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Robots invade museum

EXHIBIT EXAMINES LURE - AND FEAR - OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

By **Charlie McCollum**
Mercury News

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Nothing reflects mankind's ambivalence toward technology and science more than the robot, both real and imagined.

Since the earliest tales of man creating something in his own image - the golem of Jewish folklore, the "monster" in Mary Shelley's classic "Frankenstein" - artificial life has been conceived as both friend and protector and as a foe, the fearsome machine that turns against mankind.

Latter-day popular culture is littered with iconic robotic figures: R2-D2 and C-3PO, Gort, Robby the Robot, the nameless bot from "Lost in Space," Commander Data, the "Terminator" androids, the Daleks of "Doctor Who" and the Cylons of "Battlestar Galactica."

It is this fascination with the imagery of machines working for and against man that drives "Robots: Evolution of a Cultural Icon," a new exhibit at the San Jose Museum of Art. Sprawling across most of the museum's second floor, the installation deals with a wide range of human reaction to artificial life, from the dark to the whimsical.

JoAnne Northrup, the museum's senior curator, says the genesis of the project, which runs through Oct. 19, dates back almost seven years to when some friends at Santa Clara's Innovative Robotic Solutions threw a party to show off a new robotic arm they had developed to handle silicon wafers.

"They brought everyone into this room and said, 'Hey, is everyone ready to see the robot?'" Northrup recalls. "And I looked at it and said to myself, 'What the hell is

that?' It didn't look, in my mind, like a robot should look. Intellectually, I knew robots can look like anything, but I wanted it to look like Robby the Robot.

"Then I started to think: Why is there such a huge disconnect between real robots and the way we imagine them? And I realized it was my upbringing with Robby the Robot, the robots in 'Lost in Space,' 'Star Wars' and all this cultural input - from TV, film, sci-fi in general - so I just started probing that idea."

Northrup didn't actually propose "Robots" until 2006, when the ZeroOne Festival of Art and Technology was held in San Jose.

She decided that "for the next festival," which begins in early June, "I wanted to do a show that addressed art and technology but didn't necessarily involve technological art. I wanted us to be thinking about our relationship with technology and how complicated it is.

"I thought a good conduit by which we could discuss that is robots, because people love robots. Robots would draw them in, and then what I hope they'll do is see the show and start to think about their relationship with technology."

The closer that Northrup looked at people's perceptions of mechanical creatures, the more "weird" they became, she says.

"The word robot comes from the Czech word for labor" (*robot*, which actually means forced labor), she says. "Robots are basically slaves we have created, artificial people who will never complain about how much work they're given. They just do it again and again and again.

"Toy robots have that symbolism - that they're little toy laborers - embedded in them, but we have fetishized them so that the Marxist content is almost completely removed, and we love them as objects."

As for the elements of robotics that scare us, Northrup suggests that "the dark side is playing God, creating something in your own image, and then what you've created will turn on you and teach you a lesson.

"It's a moralizing thing. And I associate that with an American viewpoint: We can't go too far with technology because it will come back and hit us."

To explore all those themes, Northrup has split the exhibit's space into three sections. The main gallery sets the overall tone of the exhibit (one piece flashes the words, "We were promised robots"). A second space deals with the dark side, reaching all the way back to "Frankenstein."

The final gallery represents the whimsical, friendly side of robots. It reflects, says Northrup, a more Japanese, Isaac Asimov ("I, Robot") view of the machine.

"The Japanese perspective is that 'no, they're our friends. They're helping us,' " she says.

Created by more than 20 artists, the images of the robots are conveyed through a wide range of mediums and styles. The most imposing is New York artist Michael Salter's "Styrobot" - a 21-foot sculpture made of polystyrene packing pieces, which dominates the main gallery. Right next to it is Los Angeles artist Michael C. McMillen's vivid tapestry of a lonely robot against a desolate landscape.

Bay Area artist Eric Joyner mixes icons in "What We Ought Not, We Do," an oil on wood panel depicting toy robots re-creating George Bellows' classic rendering of the 1923 Dempsey-Firpo fight.

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Michael Salter's 21-foot-tall "Giant Styrobot," made from... (Charlie McCollum / Mercury News)

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Gail Wight, a professor in Stanford University's Department of Art & Art History, provides some humor (and sadness) with her "Star Struck." It's a diorama showing a toy robot watching Fritz Lang's "Metropolis" - a cautionary tale of technology from the silent film era - on his little TV set.

Also featured are video-oriented installations from the late Nam June Paik, portraits of functioning robots from New York's Thomas Zummer and quilt renderings of robots from Oakland artist Lisa Solomon.

What may enchant exhibitgoers most, though, are the robots that actually interact with humans.

"Neil and Iona - Mixed Feelings," an installation from New York video game software writer and artist Jason Van Anden, features bots with artificial intelligence that allows them to react and adapt to what is going on around them.

"What I hope I've created here," Van Anden says, "is something you might experience in a two-dimensional world and have brought it into the three-dimensional world, into our world."

(Neil and Iona are benevolent bots, but still you may want to remember the words "klaatu barada nikto" - the command that halted Gort in "The Day the Earth Stood Still.")

Northrup has hopes that "Robots" - with its pop culture appeal - will attract those who don't normally visit the museum.

"The San Jose Museum of Art is right in the heart of Silicon Valley, and we want to reach out to the people who live here," she says. "Robots are something that interest people quite a lot, even if they're not into art.

"Those are the people I want to come to this show."

'Robots: Evolution of a Cultural Icon'

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Where: San Jose Museum of Art, 110 S. Market St.

When: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays

Through: Oct. 19

Admission: \$8 adults, \$5 seniors and students, \$2 off with San Jose Library card, free for museum members and children under 6.

Information: (408) 271-6840, www.sjmusart.org

Contact Charlie McCollum at cmccollum@mercurynews.com or (408) 920-5245.

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