself surrounded by an idiosyncratic grouping of finely crafted mechanical sculptures that sprang into action at the turn of a crank. These devices—made of wood, wire, tin, and paint, combined with various configurations of cams, gears, and ratchets—performed absurd and witty acts. An altered reality came alive, one where chickens tested out evolutionary theories, tigers experienced writer's block, and Icarus caught himself flying too close to the sun with his zipper undone.

Traditionally, the term automaton (*pl.* automata) referred to a mechanized device constructed to perform actions as if by its own motive power. Like robots, animatronics, and clockwork figures, these early automata were engineered to imitate life; thus, their inner workings were hidden from view. Early examples of manmade, moving, naturalistic sculptures include the jointed religious effigies of ancient Egypt, the pneumatic models of ancient Greece, the mechanical orchestra created for the emperor during China's Han Dynasty, and the monumental animated water clocks of the medieval Islamic world.

Some of the best-known automata were designed by French engineer Jacques de Vaucanson in the eighteenth century. His life-sized mechanical duck, made of gilt brass, used flexible rubber tubing for intestines and more than 400 moving parts in one wing alone. Not only did it look like a duck, move like a duck, and quack like a duck—on being fed corn it shat like one, too! Vaucanson's work ushered in a nineteenth-century golden age of animated clockwork clowns, acrobats, and entertainers, which were popular as parlor amusements and department store window displays up until World War I.

Today's artist-designed automata tend toward an even more imaginative storytelling approach, suspending reality and exploring playful otherworlds beyond everyday existence. Jan Zalud (British, b. Czech 1955), for example, carves human heads that interact enigmatically with animals. *Sleepless*, ca. 2008, depicts a bizarre dreamworld where sheep enter and exit a man's mouth.

Space travel figures in the work of Robert Race (British, b.?). He uses driftwood to evoke the lunar landscape in his poetic piece about a voyage to the moon (*Moon Priest*, ca. 2009). Dean Lucker (American, b. 1962) shows us what one might do upon arriving, envisioning a crescent moon as the ideal spot to take a seat, have a drink, and enjoy the view (*Man Drinking in the Moon*, 2009).

Magic takes center stage in the work of Pierre Meyer (French, b. 1935). His illusionist performs a very clever levitation without the use of strings or wires (*Fechner's Levitation on Stool*, 2007). Although the operating mechanism is in plain view, it doesn't spoil the illusion. Hand-in-hand with contemporary automatists' aim to alter reality is often their belief that seeing how the trick is performed is all part of the fun.

Automatists are natural storytellers. Incorporating the element of time in their work, they create parallels between the wind-up and release of mechanical tension and the build-up and punch line of a well-told joke. Paul Spooner (British, b. 1948) and Matt Smith (British, b. 1965) include slightly macabre or erotic elements in their collaborative one-liners; in *Fugu*, 2000, their diner gingerly eats blowfish with chopsticks but after several bites gets the wrong piece and drops dead. Michael Croft (American, b. 1941) also heightens the drama of his work by playing with expectations. What will be revealed when his *Flasher*, 2001, is set in motion?

Other artists use folk tales as the premise for their pieces. John Morgan (American, b. 1956), for example, interprets the saying that if you see a turtle on a fencepost you know that it didn't get there without help (*Turtle on a Fencepost*, 2004). Neil Hardy (British, b. 1955) takes the simple adage "the early bird gets the worm" and creates an elaborate narrative with an unexpected twist; moving speech bubbles help tell the story of Eddy, the early bird, who discovers that he has caught not a worm but the tail of a hungry tiger (*The Early Bird Nearly Catches It*, 2004).

Crafting comic scenarios is only one aspect of what compels Neil Hardy and others to make automata. "I enjoy finding the right mechanism for each piece so that it fits the movements in a unique way," explains Hardy. Problem solving and mechanical ingenuity are common traits among automatists.

Many sculptors are drawn to automata for the expressive possibilities of working with wood, metal, and wire in motion. Wanda Sowry (British, b. 1975) uses contrasting colors of wood to construct scenes of frenzied activity. She captures the general cacophony of her working method in *The Automata Maker—Self-Portrait*, ca. 2005, which shows Sowry furiously turning the crank on a piece in progress while other automata self-activate and tools bounce around on the workbench. Peter Markey (British, b. 1930) prefers fashioning wood into simple repetitive mechanisms and giving them decorative surfaces that create pleasing patterns of color, light, and sound (*Piano*, 2006, and *Birds in the Clouds*, 2002).

The malleable properties of metal offer automatists an opportunity to explore more nuanced movements than can be achieved with wood. Keith Newstead (British, b. 1956) constructed an articulated brass armature mounted on a rotating rod to create the fluid flying gestures of his *Dragon*, ca. 1999. Turning the rod activates an elongated spring inside the beast to simultaneously move its head, neck, tail, forked tongue, and jaw.

Andy Hazell's work (British, b. 1959) is crudely fashioned from recycled tin, which he finds to be a quick and flexible medium "even if sometimes it's like working with a big unfriendly razor blade." In *Tricky Fish*, 2009, he explores various reflective qualities of painted and unpainted tin surfaces.

Douglas Wilson (British, b. ?), a graphic artist by training, is attracted to the ease of working with wire and the cartoonish quality it lends to his inventions. His automata are inspired by Alexander Calder's wire circus figures from the 1920s. Wilson's galloping wire *Horses*, ca. 2005, recall the wild stallion that attempts to buck its rider in Calder's circus performances. Calder has not only inspired the work of certain artists, his

pioneering kinetic sculptures have also helped pave the way for the contemporary automata movement as a whole.

Many artists appreciate the mass appeal of mechanical sculpture and find great satisfaction in seeing audiences engage with their work. Automata encourage participation, whether it involves physically winding a crank or the challenge of thinking through how a handle turned at one end creates various movements at the other. Like all art, automata stimulate us to consider the artist's intent and often invite us to draw conclusions about the works' meaning. Automata tend to elicit a genuine response from the viewer, ranging from laughter to a puzzled look; after all, it's hard not to react to what you see in an automata exhibition. Ultimately, the mechanical sculptures remind us that viewing art is intended to be an active experience.

Michael Croft's first encounter with Cabaret Mechanical Theatre—a hybrid museum, gallery, shop, and arcade founded in England in 1983 to promote contemporary automata—led to his fascination with making and collecting this unique form of mechanical sculpture.¹ He returned to England in 1995 on a summer research grant to study the art form, and for the past fifteen years has made his own automata, taught workshops, and built a collection of over sixty contemporary mechanical sculptures. Croft's collection serves as the basis for the current Chazen Museum of Art exhibition, which features the work of fourteen international artists.

¹ Cabaret Mechanical Theatre closed its Covent Garden space in 2000 but continues to operate primarily through its website, www.cabaret.co.uk, as well as by traveling exhibitions that showcase its collection around the world.