

What Pipeline presents *The First Machine*, a two-person exhibition featuring new sculptural work by Isabelle Frances McGuire and new paintings by Nolan Simon on view September 2 through October 14, 2023. The gallery has paired the contrasting figuration of these two artists to consider how modes of depiction and technology work in contemporary art.

McGuire's sculptures and installations often incorporate found-object figures that represent humans or animals. Using programming, the figures are animated, orienting them in the off-kilter realm of the Uncanny Valley. In *Robot Donkey 2*, McGuire stages a once-defunct animatronic donkey originally created for the Pioneer Zephyr train exhibition at the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry (MSI). The art deco train was a symbol of technological advancement and economic growth during the Great Depression. The Zephyr's mascot counterpart, Zeph, acted as a symbol of outdated and obsolete technologies.

At the MSI, Zeph swayed back and forth as he relayed a recorded narrative of his capture and travels in a dopey cartoon voice. Crowds of children happily rubbed his face until parts were raw and deteriorated. Now, the donkey figure is returned back to its beast of burden state by carrying a load of permanently attached speakers on its back. His voice is missing but he remains a conduit for sounds that indicate the current technological era.

For the opening of the exhibition, *Robot Donkey 2* will perform with Suicide Moi, a band featuring Isabelle Frances McGuire, Liz Vitlin, and Julian Flavin.

Nolan Simon's paintings conflate multiple forms of visual imagery using found, staged and manipulated photography as their starting point. He composes contemporary figures and objects in reference to the history of art, and uses skilled techniques to engage with, and playfully resist, the ease and promiscuity of digital image making.

Simon's new works move into a smaller scale that reflect his intimate depictions of the body. Feet, hands and torsos are cropped from their surroundings; they wear socks and underwear, robes and other notions of the boudoir, but are unprotected from further exposure to the elements. A particularly anxious image depicts hands cradling eggs while also holding lit, heavily burned-down cigarettes, the ashes at the precipice of collapse. In another painting, polished rocks balance carefully on the soles of tube-socked silicone feet that abruptly end at the ankle. It hints at new-age healing practices, but do fake feet stand to benefit from this treatment?

In Ray Bradbury's story "There Will Come Soft Rains," a space-age home continues its automated functions long after the family it belonged to has been obliterated by nuclear fallout. Similarly, Simon depicts a fragmented world as described by Baudrillard, where signs mark the absence of a reality that once may have existed but is no longer present. The pleasure of observing his virtuosity at rendering material surfaces is undermined by the temporal precarity of the scenes. His still lifes grasp at fleeting time and vainly attempt to crystalize moments long gone, reminding us that this genre of painting is better understood by its literal name, *nature morte*.