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Robot Dogs in Milk Row Cemetery

The most terrifying dog in literature is surely the "Hound of the Baskervilles", though it was only imaginary. A century later, we have virtual dogs--the dog-machine in the garden and home, the spacecraft, the battlefield, the lab experiment. In Kipling's "Just-So" stories, the dog's job is to make us human--to allow us to sit safely around the campfire chomping on meat, and turn grunts into language and stories, and bare instincts into thought, invention, and art.

Artist Brittnei Harvey's "robot dogs" seem to have faces, and the ability to make familiar and reassuring dog movements--such as bowing and stretching toward us, moving slowly and purposefully. Their plush wool and metal body parts invite stroking, touching, and wonder. Also, uncertain smiles, and questions: Are these sculptures functional or decorative? Are they fun toys, or serious art? Will flesh and blood dogs accept these intruders into their territory? Will they adapt to them as humans do? Will we all recognize and affirm this new "machine in the art garden" as one of us? We wonder: "Do robot dogs call for robot human owners?" "Will they invade and capture and captivate us, just as real dogs have?"

I happened to be at a mall with Brittnei recently. We were shopping for material for one of my art projects and found that there was a sale of velvet odds and ends going on. Brittnei was able to find some great material for her next series, though I became a little jittery when I noticed that most of the velvet was pale pink, light tan, brown/pink. What robot creatures are going to emerge from this haul, I wondered? Will they demand to be "one of us" and invade and trample what is left of our garden? Brittnei's strangely beautiful robot creatures appear to be "transitional objects"--neither animal nor vegetable, both real and imagined. They are art: the substance of things imagined, the evidence of things thought.

Faith Wilding, 2021