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Empathy

That's Amore: Max Dean at Projex-Mtl and nichola feldman-kiss's Galerie, Montréal. *Love Machine/Machine love* at Projex-Mtl Galerie, May 9 - June 17, 2007

James D. Campbell

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[See table of contents](#)

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Montréal EMPATHY

That's Amore: Max Dean and nichola feldman-kiss's *Love Machine/Machine Love*
at Projex-Mtl Galerie, Montréal. May 9 – June 17, 2007

*(In Napoli where love is King)
(When boy meets girl)
(Here's what they say)
When the moon hits your eye
Like a big-a pizza pie
That's amore
When the world seems to shine
Like you've had too much wine
That's amore*

Dean Martin

s remarkable for its formidable bravery as for its formal inventiveness, artists Max Dean and nichola feldman-kiss blew the lid off their amorous partnership in the exhibition *runaway bunny* at Projex-Mtl Galerie (which subsequently moved

from its quarters on Amherst to the Belgo Building downtown). In this remarkably affecting exhibition of digital and analogue works by two innovative artists working at the top of their form, a high level of innovativeness and hermeneutically-accessible ideas were evident from the moment one walked into the exhibition room. Here was love, intimacy, dialogue, the whole damn thing. Max Dean, our reigning czar of multimedia and machine arts, has been unravelling the skein of the myriad interrelationships that obtain between artist, artwork and observer for as long as memory serves. Living and working in Toronto, he has always sought to implicate the observer as reference pole and active participant in his work. Our status as dialogical partner to his artwork is particularly poignant in the present exhibition, which testifies as much to his Bakhtian genius for affective sculpture/

computing skills as to the truths of enduring love between two gifted artists in an art world context.

Dean's *Robotic Chair* – an apparently simple wooden chair that proceeds to fall apart and then to successfully pull itself back together into one piece, a now-quintessential Humpty-Dumpty icon of his practice that required no king's horses and men to reconstitute, only the radical ingenuity of its maker – as well as his interactive video *I snap* dovetailed neatly with all his earlier work and provided real epiphanies – and a useful introduction to the breadth of his work – for the engaged viewer. The work of Dean and feldman-kiss hooked the viewer with their measurable empathy from the get-go – and opened a window on intersubjectivity and the workings of the human heart. The juxtaposition on the wall of Dean's *Glass* and a poem by nichola effectively summed it up and said it all.

Feldman-kiss has been working at Canada's National Research Council for the last many years on her *mean body database*. In the show, *Meanbody-Classicallybound* (2003-06), a prodigious endeavour and truly remarkable compilation based on a precise numerical description of the artist's idealized naked body in the form of a 7,662-page book, literally caused jaws to drop and bibliophiles' mouths to salivate in the exhibition space. The pages in this omnibus volume contain the numerical data that describes the 203,144 triangles that define the space occupied by the body's geometry while in the standard erect posture, employed for scientific and technical study of the human body. The volume was custom-bound in pigskin to match the skin tone of the artist. In *the chimera set* (Light jet print, fluorescent light box, 42"x42" 2002-06 edition of 4), feldman-kiss comes to terms with innovative medical technologies concerning the human body and the

genesis of hybrid life forms. These composite ghost-like figures were created from two or more data sets resulting from full body scans. In *A crowd of one self* 12 miniature rapid-cast bronze figures based on a dozen three-dimensional laser scans of the artist's own body stood and squatted in their own room like Nancy Spero goddesses running amok. They pirouetted, bent and seduced us as readily and well as the woman in the lyrics "like a willow, like a fountain, she stands in the luminous air" of Leonard Cohen's song "Night Comes On" and this self-reflective sculptural narrative was at once funky, affecting – and unavoidably self-present. Counterpoint to feldman-kiss's book-work was one by Dean – his recent interactive video object, *Blinky* (2004), a wonderfully revealing self-portrait.

When viewing the exhibition, my thoughts revisited David Diamond's *The Love Machine: Building Computers that Care* which appeared in the magazine *Wired*. Diamond discussed affective computing, whose adherents believe computers should be designed to express and influence emotion in users MIT professor Rosalind Picard, in her 1997 book, *Affective Computing*, focused on the emotional equation of computers and their users. Many AI experts discount the necessity for emotional cues, believing it unnecessary for the development of intelligent machines. Max Dean, with Picard, knows better. Picard believes computers should build-in the expression and digestion of emotions from the outset. Picard argues that, lacking the capacity to understand human emotion, computers are like the autistic pizza delivery guy who says, "I remember you! You're the lady who gave me a bad tip." This is a truth Max Dean knows well.

Employing his trademark cutting-edge and startlingly original technology, consummately elegant design and interactive aesthetics, Dean's machine art is less about narcissism than empathy. In the work shown here, in collaboration with his beloved, he has executed, as she has, some of their most affecting work to date.

When the stars make you drool
Joost-a like pasta fazool
That's amore
When you dance down the street
With a cloud at your feet, you're in love
When you walk in a dream
But you know you're not dreamin', signore



'Scusami, but you see
Back in old Napoli, that's amore
(When the moon hits your eye)
(Like a big-a pizza pie, that's amore)

That's Amore, empathy and understanding care
of Max Dean and nichola feldman-kiss.

JAMES D. CAMPBELL

James D. Campbell lives and works in Montréal, and is a writer and independent curator. He is the author of over one hundred books and catalogues on art and artists and contributes regularly to art periodicals such as *ETC*, *Border Crossings* and *Canadian Art*. His most recent publication is *Channeling Ghosts: Marion Wagschal Paints the Figure* for the Plattsburg State Museum.

NOTES

¹ David Diamond wrote about MIT OpenCourseWare in *Wired* 11.09.

² *Ibid.*