

# Dean Kenning – Little Creatures

By Martha Barratt

*Suppose, for example, that I have an idea that interests me. It is my creation. It is my creature . . . It is a little person. I love it; and I will sink myself in perfecting it.*

C.S. Peirce

Dean Kenning's kinetic sculptures are both objects of creation and creators. His crawlers pull themselves along the gallery floor, jerky, skittering and unpredictable like injured tortoises. They upset one another's movements: one seems to panic when another approaches, causing a frenzied spin, while a third looks on with both arms in the air, scandalised. Screens around the gallery share their ankle-biting perspective. Looking through their camera-eyes increases the sense that these are thinking, perceiving beings. Which, in a sense, they are. They react to their surroundings, to one another and to their visitors. This, and the elements of randomness built into their programming, means that it is practically impossible that two visitors will see the same performance from the critters. They breed new thoughts and relationships every time – they make their meaning as they travel about the gallery.

Kenning's creatures are developed over time, through a process of experimentation, frustration and devotion. Their long and loving creation is reflected by their colourful appendages, lumps of silicone foam that bring to mind the frenzied inventor or the enthusiastic DIY-er: The Merzbau or the Mole Man – energy directed intensely towards a task with no reasonable object or end. For the past sixteen months (since winning the Mark Tanner Sculpture Award in 2020/21) Kenning has built these machines from a seed of an idea; a feeling or intuition that has taken shape over multiple prototypes and versions of code, accompanied by research into biosemiotics, cybernetics and philosophies of emergence. The exhibition captures Kenning's ranging interests and approaches to making art, from the importance of diagrams in his creative

process to the uncanny dances of his limb-like "rubber plants".

The name of the touring exhibition where the crawlers will appear in public for the first time, is *Evolutionary Love* – a title taken from an essay by the philosopher and semiotician C.S Peirce. Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, Peirce's essay responds to Darwin's theory of evolution by proposing that "love" rather than "self-interest" is the force that propels the evolutionary process. Refuting Darwin's logic of survival of the fittest, Peirce argues that evolution depends upon two things: a parents' willingness to selflessly give energy to its offspring (a loving parent), and on the offspring's ability to "catch the general idea of those about it" (sensitivity or sympathy to one's environment). Kenning is drawn to this theory because of its application to thought and creativity. The development of thought, Peirce explains, is no different from the theory of evolution he sets out above. It too relies upon the spontaneous creative energy of its parent (the person thinking), and on "the power of sympathy", which he defines as "an immediate attraction for the idea itself, whose nature is divined before the mind possesses it".

Thus, without a clear end in mind, Kenning sought to grow his little, incipient, ideas into the works on show. Drawing on Peirce, the artist describes this working process in terms of "emergence and creativity, as an analogue for natural growth, but an analogue on a continuous plane with life and evolution". During the development of the robots for *Evolutionary Love*, for instance, the artist negotiated "parameters and non-calculable processes to achieve results bit by bit, often through error or unintentional

outcomes". Say the artist produced a prototype in which, by accident or chance, the legs of a creature moved at slightly different speeds. It could be either "fixed", or it could become the basis of that machine's particular nature. He describes working back and forth with robotics and creative computing collaborator Llewelyn Fernandes, on multiple versions of code and anatomy, to respond to such observations and capture a certain "nervous" energy. The specific character of the crawlers' physiology was central to this process: fine-tuning the way they move about and make decisions. Kenning focused on establishing parameters for how each automaton reacts to its environs: do they recognise small objects, moving objects, one another? How does that affect their behaviour? And how does that capture the artist's still-developing thought?

At any particular moment, each creature appears to have its own character. The four-legged robot moves with an ambling, relentless gait. Like a baby learning to walk, it sees only forwards, without accepting the limitations of its clumsy movements. Other two-legged machines drag themselves on lever-like arms. One does so slowly, stopping to look about and consider its next move. It seems a better adjusted organism than its companion, crashing and spinning unpredictably alongside it.

As well as these humanish habits, the crawlers evoke prehistoric animals – lizards and snails or crabs picking their way across a rocky seabed. They are easy to identify with and project onto, charmingly idiosyncratic and vulnerable. There is a sense that they really are trying. While we know these machines don't feel the frustration or curiosity they appear to display, we feel it for them, and maybe also feel silly for feeling it. Questions tumble from the experience of being with Kenning's sculptures: What is it like to be a robot? Do you need a nervous system to feel things? Can I empathise with a non-human entity? Can anything empathise with me?

Peirce believes that we are 'continuous' with one another because we can share the same thoughts or sensations: a belief in god, for example, or the feeling of having a body. Continuity creates sympathy. It means we can relate to one another, to the things and creatures

around us. All art depends on this continuity, to be affective or thought-provoking: if we feel icky or excited or overwhelmed by something, before we know what we think about it, we are connecting with others who have experienced the same stirrings. Kenning describes this type of sensation as "a 'pre-symbolic' affect, pure quality or nervous immediacy".

At the same time, of course, how a visitor will respond to a work of art is unpredictable. It depends on myriad contexts, of the person's life, relationships, their day so far. Take Kenning's "rubber plants". Two figures in pale silicone move about, bobbing and weaving around each other, their bodies fastened at the base into a polystyrene plinth. They recall the blow-up tube men that flail outside sports stadiums and car dealerships, but also fingers or vines, creeping down the plinth, twitching. Sculptures such as these were shown at Kenning's 2019 exhibition *Psychobotanical* at Matt's Gallery, London, where the exhibition text described them as "two synthetic plants", which "square up to each other or dirty dance for territory and perhaps for sexual dominance". To the writer of that text, John Roberts, "the overriding effect is deeply unappealing and threatening". But to another, they are more pathetic, maybe sexual, yet imbued with a cartoonish air of failure and desperation. Both readings connect the work with the human body, and, more specifically, to a relationship between two of them. For the artist, "it's very much to do with pathos, a feeling towards another, and a premonition of vitalism, of some pulsating generative impulse operative in the universe, which we recognise in a primal way. But it is pathos also in the sense of a pathetic character to these creatures". The sculpture is built to elicit these reactions and meanings, even if it cannot predict the thoughts it will inspire.

In his *Social Body Mind Maps*, Kenning interrogates the factors that produce these diverging thoughts and meanings. The maps are a form of diagramming that Kenning has developed both as a teaching tool and as part of his own practice in order to show how, "we, as desiring individuals, connect to, and are caught up in, intricate social networks of influence and possibility". The maps begin with a work of art. In

the art school studio or seminar room, Kenning invites students to draw one of their pieces. From this “mysterious object” sprout branches labelled with the forces or things that have contributed to its creation. These are divided by the artist into four initial categories: capacities (e.g. imagination, dexterity); motivations (boredom, commercial success); resources (a studio space, books and films); and organisations (school, an auction house). After thinking hard about what went into their artwork, the student is able to recognise it as something “strange”, not a straightforward reflection of themselves but a product of multiple, often unrecognised, abstract and non-conscious forces, something that can breed new ideas and meanings. As Kenning explains: “This separation from the self, which is simultaneously a complex interconnection with others and the world, enables a type of art production that doesn’t reinforce identity, but encourages the creative production of a subject”.

These maps help to explain how forms and meanings are made up of things outside of ourselves, things we share rather than things that are internal and unique to us. Kenning’s diagram *Making Sense* is a lithograph print produced to accompany the current exhibition. Although its form has evolved to serve a function somewhat different from the mind-maps Kenning makes with students, it retains a similar form and principle: a mysterious object at the centre, annotated with its stimuli, contexts and creations. At the core of the diagram is a box-like object on a trunk labelled “AFFECT”, with dials measuring levels of arousal and pleasure. It takes the form of a tree-computer. Its roots are the senses, which suck up nutrient ‘signals’ from the “ENVIRONMENT”. These pass through “interpretative filters” in the shape of what look like sieves or watering can nozzles. From the “Affect” box, cables extrude emotions as electric spaghetti – love; fear; wonder. The whole creates an experience of ‘reality’, which in turn triggers action, feeding back into the environmental-contextual soil that nurtures or perturbs the probing senses.

The diagram has a pedagogical simplicity to its form – redolent of classroom pictures of the water cycle – and the conceptual complexity of a

philosophy lecture. It helps to break down the structural nature of our feelings, even those that we find it difficult to put language to – being in a room with Kenning’s kinetic sculptures, for example. These little creatures, not yet evolved, grasp at that beginning feeling, the attraction to an idea. As Peirce argued, growth of mind is best illustrated by “the development of a philosophical idea by being put into practice”, or by “the putting of sundry thoughts into situations in which they are free to play”. Kenning’s crawlers, his rubber plants and diagrams can be seen in this way, as rockpools or playpens for ideas. In the exhibition, visitors are invited to walk among the creatures as they explore the space, to interact with them and see their environment through the eyes of these non-human beings.

The philosopher Thomas Nagel famously decided that it’s impossible to know what it’s like to be a bat. That while we can imagine ourselves doing bat things, being bat-shaped, we can’t imagine how the bat would imagine itself. With his animalistic machines, Kenning suggests that our ability to connect is not reliant on possessing someone else’s consciousness, but in achieving continuity, or sympathy with them. We cannot know what it is like to be a robot any more than we can a bat. But all three – bats, robots, ourselves – have in common the fact that “the ultimate purpose of thought, which must be the purpose of everything, is beyond their comprehension”.

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MARK TANNER  
SCULPTURE  
AWARD

Standpoint