

Tommy Hartung, *R.U.R. Act One*:



*The Viewer*, 2017, still from the 8-minute color HD video component of a mixed-media installation additionally comprising two closed-circuit cameras.

Tommy Hartung  
C24 GALLERY

Science fiction flourishes in the “great whirlpool periods of history,” according to Darko Suvin, a pioneering theorist of that critically disdained genre. The Czech intellectual Karel Čapek wrote during one of those traumatic times—just after the unspeakable devastation of World War I, just before the ascension of the Third Reich, and during the rise of communism (a philosophy he virulently opposed). Čapek’s 1920 play *R.U.R.: Rossum’s Universal Robots* is a drama about a cheap workforce of manufactured humanoids who murder their human creators. It’s

now best remembered for introducing the word robot, derived from the pan-Slavic word for “labor.”

Tommy Hartung is also working during a great whirlpool period of history, so it makes sense that he would turn to this early sci-fi classic as the loose inspiration for his exhibition at C24 Gallery, eponymously titled “R.U.R.” Almost a century after it was written, Čapek’s piece eerily reflects our tortured present through the anxieties that inform it: the fear of automation, the soul-crushing domination of work over life, technological progress run amok. While these concerns were also undercurrents in Hartung’s three-part, mixed-reality installation (comprising elements that slide between the virtual and the physical), he primarily, and weirdly, focuses on the least remarkable aspect of the play: its sexist depiction of women, as represented by a ditzzy robot and an Eve-like character, the latter of whom accidentally ensures the destruction of the human race.

Hartung rolls Čapek’s cruel treatment of women into a condemnation of the abuses that gave rise to the #MeToo movement. The exhibition began with R.U.R. Act One: The Viewer, 2017, an eight-minute animation that features, in a voice-over, Olympic gymnast Aly Raisman reading a statement denouncing her abuser, Dr. Larry Nassar. Two handmade doll heads were mounted on poles in front of the screen. Cameras installed in their hollowed eye sockets captured the viewer, incorporating that person into the animation—an obvious comment on the complicity of the passive spectator. The focal point of the show, R.U.R. Act Three: Silent Siege, 2018, also surveilled. A dummy partially shielded by branches stands in front of a collage-like projection, its creepily emptied eyes also fitted with cameras, absorbing and projecting the viewer’s image into the video (which the artist can manipulate remotely). The piece continues the Nassar storyline, which unfolds with an actual recording of an angry phone call from an unidentified woman accusing Nassar’s wife of knowing about the abuse. The artist then placed it alongside images and texts pertaining to real-life pedophiles and assailants with whom he’d had direct unwanted contact. These were mixed in with textual allusions to Čapek’s play.

There was nothing particularly transformative about this on-the-nose performance of “the male ally.” I would probably dismiss the project altogether if it were by the hand of a less dexterous artist. Yet, despite Hartung’s intentions, there were certain formal elements that cast an undeniable spell: disturbing little handmade puppets and their jerky movements; rhythmic patterns of

hallucinatory color; sudden peaceful footage of sky and ocean; humorous, robot-like GIFs frenetically layered on top of jittering, discordant images. A quietly entrancing moment happened in the show's second act, made up of three touch-screen monitors that the viewer could manipulate. Each displays a 360-degree video collage, partially shot in the garden of the artist's former Connecticut home. In the first (*They're Less Than Grass*, 2018), a hawk stares cautiously, curiously, into the camera, then emits a plaintive screech. The other two (*Humans are too expensive but their behavior is priceless and Imitating Nature Without Pity*, both 2018) are layered with animations of snails, ants, and hatching butterflies. As you swirled the images around, they split and fractured into whorling abstractions.

These shifting perspectives were the keenest part of the exhibition. The artworks watch the viewer watching them; they resist being completely seen; they come apart at the seams. This is another connection between Hartung and Čapek—two artists working in harrowing times, witnessing things falling apart, holding the broken pieces up to see.

—Ania Szremski