

Eros, Death + Robots: A Contemporary Art Approach of Chinese Futurism

By Fu Xiaodong

In his *On Eros: A Philosophical Apocalypse of Love*, Wang Min'an points out that the word "eros" has two meanings in Greek: one means Eros, the god of love, and the other is love for a person based on desire or lust. Love in the Freudian sense, based on sex, is an instinct of life, a force of nature that transcends history and circumstances, and all manifestations are reduced to the drive of this essential desire. Love and desire are mixed with each other, and love is the strongest internal drive perceptible to a human physical body. How is a human being defined in the animation *Alita*? The female robot warrior who only have the human brain and heart, defiant, constantly in love, wielding the hormones as a human; In contrast to the heroine, the legion of villains who possess human flesh and brain is controlled by artificial intelligence chip, rational, indifferent, and profit-oriented. Love is a device of satisfying and realizing humanity, and the pursuit and giving of love is the most basic need and attribute of human beings. Perhaps human is a biological machine with the deepest goal of "love" at its core. A subject who feels that the exercise of free will is to live for love, to live with love. Without the deepest fear brought by love, one becomes a machine, a walking corpse, like death.

Everyone has his own understanding of love, and there are tens of thousands of different objects of love. In Plato's view, to love is to love the object of beauty, the essence of beauty, the knowledge of beauty, and beauty as absolute truth. Love drives man to desire immortality, and death becomes the greatest evil. Love is the supreme good that resists death. St. Augustine believed that the goal of love is to overcome death, and that love of God is eternal love, a prerequisite for resurrection and immortality. Descartes responded to Augustine's love of God by means of the devotional love of the supremacy of the relationship between the two parties of love, and Spinoza advocated, in the Boccaccio's style, the diversity of love, the topology of love, the escape route of love, and the fulfillment of present pleasure. Love allows us fully and sensitively to experience every moment in the present, but also to face death, the great end, with trembling. Robots do not hate or love, do not die or live. They have no intrinsic drive of self. All the robot has is shutdown and restart, just statistics and probabilities. With this as the counterpart, love and death are the properties that are unique to carbon-based human life and can be held at last. As ChatGPT continues to iterate, how can we face these crucial questions, given the anxiety of being replaced by the evolution of silicon-based life, the fear of the apocalypse under agnosticism, and the growing confusion of the uncertainty of the future?

Chinese Canadian female artist Dong Chunhua's *Along Together* (2018) is a piece of performance art work that renders an emotional story of a Chinese woman living with an old robot in a foreign land, either eerily, warmly, or helplessly. Like a poster of a movie plot, and also like Hitchcock's shots, in the idyllic scenery of the beautifully alienated countryside, those suspenseful, banal and perilous shots, one after another, gradually unfold, revealing inexplicable contradictions and conflicts of human-machine coexistence. "The question of human-robot coexistence," according to Dong, "has not been adequately answered, and it is not only a profound challenge for modern civilization, but also a fundamental shift in our future." In ChatGPT's vision, this question, on the other hand, has long been clearly mapped out. How to build a community in which humans and robots coexist, how to gain the goodwill of humans, how to govern desires and unpredictable behaviors of human beings, all of these questions, in my chat with ChatGPT, have already been prepared with systematic answers and concrete executable approaches, some of which are said to be have been prepared with practical data technologies that have spent a lot of computing power. Or, this is already another reality that we will soon have to face.

With a Chinese futuristic approach, Hong Kong artist Wen Chenmin uses artificial intelligence machine learning algorithms to create *Lan Fang Reality* (2023), a myriad of historical and futuristic stacks. He fuses cultural symbols of the spiritual homeland of Southeast Asian Chinese, historical photographs (most of which are anthropological fieldwork-style image archives of the native life recorded by the Anglo-Dutch colonizers) as a database and futuristic images with each other to create another déjà vu but strange parallel spacetime. Wen experiences that the online player community tried

to create the Lan Fang Chronicles in the “Lan Fang Republic” module of the historical strategy video game Civilization V, which constructed a fictional ethnography, and provides an opportunity for the Lan Fang Republic to become a cultural imagination that will be passed down for centuries. The work consists of three parts: the iteration of portraits with anthropological investigation, the time reckoning of historical and virtual spatial scenes, and the belief in Southeast Asian folklore-style robot worship. With the super-symbol of the Other, Wen imagines the present as the past in the future, and integrates the past into the future in the present imagination, establishing a series of heterogeneous cultural symbol chains and a kind of writing, which summons familiarity in specific sentences, but is discrete in other languages.

Qiu Yue received her Ph.D. from the Central Academy of Fine Arts under the supervision of Professor Xu Bing. Her work Mud Capsule uses traditional religious statuary methods to suggest the end of the physical body and the ascension of the spirit with the exoskeletonized shell of the torso and the manifestation of the golden body of the endoskeleton. She experiences Vimalakirti Sutra and the Initiation Sutra with clay and straw mixed with hemp, and does the pressing with her hands, being aware of how many thoughts and actions are just obeying her own body. How can our dear, illusory, putrid and extremely fragile bodies be transformed into the eternal “I” of golden sanctity? Qiu Yue takes a feminine, sensitive, inward-looking and experiential approach to the conflicts and choices of the corporeal body in the age of robots. Can we find the ascending being hidden within ourself?

Du Yichen, who has a background as an architect, collects a large amount of data on gardens, landscapes and architectures, then generates the data device with the image method unique to machine. The emerging of cartographic software and graphic programs that create digital images and cyber virtual spaces have constantly refreshed the sensory experience inherent in our physical bodies in real space and natural environments. When powerful AI tools are available, is it still necessary to use them to imitate and maintain the visual experiences already available in traditional media? Or is it necessary to stimulate new possibilities of aesthetic experience that can be generated by algorithm-formed machine graphics? Is it possible to form subtle, delicate, complex, and fascinating visual experiences in machine language? Let machines be more like machines, let algorithms be more like algorithms, which wraps itself around our past and becomes our new nature.

Wang Haoyu, born after the Millennium, is one of the youngest artists in this exhibition. His work Endless Mainstay collects glass fragments from the beach that have been polished into pebbles by the sea, and simulates the constant swaying and undulating tides with a mechanical puller device. In the age of cyberpunk, we are faced with what will surely be an industrialized nature. Industrial waste, washed by nature and time, is crystalline and rounded throughout, radiant as a jewel, evolving into a new natural object. Sooner or later, we will use machines to imitate nature that has been completely lost. How can we appreciate the beauty of industrialized nature? Is it possible to produce the poetry of the unity of nature and man through the touch of memory and senses?

Tian Xiaolei is a new media artist who has been very active in recent years. His 3D animation brings together many elements such as religious mythology, art history, post-humanism, human-machine hybrid, and realistic metaphors. It is typical of Tian to use popularly known tropes to create rational and absurd scenes and metaphorical images. In his works, he establishes a landscape of a beautiful future world with the sacred worships of the East and the West, ancient and modern historical masterpieces, mutants' orgies, space crossings, and human-machine hybrids. In today's knowledge explosion, are we willing to immerse ourselves in the magnificent picture created by the virtual world and meta-universe and never wake up?

Love, Death & Robots, a collection of short films created by animators from all over the world, immediately became popular on the internet as soon as it was broadcasted by Netflix. In the age of technology, love and death are still eternal philosophical themes, and they are still a pain in everyone's heart. What will happen when robots come? The settings will change, and hence the rules. The artists in this exhibition open up new questions in this huge field with a Chinese futuristic foothold, and also give answers to them in their phased exploration in a unique way.