

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Chazen Presents *Automata*, an Exhibition Contemporary Mechanical Sculpture

Madison, Wisconsin—The Chazen Museum of Art presents the delightful work of fourteen international artists in *Automata: Contemporary Mechanical Sculpture*. Meticulously crafted to perform complex, surprising, and often comic movements, these mechanical sculptures tell quick fanciful tales of nature, myth and magic, the creative process, and sheer make-believe. More than 25 hand-cranked artist-designed automata, most loaned from the private collection of University of Arizona art professor emeritus Michael Croft, will be on view January 16 through March 14, 2010. Videos will play in the gallery to show the animated workings of the pieces. Museum admission is free.

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, early automata were engineered to imitate life; thus, their inner workings were hidden from view. Notable examples of self-moving naturalistic sculptures include jointed religious effigies of ancient Egypt, pneumatic models of ancient Greece, a mechanical orchestra created for the emperor during China's Han Dynasty, and 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. It looked like a duck, moved like a duck, quacked like a duck—and on being fed corn it even defecated like a duck. 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 until World War I.

Today's artist-designed automata tend toward imaginative storytelling, suspending reality and exploring playful worlds beyond everyday existence. Many sculptors are drawn to automata for the expressive possibilities of working with wood, metal, and wire in motion. They also incorporate the element of time, using the wind-up and release of mechanical tension to parallel the build-up and punch line of a tale. Many artists appreciate the mass appeal of mechanical sculpture and find great satisfaction in seeing how audiences experience the work.

Exhibition-Related Programming

Friday, January 22: Reception and Curator Lecture

- 5:30 p.m. “Automata: Contemporary Mechanical Sculpture.” Lecture by Cassie Wilkins, exhibition curator. *Wilkins will discuss the history of the contemporary automata movement and individual artist’s approaches to the art form.*
- 6:30 p.m. Reception with music by the Stellanovas, refreshments, and a cash bar

Thursday, January 28: Lecture

- 5:30 p.m. “Automata: The Art of Animated Figures.” Lecture by Michael Croft, automata maker and collector. *Croft will lecture, with animation and sound, about the historical antecedents of the contemporary automata movement, then explore the world of modern day practitioners.*

Thursday, February 18, Lecture

- 5:30 p.m. “Desiring Machines.” Lecture by Jill Casid, associate professor of visual culture studies in the Department of Art History, UW–Madison. *Casid looks at extraordinary eighteenth- and nineteenth-century automata to raise ethical and political questions pertinent to biotechnology and the bounds of the human today.*

Generous local support for this exhibition has been provided by the Chazen Museum of Art Council, Hilldale Fund, Brittingham Fund, and Wisconsin Arts Board with funds from the State of Wisconsin and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Digital images of exhibitions can be found at http://www.chazen.wisc.edu/pr_pictures.asp

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The Chazen Museum of Art is open Tuesdays–Fridays 9 a.m.–5 p.m.; Saturdays and Sundays 11 a.m.–5 p.m. Admission to galleries and educational events is free. Museum Shop summer hours are 11–4 Tues.–Sun. The museum is located at 800 University Avenue on the campus of the UW–Madison and is accessible to wheelchairs from the north entrance (best reached from Park Street). Parking is available at the city of Madison’s Lake Street and Frances Street ramps. Evening and weekend parking is also available under Grainger Hall with entrance on Brooks Street between University Avenue and Johnson streets. The Chazen will provide sign language interpreters for associated programs by three-week advance request to Anne Lambert, Curator of Education, weekdays, (608) 263-4421 (voice). Information is also available by visiting our Web site at www.chazen.wisc.edu.