

# "POST HUMAN"

Jeffrey Deitch, Los Angeles

TIM GRIFFIN

**THE BEAUTY OF OPENING** a time capsule is what we learn not about the past, but about our disarming proximity to it. Few exhibitions are so ripe for unearthing and reflection in this vein as "Post Human." Organized by Jeffrey Deitch in 1992—and enjoying a tour of international venues beginning with FAE Musée d'Art Contemporain, Pully/Lausanne, and concluding at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem—the show put forward a constellation of artists making figurative work precisely at a cultural moment when any conventional sense of "realism" was being cast into doubt. Popular experience was proving increasingly manipulable, whether through mind-altering pharmaceuticals, body-sculpting surgical procedures, or culture-hacking information technologies. And such a shifting environment, Deitch asserted in the show's bold catalogue, was "shaping . . . a new construction of what it means to be a human being"—something "conceptual," he added, as opposed to "natural." If artists were making figurative work, that renewed impulse and allure only spoke to an urgent need to process just how thoroughly ordinary life was already permeated, and recast, by artifice and invention.

Sound familiar? At the time, this premise put Deitch squarely in the pocket of a theoretical wave gathering among Futurists and select philosophical circles. Recall that Donna J. Haraway's feminist collection *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991) appeared the previous year, speculating on the apparent transposition of anthropological terms into fluid code, whether from sex into genetic engineering or from mind into artificial intelligence. In subsequent years, however, "Post Human" and its propositions have only grown in notoriety among artists, with its perspectives augmented by the discourses around post-internet art and the Anthropocene, and echoed by later efforts like Cecilia Alemani's 2022 Venice Biennale exhibition, "The Milk of Dreams," which also explored metamorphosed portrayals of the human body and psyche across historical moments of technological rupture. (In a generous nod, Alemani organized a public discussion of Deitch's show as part of the Biennale's programs.)

Revisiting "Post Human" in any capacity would therefore represent an important occasion, especially in the States (where the original trafficked by word of mouth). It is all the more illuminating given how Deitch restaged the show at his Los Angeles gallery in the fall of 2024. Working with Viola Angiolini, the gallery's senior director, he expanded the exhibition's scope by putting forward a selection of artists included



Above: Pippa Garner, *Human Prototype*, 2020, mixed media, 78 × 33 × 36". Photo: Bennet Perez. Opposite page, from top: View of "Post Human," 2024–25, Jeffrey Deitch, Los Angeles. Photo: Joshua White/JW Pictures. Paul McCarthy, *The Garden*, 1991–92, plants, motorized figures, artificial garden. Installation view, Castello di Rivoli, Turin, 1992.



in the original show amid several from generations working since. This new staging tracks the path of an idea through time, without arguing for any particular evolutionary thread. Pieces from different eras, past and present, exist on the same plane alongside one another. The futuristic conceit is even propelled by this contemporaneous sensibility. One only recognizes a changed sense of historical menace writ large given our day's rising reactionary forces against anything not adhering to the supposed norm, even while the "natural" is nowhere to be found.

Truth be told, whenever thinking about the original "Post Human," I've found myself facing an internal debate, believing wholeheartedly in the show's conceptual significance but wondering whether its theorizations were ultimately being mapped onto artists' endeavors. The various sculptures and pictures by its artists, from Maurizio Cattelan and Robert Gober to Cady Noland and Kiki Smith, had, after all, already been convincingly discussed in other artistic contexts. (It's doubtful that any of the artists themselves were consciously aiming for "posthumanism.") Then I remember that the show's first turn on "realism" was meant exactly to suggest how the outward visage of things often obscures the fact of technology's reformatting of culture. What you see is not what you get. And such works, however familiar their figures and images may seem, are themselves—from subject to substance—conditioned by these forces.

By that measure, the works here—and Deitch and Angiolini went for the heavy hitters—do not illustrate ideas so much as they seem prompts for inductive reasoning. Among artists from the first roster (some represented here by works not in the original show), there is Damien Hirst's *Nothing Is a Problem for Me*, 1992, a medicine cabinet laden with pharmaceuticals capable of recasting both moods and physiques; also included are Cindy Sherman's distended faces, whose skin seems like a synthetic substance for continual recomposition. Ashley Bickerton's fetish-like object *F.O.B.: Tied (White)*, 1993/2018, conjures the Surrealist sculptures of Hans Bellmer, with its bound folds of flesh rendering the human body a trafficable thing, while Matthew Barney's *The Jim Otto Suite*, 1991, displaces the sculptural discourse of subject-object relations with a ritualistic recasting of human form through sport and spectacle. Paul McCarthy's legendary *The Garden*, 1991–92, makes a magnificent return with mechanized mannequins copulating with an artificial forest, rendering the sex





Above, from left: Alex Israel, *Self-Portrait (Wetsuit)*, 2017, acrylic on aluminum, 55 1/2 x 24 x 18". Matthew Barney, *The Jim Otto Suite* (detail), 1991, light-reflective vinyl, prosthetic plastic locker, NFL jersey, hydraulic jack with glucose syrup, petroleum jelly, two-channel video (color, silent, indefinite running time), dimensions variable. Photo: Joshua White/JW Pictures. Below, from left: Josh Kline, *MAOI Inhibitors Can't Fix This (Elizabeth/Administrative Assistant)*, 2016, 3D-printed plaster, ink-jet ink, cyanoacrylate, foam, polyethylene bag, 23 x 28 x 39". Photo: Charles White/JW Pictures. Ashley Bickerton, *F.O.B.: Tied (White)*, 1993/2018, fiberglass, rope, steel, 75 x 40 x 33". Photo: Joshua White/JW Pictures. Opposite page: View of "Post Human," 2024–25, Jeffrey Deitch, Los Angeles. Photo: Joshua White/JW Pictures.





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drive a matter of obscene automation. Elsewhere is Charles Ray's *Family Romance*, 1993, whose hand-holding nude figures subvert any structuring of traditional family values. Particularly subtle, yet salient, is Jeff Wall's *Pair of Interiors*, 2018, a diptych whose living-room images feature uncannily similar couples, suggesting how we all represent different things to different people—and, moreover, how we present different images of ourselves in each medium we use.

In nearly all these cases, there remains a sense of the uncanny, which makes the more recent works in the restaged show noteworthy for their comparably insistent, sometimes expressionistic representation of a warped realism. The image of Pippa Garner's *Manette*, 1992/2024, is radically concrete in its dismantling of the culturally conventional human figure, whereas Garner's *Human Prototype*, 2020, seems like a sculptural Franz Marc for this era by virtue of its assemblage of human form across all axes of identity. Similarly, Cajsja von Zeipel's *Pep Talk*, 2024, is positively chimera-like in its recombination of machine and human figure, while Anicka Yi's glittering *The Sliding World*, 2024, brings together fossil and fashion in a stylized (if not genuinely decadent) fabricated relic. This sense of history collapsing is echoed by numerous more austere pieces that conjure at once themes of classicism and control, as with Frank Benson's *Human Statue (Jessie)*, 2011, and Alex Israel's *Self-Portrait (Wetsuit)*, 2017. (Each piece's precision is indebted to the use of full-body scans.) Jamian Julian-Villani's friezelike painting *Women*, 2024, offers a surreptitious turn on Marcel Duchamp and Eadweard Muybridge by featuring an ostensibly female figure with too many (and ambiguously gendered) appendages. It takes a moment—just a flicker more attention—to decipher and parse the actual image.

Most resonant for this context are pieces gravitating toward such slippages and entanglements, such as Josh Kline's video *Forever 48 (Whitney)/Citi Display Wall 46"*,

2013, and sculpture *MAOI Inhibitors Can't Fix This (Elizabeth/Administrative Assistant)*, 2016. The former features a deepfake rendering of Whitney Houston's face on an actress's body, while the latter comprises the full-body scan of an unemployed worker, part of a series predicting the range of professions that eventually will be eliminated by AI. In each case, the representation does not stand at any cool distance from our mediated world. Rather, the audience experiences the work as part of their familiar, lived space. Pierre Huyghe's *Idiom*, 2024, provides a similarly disarming experience, comprising a gold mask that recalls relics from ancient Greece, but which houses an artificial-intelligence program that generates garbled language in real time in response to sounds in the gallery, including visitors' prompts. Such works by Kline and Huyghe place the viewer on the very cusp of not knowing where they stand—something that is arguably the most realistic posture for our day.

Which brings to mind another uncanny assertion from Deitch's original catalogue essay: "Within the next thirty years the fear that we may not be able to distinguish real humans from replicants will no longer be science fiction." The observation certainly seems ready to be borne out, if the daily updates on the *New York Times* homepage regarding AI and its uses—from the corporate to the political—are any measure. The corresponding, pressing question is how the frame, and behavior, of art might be altered in turn. And if that change were ever to unfold, how would we even know? Put another way: To what degree is the post-human no longer a proposition and, as Deitch asks again here, how could art's realism be recast once more? □

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