Machineries of joy: Futurotic

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Futurotic manifests Ian Haig’s ongoing interest in the strange relations between the body and technology and, in particular, the peculiar and often disturbing uses people find for the gadgets that increasingly surround us at home and work. While the impetus for Futurotic arose from this interest in “looking at everyday technological items and re-thinking them, transforming them”, the specific preoccupation of this work involved the perverse sexual uses of domestic appliances. In the context of the trajectory of Haig’s work, there is something appropriate in this conjunction of, for example, vacuum cleaners and masturbation. But there is actually a vast literature devoted to the history of domestic appliances as sex devices and Haig has clearly done his homework.

Futurotic takes this inquiry further by defamiliarising the very idea of prosthetic sex. Haig’s preposterous yet vaguely functional assemblages cleverly reinterpret the idea of the sex toy as a slightly bizarre concept. The care with which he has made these objects draws attention to the artifice and craft at the heart of the sex industry. Just think of the verisimilitude of dildos—you know what I’m talking about—fake vaginas, ‘signature’ penises, prosthetic anus and the like, their deft simulation of human anatomy, abstracted from the body and endowed with the portability of any other object. The titles of Haig’s works—Afternoon Delight, Perfect Day, The Things I Love About You—are ingenious overtures to commercial erotica and their invocation of intimacy and pleasure. But you won’t find anything like The Mole, I Feel Much Better Now or No Place Like Home in Sexyland, Club X or even the Toolshed. In Haig’s hands, the conjunction of machinery and gratification brings with it extreme scenarios, as in Over the Rainbow, a “preparatory sex change device” in which the utilitarian Bamix becomes the basis of a sinister looking instrument, the sex toy of choice for the transgendered individual.

The plausibility and stylised functionality of Haig’s futurotic devices astutely draws
attention to the strange, obsessive nature of the sex industry. “I consciously drew on
this reservoir of ideas...from the sex industry to do with links between sex and
technology. The things that you can actually buy in sex shops are strange things in
themselves; so I was conscious with my works that they had to be even stranger than
that, more extreme. A lot of popular culture is actually more interesting than a lot of art,
and art needs to be aware of things that are visible in popular culture and take them
somewhere else.”

Somewhere else for Haig is an imaginary future, though still grounded in actuality, in
which the technology of sex, sex itself as technology, dismantles any remaining
boundaries between the human body and machinery. “I wanted to make these modified
household devices, which have actually been used for different kinds of masturbation,
such as the vacuum cleaner, and turn them into sex toys for some kind of super
evolved human, or...alien species.” In this sense Futurotic is a complex mix of satire,
irony and play and, at a much more profound level, dread. Haig’s work brings us back
again and again to the conviction that our interfaces with technology transform us in
ways that are not always positive, nor always foreseeable. Not that he is especially
po-faced on this point, nor in any way moralistic. On the contrary, Haig is interested in
the deeper, psychic dimension of what it means to be technologised.

“One of the other big references here was [filmmaker] David Cronenberg and his
investigation into the psychopathology of sex and technology, especially [in] Dead
Ringers with its instruments for operating on mutant women. One of the punters who
came to the stall said if Cronenberg was here he would probably whip out his gold
American Express card and buy the whole lot.”

The most dramatic aspect of Futurotic was not so much its content but its context. Why
exhibit at Sexpo? “Let’s be honest, a regular gallery is going to attract the regular
punters, pretty much, I’m kind of exhibiting to the same crowd. I wanted to avoid that
and take the work to a whole other audience, take it back into the context from which it
came.” Haig is quick to point out that Futurotic is in no way a critique of the porn
industry, but rather a temporary engagement with it, an active participation in order to
connect with a different context for his work. Given the usual ways of curating and
installing new media art Futurotic was a distinctive event. It inventively found a new,
site-specific context for the exhibition of works that admittedly suited the venue, but
which, nonetheless, were also out of place because they were not really functioning
sex toys. (Experimenta Media Arts’ Altered States exhibition of 1997 did something
similar, locating itself within the corporate context of the Interact Multimedia trade fair.)
However for Haig, this blurring of work and context created an unexpected and
pleasing confusion that actively engaged people with the art, because the site-specific
aspect of Sexpo was “as much a part of the art itself...Sexpo went off. It was the most
surreal experience I’ve ever had exhibiting work. After doing this kind of work for years,
Sexpo was the most intense response I’ve ever had...”

The overtly playful, reflexive element of Futurotic seems to have prompted people to
take the time to stop and look, ask questions and relate to the work as a kind of
dialogue with sex toy erotica. “Absolutely,” Haig says, “in fact there was a lot of
confusion there as well because the works do look vaguely realistic and I ended up
explaining quite a lot to people that they were art pieces and not functioning sex toys.
But that didn’t change the situation. They still really responded to that, to the idea that
they were art about sex toys...I tried to create tensions between fictional and non-fictional scenarios that people could actually have a stake in, like the works were props from some soon-to-be-seen science fiction film, or things that have been used in some pre-existing context, which I really liked.’’

The success of Futurotic at Sexpo has opened up a number of international exhibition opportunities. In June 2004, Haig will take Futurotic to the mecca of the sex industry, Los Angeles, for LA Erotica and in January 2005 to Las Vegas for the Adult Entertainment Exhibition. Potential buyers of the work, including the LA Museum of Erotica, have also encouraged Ian Haig that the project has been worthwhile and successful. “Well you can’t go wrong with sex. It’s the great equaliser. In some respects it does make sense that art can also deal with that as an everyday kind of thing that we experience.”


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