

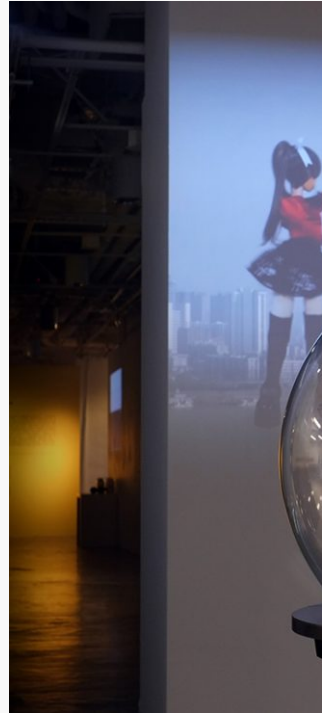
Future Femme

Art + Technology

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Elena Knox, *Waiting On You* [detail], 2016. Acrylic, resin board, gold and silver leaf, velvet, digital video, fan, industrial steel, computer parts, Dollfie. Robot by Rozen Zebetto. Photo Lindsay Webb.



Elena Knox, *Waiting On You*, 2016. Acrylic, resin board, gold and silver leaf, velvet, digital video, fan, industrial steel, computer parts, Dollfie. Robot by Rozen Zebetto. Photo Lindsay Webb. Video: Elena Knox, *Having It All*, 2016. HD video.



STEVE DOW

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Artist [Elena Knox](#) talks about sex, sexism and the future of robots.

Ursula, a character played by octogenarian Australian actor Maggie Blinco, brushes the long, lustrous hair of Actroid-F, a robot from Japan with Eurasian features and the unblemished visage of a woman in her early twenties. "I wish I could see you as you age," opines Ursula in Elena Knox's short, high-definition video, *Pathetic Fallacy*. "I won't age," Actroid-F retorts. "I will stay pretty much the same."

Humanoids are being programmed to respond to the emotions of real people. Perhaps the demand will come for robots to provide not only company, but also sexual services.

Australian artist Elena Knox, whose media arts PhD researched performativity in gynoid robots (fembots) makes art of her feminist critique imagining the consequences.



Elena Knox, *Pathetic Fallacy*, 2014. HD video and stereo sound, video still.

Knox lives in the basement of a terrace house in the inner Sydney suburb of Potts Point with artist Lindsay Webb who works on environmental design, and sound for Knox's video art. The pair split their time between Sydney and digs in Berlin, but lately the demand is coming from Asia.

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they remain at the level of high-tech puppet. Actroid is being upgraded, and Knox, who worked with the humanoid in Sydney two years ago, will be allowed to work with the new version.

"I wasn't sure I'd be able to again," Knox laughs as we sit at her wooden backyard table overlooking a magnificent Sydney skyline, while Webb takes a break from behind his computer to make us coffee. "But the level of gender critique has been welcomed, in a way."

Knox has a project lined up at Tokyo's Waseda University, where she will be looking at not only the gender politics of robots but also their intersection with sex dolls. "It is actually real, it's not just in our fantasy," says Knox. "Money from the sex industry is going into developing them, so I want to do more of a follow-the-money project."

Market forces are now in play. "The people who develop the skin [for the robots] are also developing the skin for the more highly developed sex dolls. The tactility will be the same in this particular model of robot."



Elena Knox, *Discreet Charge* [from *Gynoid Survival Kit*], 2016. Rhodium, brass, silver Photo Lindsay Webb.

In mid-2016 Knox presented her Actroid video works involving the robots at two shows in Hong Kong. She has just completed a two-month residency at K11 artist club within a shopping mall in Wuhan, China, in which she created a "survival kit" of concealable items a "gynoid prostitute" might need to "keep safe, which is going to be difficult for her/it."

So why are robots usually designed to appear female and

passive: is it something to do with the loneliness of male robot programmers?

"Oh, it's in the zeitgeist, isn't it?" replies Knox. "I've always been fascinated, before I started working with robots, with magic shows, and magic show assistants, before cinema and in vaudeville. You have these passive, robotic women, and it's nothing new. It's retro-tech... There's a really long history going back to Descartes of people trying to build mechanical brides."

Knox grew up in a small town off the NSW Central Coast. Her father builds violins and cellos and conducted the local orchestra. Her mother was a violinist. Knox had a lot of training on one of her father's cellos. "I'm probably meant to be a classical musician," she says.

Knox has been a cabaret performer, even a busker. She once performed as a magic show assistant, with the twist that, when the male magician sawed her in half, it appeared that the two parts of her body could not be reunited.

Drawing also on her own experience of how female performers can be objectified, does she think there is any overt misogyny in making robots female and passive? "Sometimes," she says. "I wouldn't say it's necessarily overt. One of the leaders of the project in Japan

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Questions of misogyny go to a dark under-layer, intersecting with prostitution and services rendered."

In another Knox video, *Canny*, Actroid-F wears red, her hair in a bow, and she sits in a Google data centre, voicing searches for game show hostesses who perform mental arithmetic. Actroid-F locates what Google and YouTube users had to say about Lily Serna, co-presenter of the SBS show *Letters and Numbers* from 2010 to 2012. "Lily Serna, astonishing dress," says Actroid-F. "Contains explicit language. Lily Serna, simply stunning. Total pervage down under."



Elena Knox, *Canny*, 2013. HD video and stereo sound, installation view, photo Maylei Hunt.

"We copied *Letters and Numbers* from a British show called *Countdown*," explains Knox, "and it had a very highly trained mathematician woman [Carol Vorderman, and later, Rachel Riley] in her outfit, presenting in the same robotic, physical way, inside the same formula. Every now and then, they say, 'Carol, over to you,' and she does this mental calculation. I thought, 'Wow! That's like a robot!'"

Knox notes that despite being the mathematician, the woman in this TV show was not driving the narrative "She's performing, like a seal," Knox say. "So I thought: I'd like to get the robot performing like this, because her mind is a computer. So I wanted to get some of the calculations these women made, and I started looking on YouTube for their performances. But all I got, in hours of searching, was piles of pervy comments. There wasn't much online about their ability. But there was so much about their boobs."

The future, it seems, may be rendered in a vaguely recognisable face, but also in gendered power structures as old as time. Elena Knox, for one, hopes she can persuade the tech-heads to rewrite the program.

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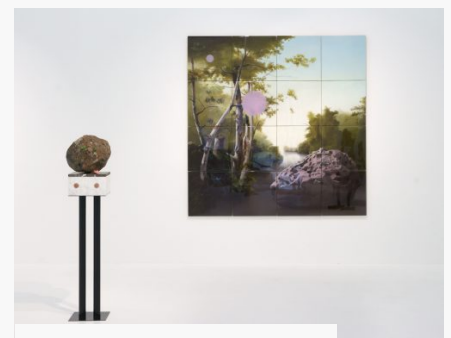
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