

25 Essential AI Artworks

BY ALEX GREENBERGER
August 20, 2024

Ian Cheng, *BOB*, 2018



Ian Cheng, *BOB*, 2018.
Photo : Courtesy the artist

Each passing month seems to bring a fresh wave of anxiety about what artificial intelligence has done to artmaking. Fear arises when new image generators are unveiled, when AI-produced artworks win contests, when museums like the Museum of Modern Art exhibit pieces that involve machine learning technology.

But artists have been thinking about AI for years, since well before it became the subject of widespread talk, in fact. This list takes stock of 25 artworks that involve AI or address it. Neural networks, deep learning, chatbots, and more figure in these works, which cast a suspicious eye toward AI while also showing its many possibilities.

Some works on this list do not involve AI as we might now know it, given that they were made when machine learning methods were less readily accessible to the general public. Still, those works have the same thematic concerns as some of the newer pieces that appear here: questions about the shifting notion of originality in an increasingly digital world, and quandaries about the limits of humanity.

Many works here view AI through the lens of gender, race, sexuality, and more, laying bare the bias accompanying forms of technology that feign objectivity. As AI researcher and artist Trevor Paglen once put it, “AI is political.”

Ian Cheng, *BOB*, 2018

Many of Cheng's moving-image artworks—simulations, as he has called them—are composed of digital beings that change before viewers' eyes, creating new societies and altering their behaviors in response to one another. In 2018, having already taken evolution itself as the subject of a trio of simulations, Cheng moved on to a series of works starring BOB, an artificial life-form that looked like a red serpent whose blocky body split off in many directions.

BOB, whose name was short for Bag of Beliefs, was put through situations that could vary in real time. In many of them, BOB was subject to the whims of what Cheng called his "Congress of Demons," or creatures that would search for food and even taunt BOB, who would often die, only to regenerate anew. As BOB learned to navigate his environment, gaining strategies for how best to survive amid the threat of the demons, viewers could watch as his behavior changed. In certain cases, viewers could even control BOB using an app that would introduce new stimuli.

Cheng, who studied cognitive science as an undergraduate, said that BOB furthered his interest in how animals respond to change. In 2019 he told *ARTnews* that using AI was a means of showing that it could be "an extension of a human being, integrated into human culture." BOB looked nothing like a person, but it didn't matter—he was one of us all the same.