

GREENE NAFTALI

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Paul Chan

Automa Mon Amour

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8th Floor

Greene Naftali is pleased to present Paul Chan's *Automa Mon Amour*, featuring new kinetic sculptures, models, and works on paper in the artist's seventh solo exhibition at the gallery.

From the artist:

The philosopher and polymath Gottfried Leibniz used *automa* to describe an immaterial and self-moving substance. Words such as "automation" and the like are derived from this Latin term. But whereas modern automation suggests a mindless, mechanical process—and now, increasingly, the slop from AI bots and agents—Leibniz's *automa* captures the idea that what is genuinely self-propelling and spontaneous is both mindful and spiritual in nature.

In his writings, Leibniz speculated that the soul is empowered like "a spiritual machine," since it acts and changes on its own, directing the motion and behavior of all that it comes in contact with. Leibniz was not the only philosopher who viewed the "soul" or "spirit" as mechanisms: He was just the most forward-thinking. The notion of a "ghost in the machine" is part of this intellectual legacy. As is, I would argue, the insufferable idea that the living must toil endlessly and mindlessly like machinery if they are to move through life at all.

For over ten years I have been at work on a series called the *Breathers*, which draws heavily from the contradictions born from this line of thinking. These latest *Breathers* collapse art historical differences between figuration and abstraction, positing what a work that makes no distinction between sculpture, performance, and the moving image might look like. I've described them as "clothing for spirits," and they have led me to reflect on the relationships that bind animation, senses of enlivenment, and visual art. *Automa Mon Amour* is a love letter to these questions.

At the gallery's center, five figures form a loosely circular configuration that recalls dancers or partygoers holding hands. The shape of each figure reacts to airflow differently, which creates sometimes subtle, sometimes dramatic variations in how each one can move. Mounted on the wall at eye level, *Tokener Ecstasis* behaves like a scene from a picture that has literally come alive, with the brashly colored garments custom-fit to each figure strewn across the floor—as if the performers decided to mog viewers and let it all hang out.

That idea of a "living picture" runs throughout the exhibition. Other sculptures pair single moving figures with knitted forms inspired by the work of Mike Kelley, who has been an enduring influence. In *Hex 1*, the trunk and four arm-like appendages sway like a tree from an alien planet. In *Hex 4*, the body resembles a headless figure sashaying mindlessly, as if looking for someone to pay some attention.

The *Breathers'* inherent contrast between movement and stillness is heightened in *Tokener Gradient 1*. Here five interconnected figures are aligned in a rising diagonal up the wall. Only three figures are moving; the other two are

deflated and one dangles lifelessly onto the floor, where it lays alongside electrical cords arrayed in loose patterns, like the pencil marks of a drawing. This direct linking of static figures to moving ones toys with my own assumptions about what defines a *Breather*—most explicitly in *Tokener Stasis*, where there is no movement at all.

Automa Mon Amour also features models that eventually became (or have yet to become) “living,” moving *Breathers*. Virtually all the models on display were created before 2018, to experiment with the silhouette and shape of the figures before imbuing them with the capacity for movement. They are shown here for the first time as works in their own right. Made of muslin and other cotton fabrics and installed on specially designed wall mounts, these models draw inspiration from a variety of sources: from medieval religious carvings to the figural compositions of Michelangelo and Raphael, to biological organisms and the sewn works of Louise Bourgeois.

In *Untitled (Wheel of Synth Life)*, models in various stages of development congregate in clusters that echo scenes of living and dying from second-century Buddhist murals. Directly opposite is *Untitled (Wounder in Black)*, a lone black hooded figure with a subtly twisted torso and raised arms, as if ascending or surrendering. A gash made of red thread is hand-stitched on the side of the body. This model was the basis for a number of extant *Breathers*, and was inspired by garments from early monastic communities and by Michael Brown, who was murdered by the police in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014.

Drawing has been a consistent practice in my work. Here, I’ve tried to create portraits of the invisible and nearly immaterial substance that animates the *Breathers*: air. The pleasure of making the *Breathers* comes from the radically abstract nature of the work—creating geometric shapes and curvilinear pathways that influence airflow to make figures stiffen, sway, or gesticulate. These new drawings, with their undulating lines and arrows, visualize how flow brings the *Breathers* to life.

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Paul Chan lives and works in New York. He was named a MacArthur Foundation Fellow in 2022. Solo exhibitions of his work have been held at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2022), which traveled to the Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU, Richmond (2023) and the Contemporary Art Museum, St Louis (2024); M+, Hong Kong (2023); Greene Naftali, New York (2022, 2020, 2019, 2017, 2009, 2004); Remai Modern, Saskatoon, Canada (2018); Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia (2017); Deste Foundation Project Space, Slaughterhouse, Hydra (2015); Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2015); Schaulager, Basel (2014); The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago (2009); New Museum, New York (2008); and Serpentine Gallery, London (2007). The 2014 recipient of the Hugo Boss Prize, Chan co-curated the exhibition *Artistic License: Six Takes on the Guggenheim Collection* (2019), and in 2007 he collaborated with Creative Time and The Classical Theatre of Harlem to stage a site-specific presentation of *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*.

His work is in the collections of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; Art Institute of Chicago; Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; the Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation, on permanent loan to the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York; Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, DC; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; M+, Hong Kong; Magasin III, Stockholm; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Remai Modern, Saskatoon, Canada; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Tate, London; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, among others.