

WORLD SCULPTURE NEWS

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ARIES LEE



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between the observer and the watched is pushed in many directions. Everyone is left to consider why one looks, who looks at us, and how one looks at oneself.

Kate Bryan

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Barry Freedland at Sundaram Tagore Gallery

There was a time in Western art when masters strove to remove any vestiges of their physical presence in their work, aiming to allow the artwork to transcend the human realm and to exist as an autonomous, perfect thing. It may seem strange to suggest that the quest for academic realism is in any way similar to contemporary conceptual art, where the artist's physical presence as a creator is also visibly absent. The difference, of course, is that with the former traditional aesthetics and concern for materials are still very much at the heart of the creative process; whereas, in conceptual art, the hand of the artist becomes subordinate to the idea of the artwork and their hands-on skills are no longer relevant.

In many respects the work of Barry Freedland straddles the two positions. Since graduating from his undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in sculpture over 20 years ago, the American artist has been working with robotics and computer programs to make a series of machines to make his art for him. He raises questions about the notion of the artist/genius alone in his studio, who pushes the act of creation as far

as his physical skills will allow him to. In an age where some of the highest selling artists around the globe do not physically produce their artworks, Freedland asks who the real creators are.

Like Sol LeWitt's before him, Freedland's art is created essentially by instructions to another body. With LeWitt it was written instructions to curators on how to create what he envisioned. With Freedland it is computer programs in small robots that carry out his instructions, stamping patterns on sheets of paper. The inherent difference between the two, though, is that Freedland both writes the programs and builds the robots himself. The art that they make on his behalf comes from his thorough understanding and control of the process. We are left pondering whether this makes the results of such works, as in his recent exhibition entitled *Synthetic Surrogate*, more genuinely his own than, say, a studio assistant working in the style of the master, an age-old tradition.

The idea of artistic ownership and the boundaries of the creative territory are brought into sharp focus in Freedland's exhibition. Freedland always incorporates some aspect of his physical identity into the robots, such as his thumbprint or a cast of his hand, which holds the pencil making the lines. As such he is testing the threshold of how little he can actually do in the artwork whilst still incorporating a sense of his identity. One of his first autonomous 'robot artists' was programmed to stamp Freedland's thumbprint across a room. The artist did not need to

be present for the act of creation: he had preordained the results at the program-writing stage. However, his presence at the scene cannot be denied, for his unique genetic code is the basis for the artwork and the results only came about as a product of his earlier labors.

How successfully has Freedland cloned himself as an artist? Once built and programmed, the robots are self-sufficient and will carry out their instructions to draw circles or stamp patterns until their batteries run out. Freedland can send them to galleries in countries he has never even visited with instructions about where to place them on the paper and where to find the 'on' switch. The art they make on the page is then hung on the gallery wall as a Freedland original, though he may never have cast eyes on the creation.

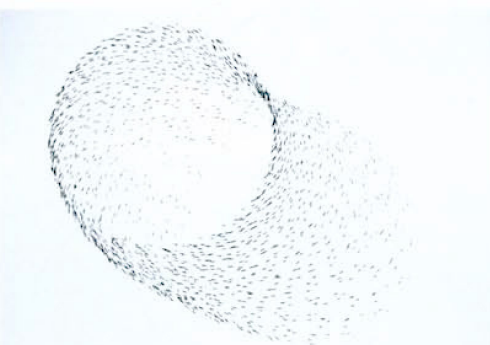
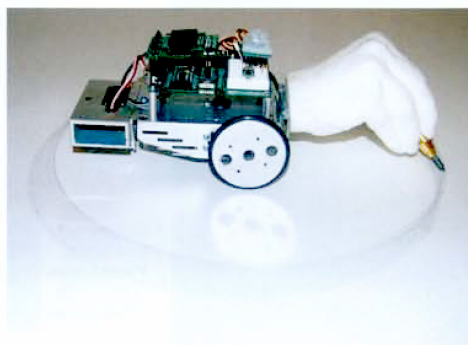
Thankfully, the process is not as clinical as it might seem. Freedland is still an artist who enjoys happy accidents in his work. When the batteries run low the robots veer off-course, making unexpected patterns and disruptions to the drawing. Ultimately, the artist cannot control everything, as is the case with more traditional artistic practice: accidents and mistakes can sometimes have great visual effect. For instance, the imprint of the wooden floorboards at the Sundaram Tagore Gallery have found their way into the artworks, as have the grey tire tracks that the robot leaves behind. Both serve to give the artworks a greater sense of depth and texture, but did not appear in Freedland's grand design. Another interesting aspect to the robots is that

they can make something that the artist physically cannot. Freedland cannot compete with their painstaking accuracy and the robots in this sense exceed his capabilities.

However, the robots are still very much at the mercy of Freedland and the artist plays with the dichotomy of control and autonomy in some of his recent pieces. Some employ motion sensors, so when the spectator walks toward the piece the robot is activated, and deactivated when they step away. In another excellent example Freedland puts two robots together, one making lines with a graphite pencil and the other programmed to erase them. Neither can ever know of the futility of their endeavors and the artist draws attention to himself as the puppet master, ultimately orchestrating the entire scene. Freedland's output is colossal and he has been developing new activities, including carving, for his robots. As soon as technology catches up, to which he will always be a servant, he aims to make a moving robot that carves with a laser, introducing a new host of robotic characters in his highly original and appealing technological performance art.

Kate Bryan

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Barry Freedland's righthand robot with a pencil in motion and a "drawing" on paper by thumbprinter robot. Images: Courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery Hong Kong.