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Roxy Paine at James Cohan

By Anna Hammond



Roxy Paine, *PMU*, 1999-2000, aluminum, stainless steel, computer, electronics, relays, custom software, acrylic, servo motors, valves, pump, precision track, glass, rubber, 110 x 157 x 176 inches

The machines in Roxy Paine's recent exhibition were programmed to operate at precise intervals of an hour or more. That's a long time to wait in a gallery if you miss the crucial moment. If you were lucky (or patient) enough, you'd hear a warning beep and see a red signal light. A wheel moved, a lid opened, a metal pipe-arm lifted and moved toward its prey: a stretched canvas vertically suspended at the back of the machine. The arm zeroed in, found its position and sprayed white paint horizontally across the surface as the canvas moved gently up and down (suggesting any number of natural metaphors). The arm retracted, and the extra paint dripped off the canvas and was funneled down into a vat for reuse in subsequent spewings in any of the 80 to 200 thickening layers of the paintings that *PMU* (*Painting Manufacturing Unit*), 1999-2000, creates. Each takes many days to complete. The machine and the mechanics are highly controlled. Paine first makes a drawing and then works with a computer programmer before building the machine. Once it's working, the artist need only attach or remove canvases from a set of hooks. Each painting is slightly different, depending on how the paint drips off of it. This is also true of the other work in the show, *Drawing Machine* (2001), in which a computer-programmed flatbed moves a tube that periodically drips ink onto thick paper that absorbs it irregularly. *PMU* and *Drawing Machine*

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are programmed to make a set number of works, and if you buy a machine, you buy the limited number of paintings or drawings it makes.

In another continuing series (not shown here) Paine casts and realistically paints such beautiful but dangerous gifts of nature as poisonous mushrooms and poppies; he installs them unnaturally on a wall or in a glass box. In these works--and in his earlier pieces of art-producing machinery, including one that cranked out "unique" plastic blobs of sculpture--the artist comments ironically on art-making either by imitating nature exactly or by making the creative process as mechanized as possible. He could have designed machines to make identical works, but cynicism fades when each work is original--not by programming but by laws of nature such as gravity or absorption, which govern chance differences.

The conceptual issues are endless, and references to Walter Benjamin, Duchamp's readymades, Ryman and Pollock abound. In the end, the work is a reminder, even if a little condescending, that the computer age still has some qualities of the Iron Age, that the hand is as much involved in making these machines as in pounding out a blade, and that however hard we try to control chaos, nature will still have its way.