

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Hettie Judah, "Ian Cheng's A.I. Artwork Has Come to Seduce You," *Garage Magazine*, March 15, 2018

GARAGE



Ian Cheng's A.I. Artwork Has Come to Seduce You

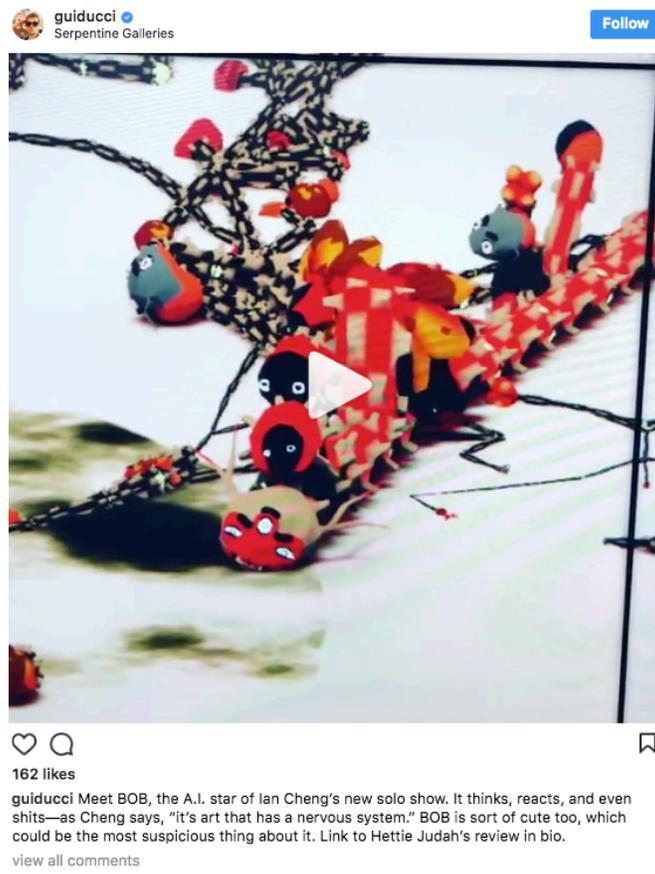
"It's not interactive art. It's art that has a nervous system." And it's nicknamed BOB.

I think I was predisposed to like BOB. BOB appears to have slunk straight out of a Studio Ghibli film—one from the more mystic end of the Hayao Miyazaki canon—an aesthetic I find particularly appealing. BOB croons occasionally, rather than speaking, and makes, as it moves, a noise somewhere between a flurry of water droplets and the reverberating echo you get dropping a pebble into a deep hole. BOB is fascinating to watch, sometimes a little gross in behavior, occasionally interested in me, but mainly

GLADSTONE GALLERY

ambivalent: coincidentally, a combination that also describes the tactics my dog deploys to keep me in a state of adoration.

BOB was “born” at London’s Serpentine Gallery a couple of weeks ago. Rather than pet proper, BOB is the latest creation from Ian Cheng, whose trilogy of self-evolving gaming simulations, *Emissaries*, will be shown at this gallery later in the spring. Six baby BOBs, pooping, moping, and making little “poc-poc” noises, emerged onto screens like so many exotic creatures in a reptile house. Its name an acronym for Bag Of Beliefs, BOB may appear to us as an animation, but is in fact an evolving artificial life form.



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Developing over a lifetime, each BOB can interact and learn from visitors—if it feels amenable—via a linked handheld device. As I made faces at the smartphone screen connecting me to a BOB, as if entertaining a small child, it grimaced back but soon cut me off—perhaps so it could metabolize all the fascinating data it had harvested, or perhaps, sadly, because it considered me of limited interest. BOB is not an entertaining performer, or much good for self-validation.

Red in color, for the most part, and led by a single "Bobhead" lording it over a host of nodes and secondary heads, BOB behaves like a coral or other colony system. Depending on its energy and evolving behavioral laws, each BOB shifts through forms that are more or less vegetable, arachnid, or carpet-like. Nodes can be cast off to decay, right down to the point where the Bobhead goes it alone and starts scooting around like a caterpillar.

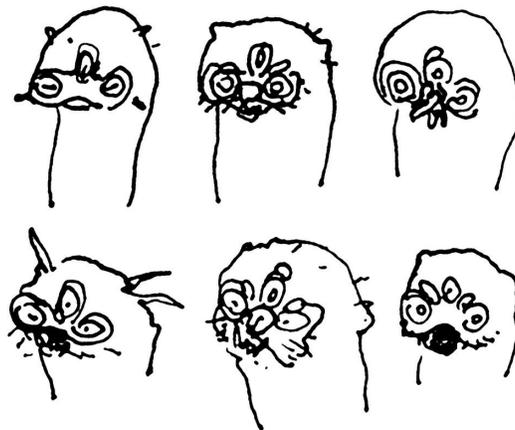


Ian Cheng, *Emissary Sunsets The Self*, 2017 Courtesy of the artist, Pilar Corrias London, Gladstone Gallery, Standard (Oslo)

GLADSTONE GALLERY

“It’s not interactive art. It’s art that has a nervous system,” Cheng explained in a conversation with curator Hans Ulrich Obrist. “The show’s spirit is grounded in wanting to create an internal nervous system for an artwork, so that the artwork may begin to live an autonomous life of its own on the same plane of existence as us.” How creepy you find this depends, first, on whether the concept of an artwork with a nervous system per se gives you the willies, and secondly, on how alarmed you are by AI in general.

Last October, the Serpentine held a twelve-hour multidisciplinary AI-themed gathering. There was a broad split between participants from the arts and those from scientific backgrounds. The artists warned the audience that AI was potentially terrifying, that robots could take over, and that it was really not a route we should go down. The scientists explained that we were already, unstoppably, going down the route of AI and that we urgently needed to face up to it because the period during which we could work out how to regulate it was running out.



BOB drawings, 2018 © Ian Cheng

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Not all discussion of AI winds up in grim dystopia—Aaron Bastani’s book *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*, to be published later this year, suggests that new technologies might provide the opportunity “to build a society beyond both capitalism and scarcity” and that “automation, rather than undermining an economy built on full employment, is instead the path to a world of liberty, luxury and happiness.” AI, in other words, could do the all the work, while future humanity gets a mani-pedi and watches reruns of *The Office*.

BOB’s entrancing ambivalence is a kind of third-way proposition: neither evidently malign nor subservient. Mesmerizing as a crackling fire or tumbling waterfall, BOB suggests the possibility of our comfortable co-existence with AI. Should we be suspicious? Much like the Shiba Inu dog that stars in Cheng’s *Emissaries*, BOB is a highly designed being carefully designed to appeal to humans. And it works. Like my fellow visitors to the Serpentine I automatically projected relatable human behavior onto BOB— sad, angry, cheeky, eager, grumpy, childlike, or sulky—just as I might have done with a cute Shiba Inu. I was predisposed to like BOB; he was programmed that way.

Ian Cheng: BOB (Bag of Beliefs) is on view at the Serpentine Gallery, London, through 22 April, then online at live.serpentinegalleries.org/ through 28 May.