

Greetings from Robot City
Naive Robot Art by Model_23
Curator's Statement

In the growing field of naive robot art, one tiny machine looms large. Model_23 did not start out as an art robot, and lacks designated art creation circuitry. Nonetheless, this robot has created a unexpected stir with its cityscape constructions that resemble a cross between computer punch cards and shoji screens. Cultivated by its owner, Model_23's oeuvre expanded into cutout figures of other robots, vehicles and aircraft, populating a "robot city" that fills an entire room. When combined with Model_23's strange habit of creating assemblage from relics of antique technology found in dusty equipment rooms, "Robot City" becomes an evocative look at the robotic experience in today's cultural landscape.

It is still a mystery as to why Model_23 started making human recognizable art. The owner (who remains anonymous) believes that the robot was damaged during a power cycle while performing translations from an older manufacturing system to a high tech line. After Model_23 was repaired, it started etching forms into walls and floors when it was not specifically on a task. Not all robots with such flaws in their programming are allowed to pursue such deviant activity. Model_23's owner at first was appalled at the reports of the robot's erratic behavior, but soon recognized that what had happened was special. Instead of erasing the programming, Model_23's owner started tasking the robot to make the work now known as robot city. When Model_23 also started assembling old bits of technology together, its owner allowed a small bridge program to be run on the robot to encourage this behavior to continue in tandem with the other.

Model_23 was not designed as a human interactive robot, and does not comment on its work. Nor does it seem to care about the attention generated. Model_23's owner comments "I let the robot do its thing because it amuses me, and I never know what the little machine will make next. Other robot owners might not agree with my repurposing of Model_23, but I'm not hurting it, or anyone else. If anything, I'm helping prove that robotic artists can be discovered and encouraged, not just manufactured. Besides, I could never afford a full programmed art unit, and Model_23 makes stuff I like."

As curator for Model_23's "Robot City", I believe that there is a growing need to understand more about naive robot art, and the complexities of its cultural positioning. Unlike human naive or outsider artists, naive robots theoretically do not have an emotional need to create something. Allowing naive robot work to enter into the world of art represents an anthropomorphic dialog that says more about a human desire for robots to reflect humanity. Many critics are still bitterly divided about the common use of robots to create art for public display, and whether even the most cleverly programmed robot actually produces art. Having worked with Model_23 and its owner to produce this show, I posit that not only can robots make art, they can make interesting art.

Critics of the nascent naive robot genre question whether Model_23 still qualifies as a naive artist since its owner installed a bridge program. My perspective on this question reflects my view that nothing intrinsic to Model_23 was changed, and could be considered analogous to prescribing high blood pressure medicine to a human. Current programming practice for bridge program insertion has less impact in the practice of robotic art than sending a naive or outsider human artist to a highly accredited art school for years of study. Model_23 remains the leader of the category.

The first time I saw the grouping of art that comprises "Greetings from Robot City" it reminded me of visiting the Smithsonian Museum of American Art as a child. There I discovered a large display that I grew up calling "The Throne Room". Years later, as my art studies were formalized, I rediscovered this work by James Hampton, who worked as a janitor in Washington DC. The work, formally titled "The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly", took Hampton 15 years or more to make, and was discovered after his death in a rented garage, and is a large installation of 180 works. Model_23's work shares in common with Hampton a use of everyday material and an obsessive edge. Where Hampton created a room full of furniture fit for his God, Model_23 creates its punch card city for us, and of course, Model_23's anonymous owner.

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