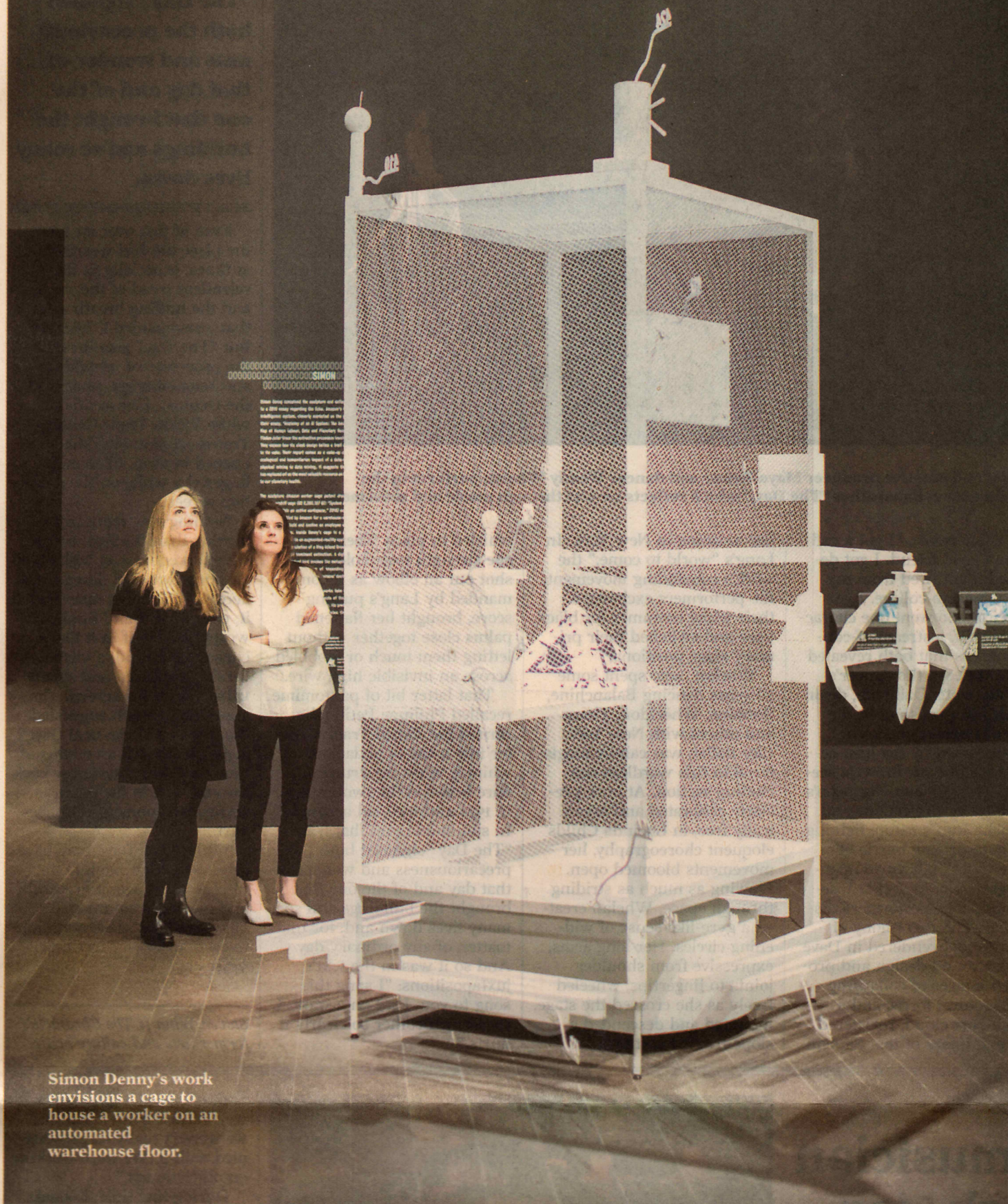


Datebook



Simon Denny's work envisions a cage to house a worker on an automated warehouse floor.

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Artificial intelligence in kaleidoscopic diversity

By Charles Desmarais

It has been billed as “the first major exhibition in the U.S. to explore the relationship between humans and intelligent machines through an artistic lens.” With “Uncanny Valley: Being Human in the Age of AI,” the de Young Museum does not merely dip a toe into those placid waters, it dives in, cannonball-style.

The show — kaleidoscopic, kinetic, noisily overwhelming — is up through Oct. 25. The most significant curatorial effort of the museum’s contemporary specialist, Claudia Schmuckli, since her appointment in 2016, it will run for eight months, pre-

De Young’s ‘Uncanny Valley’ exhibition overwhelms with spectacle of sound, screens and computers

sumably to amortize what is surely a spectacularly large budget to match its spectacular installation and all its display screens, sound systems, computers and other equipment.

If the experience of the exhibition is both visually exhilarating and intellectually stimulating, it is also a little like being seated as a dinner guest next to a voluble professor who can’t quite gauge the audience. One might feel more overcome than informed by the discussion.

The exhibition opens with “The Doors,” a psychedelic shrine that is hard to take too seriously as philosophy but is dazzling

“Uncanny” continues on E3

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Art dives into human-AI interface

"Uncanny" from page E1

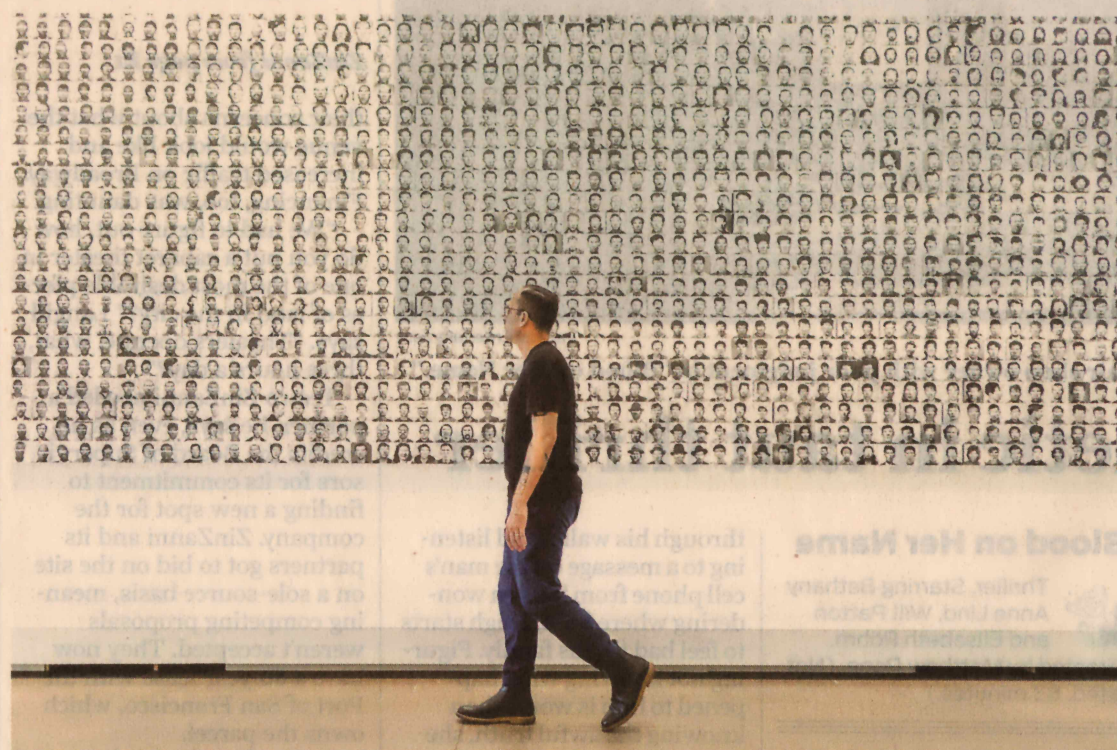
in its multi-video, emerald-green glow. Artist Zach Blas has packed the work with drug references, from Aldous Huxley's 1954 paean to mescaline, "The Doors of Perception," to lyrics by the late Jim Morrison, leader of the rock group the Doors. Abstract designs and altered video of a glistening lizard stretch across large monitors, while a sound recording of Morrison reciting the poem that earned him the nickname "Lizard King" swirls through the air. Retail containers of so-called nootropics, supplements said to enhance cognitive function, float on transparent shelves at the center of the room.

The whole thing makes about as much sense as any dream. Which is to say, you can make of it what you will, attaching meaning as it suits your frame of mind.

One particularly touching work is a selection of four interactions, plucked from a series that has been ongoing since 2014, between artist Stephanie Dinkins and a robot. "Conversations with Bina48" is presented on video monitors mounted in the museum's central atrium.

The first thing one might find remarkable about the work is that both characters are black. There is no reason there should not be a black robot, of course, but it is an infrequent enough sight that we recognize it as a choice, made by some designer — a construction in which the very concept of race itself is a category of difference.

Bina48 is short for "Break-through Intelligence via Neural Architecture, 48 exaflops per second," the show's catalog tells us. It also says, compounding the sense of TMI that imbues the entire exhibition, that Bina is the name of the lesbian robot engineer's wife. That may or may not be interesting background, but it has little to do with what works about the piece. More compelling is the playful exchange of comment and barely relevant response, the distorted echoes of gesture



Gary Sexton / Altman Siegel Gallery



Andrea Rossetti / Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

and facial expression, that bring us to the brink of the uncanny valley — a hypothetical place of emotional response to human simulation, first described some 40 years ago by Japanese engineer and religious thinker Masahiro Mori.

Works by 15 artists and collectives make up the exhibition and fall into one of two basic categories: One draws upon the history of artificial intelligence as a way to better understand its un-

derlying assumptions. The other is speculative fiction.

Trevor Paglen's new work "They Took the Faces from the Accused and the Dead ... (SD18)" fits into the first category. It consists of 3,240 identically sized photographic portraits drawn from the original primary source material for facial-recognition technology: mug shots of criminals and crime suspects.

Simon Denny, meanwhile, examined patents filed by the online retailer Amazon, set-

ting on one for a metal cage that could be used to protectively house a worker on a busy automated warehouse floor. Then he built it.

He should have stopped there, letting the "worker cage" stand as a quiet metaphor. But in another example of the exhibition's no-excess-is-too-excessive approach, he has added a feature whereby viewers can use a tablet computer to follow a virtual bird flitting about the cage. The title of the work supplies the

"Uncanny Valley: Being Human in the Age of AI": 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. Through Oct. 25. \$6-\$15; under 18, free. Included in free General Admission Saturdays for Bay Area residents. De Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, 50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive, S.F. 415-750-3600. <http://deyoung.famsf.org>

final, neo-baroque flourish: "Amazon worker cage patent drawing as virtual King Island Brown Thornbill cage (US 9,280,157 B2: 'System and method for transporting personnel within an active workspace,' 2016)."

The speculative fiction component of the exhibit is exemplified by Christopher Kulendran Thomas with Annika Kuhlmann in a technical tour de force they call "Being Human" (2019). It enlists deepfake, AI versions of pop singer Taylor Swift and well-known artist Oscar Murillo in a convoluted story of art and civil war in Sri Lanka.

Near the beginning of the exhibition, an 18-screen video ensemble is the centerpiece of "BOB (Bag of Beliefs)," a 2018-19 installation by Ian Cheng that features a goofily endearing, segmented worm-like creature. Viewers are encouraged to download an app that allows them to make "offerings" that, supposedly, BOB will choose or reject, and that will affect its/his behavior.

There is no way viewers can really know if such choices are, indeed, intelligent choices, or merely random actions, but I don't think that's the point. What counts, as with all AI — in the exhibition and in the rest of our lives — is whether the piece can get us to believe that a quasi-sentient creature is making decisions that affect us personally.

In the end, it is a matter of trust.

Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle's art critic. Email: cdesmarais@sfbchronicle.com Free weekly newsletter: <http://bit.ly/ArtguyReviews>