

ArtReview



“Nobody understands
what ‘performance’ is today”

Joan Jonas meets Liam Gillick

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Lucretia My Reflection (1987) by the Sisters of Mercy queues up in my mind at the sight of Survival Research Laboratories' big, nasty, overaccessorised machines at Marlborough Contemporary: "I hear the roar of a big machine / Two worlds and in between / Hot metal and methedrine..." On that note, near the entry is *Mr. Satan Head* (2007), a malevolent milled-steel visage attached to a furnace and mounted onto a reconfigured military munitions loader. *Satan's* firepower suspended, the gaping eyes and mouth loom with the threat of some pyrotechnic pagan performance.

SRL has titled the exhibition *Inconsiderate fantasies of negative acceleration characterized by sacrifices of a non-consensual nature* – a clunky, overwrought, wilfully disturbing manifesto, perhaps. The Sisters' lyrics often seem, on closer examination, rather empty, describing nothing more particular than a mood or generic apocalyptic tableau. Prior to the reveal/roar of SRL's misaligned industry, there emerges a veritable press kit in a wall of self-promotional posters at the gallery entry espousing SRL's flaws, or virtues, as it were – 'Useless Mechanical Activity', shouts one; 'A Bitter Message of Hopeless Grief', sniffs another. That SRL might, in the form of their own promotional material, attempt an end run around likely criticism of their work speaks to both the juvenility and the overwhelming character of much of it: machinery alternately clanging and wickedly inert, capable of awesome, random, arguably pointless destruction.

The principle here is machines up to no good, retooled by SRL with the heady, high drama of mechanical power. *Pitching Machine* (1999–2017) features a Lexan and steel cube into which a series of gears, armatures and power sources hurl, at speeds well over 300kph, 2x4s, which then splinter against a heavily armoured wall, and accumulate. *Pitching Machine* represents a tamed weapon into which material is mauled, and trapped, to little end other than a demonstration of power. Taming it further is a gallery setting, to say nothing of concerns for public safety – *Pitching Machine* was operated only at an inaugural event for the exhibition; within the show, the only machine actually moving (thankfully) is *Fanuc Robot Arm* (1992), in which a robot controls the panning, sweeping movement of a large television screen attached to a rotating arm. On the screen plays footage of one of SRL's demolition derbies, their machines fighting each other in a battle with no concept of victory.

Rotary Jaws with Squirrel Eyes (1987) seems to mock the magical realism implicit in the fear that machines, which we create and control, might gain sentience. The rusty teeth of a bear trap form a skewering grin, above which two glass spherical 'eyes' watch – actual dead squirrels form each eye's 'iris'. The sculpture is googly-eyed, cartoonish even, but still scary: a power supply looms at its base, suggesting that all it needs to begin its nihilistic chomp is a grounded outlet. The padded 'fingers'

of *Track Robot* (2015), though similarly powerless, beckon with a grasping touch that might quickly escalate from soft to crushing.

Lucretia continues: "...I hear empire down". In a recent interview, SRL's founder Mark Pauline states, 'As an artist, it's more exciting to think of yourself working in a super right-wing dictatorship where you can't say anything directly and everything has to be implied. Like in the old Soviet Union.' SRL's work comments on the industrial as an appendage of state power – mechanical production being the ultimate model worker, threatened annihilation the ultimate assurance of peace. This fundamental perversion forming the core of authoritarianism, whether allegorical or practical, extinguishes the soul from whatever it aspires to fully control. So what does that leave?

A YouTube clip from 2012 shows SRL's *Spine Robot* (2012–14) sluggishly, but menacingly, taunting an outdoor audience, its four-pronged claw lingering at the head of a long, coiled, snakelike 'arm'. The lateral undulation and speedy movement of snakes is still not completely understood; uncanny, it leaves an uneasy feeling in the stomach, mine at least. It's tempting to read *Spine Robot*, in its domesticated setting at Marlborough, as little more than industrial taxidermy, Frankenstein without the electricity. Lost in the threat of destruction is its beckoning: "Lucretia, my reflection, dance the ghost with me..." Aaron Horst



Fanuc Robot Arm, 1992, steel, aluminium, HD television, Fanuc RT3 robot, electronics, 234 × 183 × 152 cm. Courtesy the artist and Marlborough Contemporary, New York & London