



*Dave Pressler. The Robot Show. MOAH, Lancaster. Photo Credit Kristine Schomaker*

## The Robot Show at MOAH on view through September 26th

Museum of Art and History, Lancaster California

by Betty Ann Brown

We are all cyborgs. Our screen machines—phones and computers—have been completely integrated into our lives, our bodies and our identities. Two threshold events announcing the integration of human and machine—Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” and the Super Bowl advertisement introducing Macintosh personal computers—occurred in 1984. Since then, in spite of the growing impact of machines in our lives—or perhaps because of fears generated by such influence—many people are ambivalent about the human-machine interface. Some are adamantly technophobic.

The complex human-machine relationship is visually embodied in robots, i.e., machines capable of human-like functions that often resemble our species visually. Robots have appeared as evil entities in popular culture, from “The Day the Earth Stood Still” (from 1951) to “iRobot” more than fifty years later (2004). But they have also been portrayed as heroes (e.g., “Wall-E” from 2008). And if “The Robot Show” at the Museum of Art and History (MOAH) in Lancaster is any indication, they can also be cute, fun, and fascinating characters.

**Alex Kritselis’s** multi-panel painting is installed in the museum classroom windows, so that viewers see it as they approach the building. Entitled “Predator/Prey,” the 380 galvanized steel and plywood panels pair a running robotic man (chasing? escaping?) on the right with a second figure (imploding?) on the far left. The second figure is presented in two halves: one half falls Icarus-like through space, while the other burns in bright orange flames. Kritselis presents a narrative that interrogates the aggressor-victim interaction. Between the flanking figures is a gunboat, outlined with wire-like lines and topped by a drone. The artist augments his imagery with text. The expansive mural is glossed with graphic words: OLIGARCHY, IDOLATRY, and DISCONNECT speak to the present state of our political times. The word ROBOT announces the shared theme of the art inside.



*Alexander Kritselis. The Robot Show. MOAH, Lancaster. Photo Credit Joey Forsythe*

The centerpiece of the exhibition is **Dave Pressler's** "Idea to Object," a twenty-year retrospective in the main MOAH gallery. Pressler is an incredibly gifted painter both technically and conceptually. He is also an accomplished sculptor who translates his vision into various media, from plastic toys to large metal structures. MOAH visitors are greeted by one of Pressler's large, toy-like figures: a befuddled gray robot holding an immense pencil and wearing a tee-shirt emblazoned with "SHUT UP AND DRAW!" It is simply hysterical. A few feet away, a three-dimensional robot hangs from a cable, the black silhouette of his shape outlined on the ceiling like a dense shadow. He hovers above the largest robot in the exhibition, a large round, rusted figure that manages to be simultaneously humorous and noble. He reminds me of Tik-Tok, the rotund proto-robot from the Wizard of Oz stories. Pressler's work reminds us that the Greek word "techne," which is the root of our "technology," originally meant "craftsmanship" or, simply, "art."



*Dave Pressler. The Robot Show. MOAH, Lancaster. Photo Credit Betty Ann Brown*



*Jeff Soto. The Robot Show. MOAH, Lancaster. Photo Credit Betty Ann Brown*

**Jeff Soto** is another remarkably skilled painter. For MOAH, he has created an engaging robot world, populated by beautifully rendered and charming mechanical characters. Each Soto robot is isolated on a single sheet of white paper, its body emerging from areas of spray paint activated by graphite and chalk. (I write “his” because most of Soto’s figures are gendered with robot genitals.)



*Robert Nelson. The Robot Show. MOAH, Lancaster. Photo Credit Betty Ann Brown*

**Robert Nelson** deploys his realist “chops” to portray a surreal robot world that merges contemporary imagery with quotations from Western art history. Renaissance Madonnas, limned in grisaille (shades of gray) or royal blue, embrace robots as their predecessors embraced baby Jesus. In one, a fat turquoise house cat looks on without comment. (It is, after all, a cat.) Nelson’s smart pastiches merge past and present in dizzying delight.

**Patrick McGilligan's** tiny paintings punctuate one of the entryway walls at MOAH. Formally, they range from thin flat lines to thick impastos, but all employ McGilligan's direct "naive" style. Many of them portray robots, but others appear to be zombies or aliens. One has Frankenstein-like stitches across his icy white neck. (Mary Shelley's Frankenstein from 1818 was one of the first literary treatments of the nightmarish horrors of the combination of human and technology.) (McGilligan's Frankenstein looks a bit like Tim Curry—think "Rocky Horror"—but I'm not sure that's intentional.)



*Patrick McGilligan. The Robot Show. MOAH, Lancaster. Photo Credit Kristine Schomaker*

While Kritselis, Pressler, Soto, Nelson, and McGilligan employ overt robot imagery, some of the other artists address the human-machine interface in different ways. **Karen Hochman Brown** digitally manipulates photographs to create techno-mandalas. From one source photograph (a rather saccharine image of the sky), Hochman Brown generated a five pointed star as central mandala—the sharp facets resembling the scattered and reflected shards of a Kaleidoscope—as well as the tiny

pentagons that surround it. Her compositions are printed on fabric, hung like Asian scrolls, and adorned with laser-cut ornaments, also designed by the artist. Lovely, meditative, and elegant, they belie the stereotype of machine-based art as cold and unfeeling. Hochman Brown also exhibited a video of her mandala forms, spiraling and transmuting in hypnotic rhythms.



*Karen Hochman Brown. The Robot Show. MOAH, Lancaster. Photo Credit Betty Ann Brown*

**Chenhung Chen** weaves and crochets thickly coated cables and thin metal wires—the “innards” of robots, if you will—to create tapestry-like drapes that merge into walls. She transforms the technological into what appears to be organic; her cables and wires recall tree branches, spider webs, and blood vessels. They also resemble cotton gauze or silk chiffon, two fabrics from natural sources.

On the second floor of the museum, in what the staff calls the “Light Box,” Chen has installed a hanging sculpture that resembles a technological teardrop. (It also recalls the inimitable work of Ruth Asawa.)



*Chenhung Chen. The Robot Show. MOAH, Lancaster. Photo Credit Betty Ann Brown*

**Chris Cichocki’s** “Divisions of Land and Sea” does not at first appear to address the subject of robots, i.e., the embodiment of the human-technology relationship. Instead, it explores the interaction of nature and technology. As it happens, Donna Haraway (of “The Cyborg Manifesto” fame) writes about cyborgs as symbolic of the rupture of historic boundaries, between humans and machines—but also between the natural and the artificial. Cichocki explores this last boundary between nature and the human-made in glorious paintings, photographs, and mixed media sculptures. He covers an aloe plant with Day-Glo (i.e., artificially manufactured fluorescent paint), then illuminates it with black



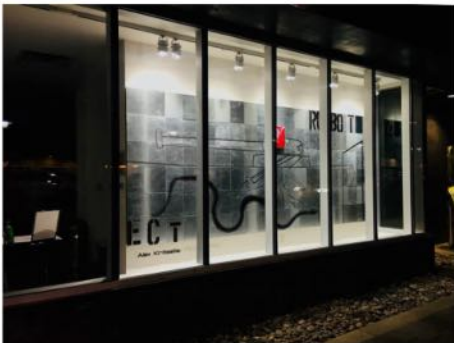


*Cristopher Cichocki. The Robot Show. MOAH, Lancaster. Photo Credit Betty Ann Brown*

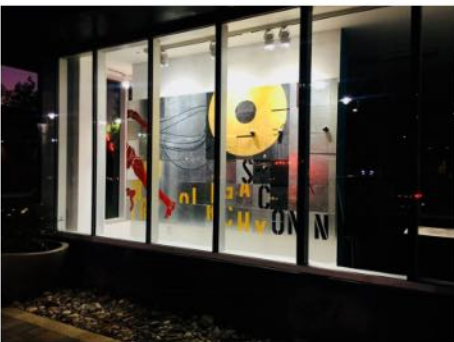
light. He creates horizontal bars of color, contrasting naturally occurring white sand and brown dirt with aniline red pigment. He juxtaposes two photographs, one of water, one of a dried lake-bed, both divided by a bright red line. Cichocki's unites the natural and the artificial in objects and images that are visually seductive but also function as cautionary tales. He reminds us that our embrace of technology is changing our planet and our individual lives in ways that are not all positive.



(<https://artandcakela.com/2018/08/20/the-robot-show-at-moah/joey-2-2/>)



(<https://artandcakela.com/2018/08/20/the-robot-show-at-moah/joey-2/>)



(<https://artandcakela.com/2018/08/20/the-robot-show-at-moah/joey-1/>)

The Robot Show at MOAH – Art and Cake



(<https://artandcakela.com/2018/08/20/the-robot-show-at-moah/alex-kritselis-1/>)



(<https://artandcakela.com/2018/08/20/the-robot-show-at-moah/alex-kritselis-5/>)



(<https://artandcakela.com/2018/08/20/the-robot-show-at-moah/alex-kritselis-6/>)