

## Alex Pearl - Automatic Films

”He has effectively turned the machine into a proxy artist. Pearl’s productions suggest an affinity with this way of making, wherein it is not enough to simply designate the object as an artwork, to follow Duchamp in stating that ‘I CHOSE IT’, but rather one can even contract out the practice itself. As in those dystopian nightmares of the Matrix or the fears of nanotechnology, the artist has simply provided the nudge that could one day render his own role irrelevant.” Chris Clarke *Artists’ Clinic*, Cornerhouse, 2010

### Residencies

VAI, St Mary’s at the Quay, Ipswich

*Sideshow*, The Old Costume Museum, Nottingham

*There & Then*, Airspace, Stoke-on-Trent

*Inaugural Exhibition*, The Great Central, Leicester

*Trying to cope with things that aren’t human*, DCP, San Francisco

“Pearlville” *Unspooling – artists and cinema*, Cornerhouse, Manchester

The films described below are selected from an ongoing series made over the last few years. Each was made on location usually in a single day. Much like the early comedy film studios such as The Lubin Company and Vim which turned out a new film every few days, recycling sets, cast, and gags, I approach the filming by bringing lots of self powered automata and camera carrying devices into a space and letting them loose. There is also a small evolving troupe of actors, usually clockwork and battery powered automata cobbled together from bits and pieces. These creatures seldom perform as expected: breaking, failing and surprising in turn. The ensuing films are always highly local and contingent relying almost totally on whatever is to hand and the vagaries of analogue machinery.



*Automatic Film IV (Then & There)*, 06’07, 2008

Automatic Films can be viewed at the following links:

<http://www.vimeo.com/26426188>

<http://www.vimeo.com/3273521>

<http://www.vimeo.com/1047695>

## Reviews

But this is argumentation, of sorts, and it is notable that the show's most potent moment vaults right over that approach, situating itself in the haptic. Alex Pearl's videos *Automatic Film 7 (Project)* and *Automatic Film 8 (Room 547)*, both 2008, turn a camcorder on the artist's gimcrack motorised constructions: one film records an unconsummated tryst between a helium-filled balloon and a ball on a stick, while a crooner sings *Lover Come Back to Me*; the other turns an eye on bowls full of ping-pong balls on stilts, battery-powered nailbrushes flip-flopping across the studio floor and more lightweight balls rolling along jerry-built lengths of track. It would all be very Fischli & Weiss if it weren't for Pearl's domineering, jittery aesthetic, in which shaky video-*verité* footage is intercut with static, bursts of pixelation and unmatched sound. Pearl's use of video is like, say, Stevie Wonder's use of synthesisers in his early-1970s albums (or the prevalent use of electronics by young experimental musicians): instinctively humanised, expressive and liquefied, dodging around the medium's potential coldness. The videos, sometimes suggestive of a cash-strapped artificial intelligence lab, again project anthropomorphism onto unfeeling matter, dreaming in defensively comedic fashion of a relation with 'things that aren't human' – but where they strike home most strongly is on this energetically mongrelised formal level, an improvisatory language of glitch and gleeful breakdown. Here, while the phrase 'trying to cope' takes on a bright, resilient and justified cast, a hybrid representational language intersecting the natural and the artificial slides into view. ■

**MARTIN HERBERT** is a writer based in Tunbridge Wells.



*Automatic Film VII (Project),*

Filmed in a San Francisco Gallery by a number of itinerant automatic camera operators who created a sort of retro future Bmovie from found objects architecture and situations

During his residency, Pearl created a range of automata by cannibalising and splicing small electronic and wind-up devices that came to serve as camera operators and/or actors within a film produced in the space. Over the three days the artist captured and edited footage made with the automata into one film that now projects onto a screen in the space alongside the abandoned inanimate creations that form the subject of the film.

Pearl's approach to making the automata for the film is impatient and crude, the mechanics and underpinnings of his devices are left bare and exposed, his method of joining and combining is endearingly logical and simple. His creations are both unspectacular and peculiar and rarely work as intended, if at all. The failures and successes of his inventions are indiscriminately embraced, recorded and made accessible through the film.

Watching Pearl's creations on film you quickly attribute them with disturbing anthropomorphic qualities. The documentary style film is taken from the ground and shot close up by either the artist or the automata itself. Scale is drastically distorted, the miniature appearing mighty as the crudely contrived designs operate with largely unpredictable and uncontrollable behaviour. Throughout some of the film there is the sound of a brass band playing, as heard and recorded by the artist whilst conducting the residency which happened to fall on St. George's Day. This has the fantastic effect of transforming the film into a type of freak show within a sinister and twisted funfair, gifting the film an unpretentious narrative occurring only through the chance circumstances of the residency. Despite this, the film also retains a sense of comic absurdity achieved through the banality of the materials and devices used against the silly manner in which they perform actions.

Whilst the brilliantly executed film loops within the space, you are also standing in amongst the very devices that have created and/or feature in the film, now in their inanimate and corpse like state, abandoned by the artist. Seeing the animated devices filmed through his fascinating and coincidental narrative brings a sophisticated layer of intervention and control to his intentionally uncontrollable devices.

Tristan Hessing, *Sideshow*, 2006

Like J.F. Sebastian's automated companions in the film Blade Runner (Ridley Scott 1982) or the macabre mutilated and reconfigured toys of Sid Phillips in Toy Story (John Lasseter 1995), Alex Pearl creates and then uses adapted automata in the making of his 'Automatic Films'.

Each film is made in a different location in a single day simply by 'bringing lots of self powered automata and camera carrying devices into a space and letting them loose.' The artist having created his team of actors and camera crew has little control of the direction of the filming only regaining control during the cutting and editing process. Despite this lack of control the end result is an intriguing set of films that explore the nature and atmosphere of the buildings they inhabit, creating their own story line, somewhat bizarre, slightly macabre but always with a large pinch of playful humour.

Pearl is the Mike Leigh of automata art film.

Eric Rosoman 2008