

Ferguson, Joe. "Straight Talk: Technology & Bees with Kelly Heaton." SciArt Magazine June 2017. <http://www.sciaartmagazine.com/straight-talk-kelly-heaton.html>

STRAIGHT TALK

Technology & Bees with Kelly Heaton

[Kelly Heaton](#) combines traditional art with electronics to explore the energy that animates natural and human-made forms. Her work investigates the widening gap between technological progress and the natural world, and questions humanity's stewardship of life on Earth.



Kelly Heaton. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Joe Ferguson, SciArt Magazine: There is a popular, simplistic notion that logical, analytical people are “left-brained” and that creative, artistic people are “right-brained.” How do these two modes of thinking come into play in your artistic process?

Kelly Heaton: My brain has no dominant “side,” which is an advantage in some ways and a nuisance in others. I’ve always wanted to be an artist, but I’ve spent a lot of my life worried that I don’t have what it takes—a “right brain” that can, when appropriate, override the so-called logical mind. Overly analytical art can be clever and amusing, but it’s never truly great. Look at any masterpiece and you will see evidence of inexplicable talent, an amazing connection with reality that can’t be captured with logic alone. Only the artistic brain can do this. That said, only the logical brain can build a smart and rigorous framework for raw expression. Without structure, the artistic brain makes an unintelligible mess. The best artists are slightly artistic brain-dominant—just enough to add that extra dose of raw experience to a clear and accessible architecture. I work really hard to overcome my controlling, logical tendencies and allow raw expression into my work. This takes courage, non-attachment, and what feels like a trace of insanity because you must be willing to destroy your work in the studio and fail when you are in public. In my opinion, the best scientists are indistinguishable from the best artists—slightly “right brain” dominant with a rigorously-trained “left brain.”



“American Resistance (Black and White Cow)” (2017). 12” x 18”. Oil painting on canvas. Image courtesy of the artist.

JF: Your work often addresses the impact of technology on human psychology. Are we on the right path with technological progress?

KH: My internet-connected computer is safely stored in the atmosphere of air conditioning, artificial light, recorded music, wireless phone access, and social media updates. I am vaccinated against disease, my water is free of pathogens, and my nutritious food is refrigerated. I can drive

my car whenever and wherever I want. As I type, my thoughts are instantly stored on a tiny wafer of sand with a design sophistication beyond my comprehension. Soon, I will press a button and these words will travel hundreds, if not thousands, of miles in a second.

In my opinion, we take technology and civil infrastructure too much for granted. We are vitally dependent on the electrical grid and its devices. Few people can build or repair electronics, especially not without access to rare minerals and sophisticated production facilities. We are losing our ability to live on Earth without technology. Combine human ignorance with environmental degradation, and our survival is in serious danger.

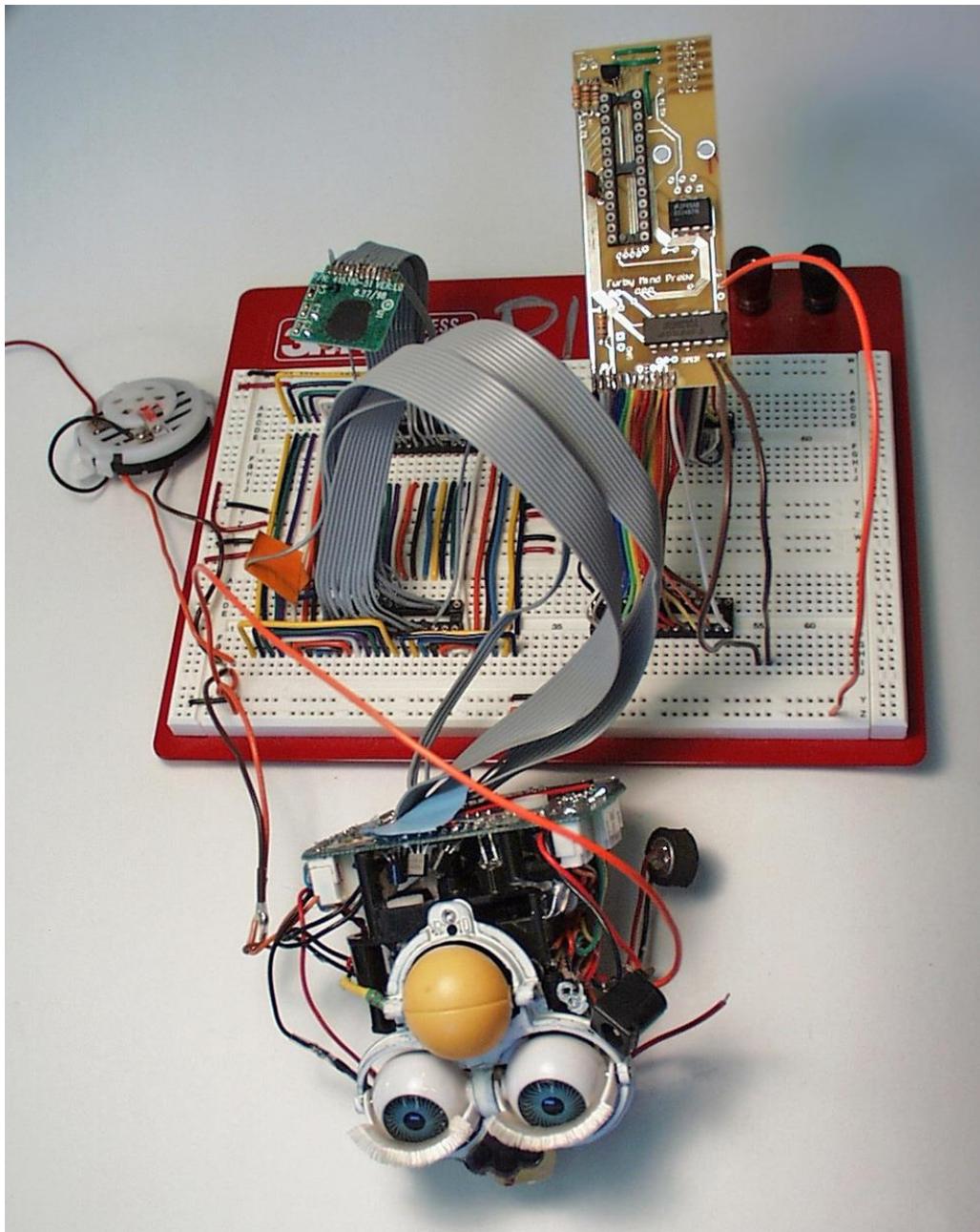


"Colony Collapse Disorder" (2015). 76" x 120" x 60". Sculpture made of steel, brass, EPS foam, polyurethane, paint, and wood platform. Image courtesy of the artist.

JF: Your work upends the black box tendency in digital design—the idea that a device, system, or object can be viewed in terms of its inputs and outputs without any knowledge of its internal workings. Is it important to understand the internal workings of the technology we interact with?

KH: It's not the engineer in me, but the biologist, philosopher, and curious child that wants to understand electronic devices. I open black boxes and pull out their guts because I wonder if machines are alive—albeit in a primitive way—like aliens or viruses. Machines are like organisms with anatomy, energy requirements, lifespan, and maybe even soul. I want to see computational devices as they really are—naked, not hidden behind human-centric interfaces. The miracle of smart machines makes me wonder about the definition of life, consciousness, and

the existence of a divine creator. Manmade electricity and electronic devices have enabled humans to tinker with all forms of life, upended our sacred beliefs, and ushered a new geologic era. That's incredible. Why wouldn't we want to understand our machine cohorts?



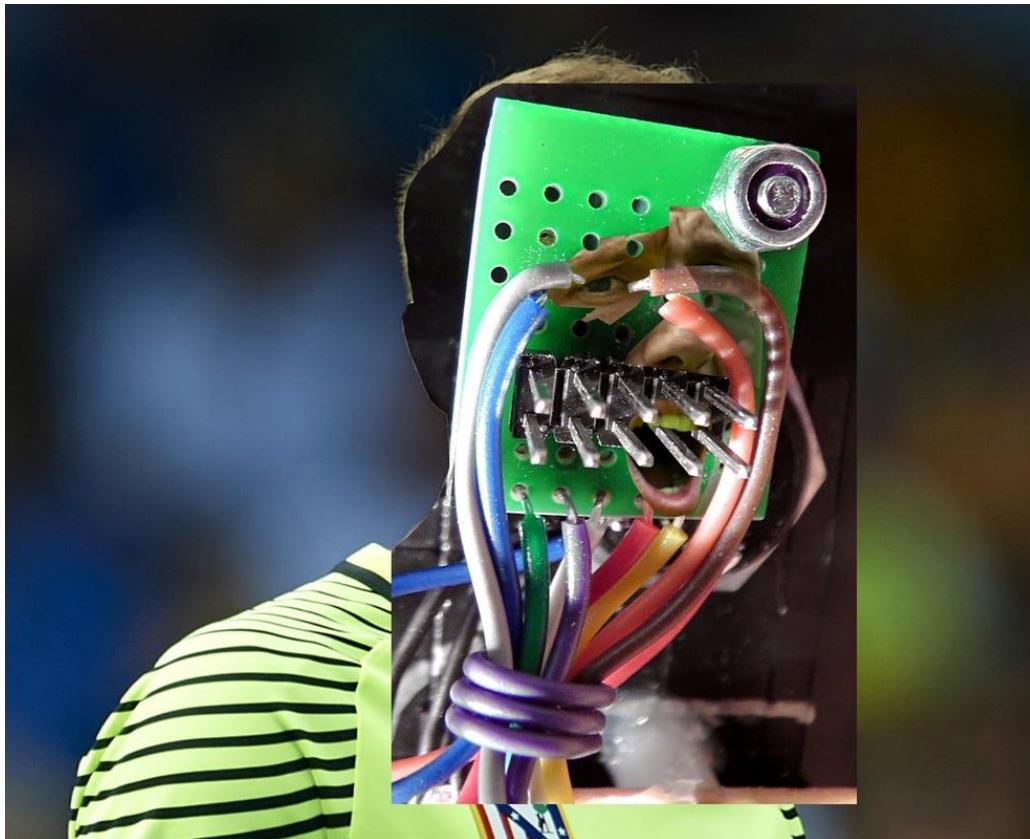
"The Furby Pixel" (2001). Artist Kelly Heaton with firmware engineer Steven Gray. Furby(TM) toy modified with custom electronics, as used to create "The Pool" and "Where Am I?" for Heaton's installation, "Reflection Loop" (2001). Image courtesy of the artist.

JF: Advances in technology and science are often viewed in a linear fashion—a particular discovery leads to a particular response or outcome. Since your work addresses technology, would you say it has similarly progressed, or have you followed a different path?

KH: I've followed a different path. I use whatever media interests me—and that I can afford. I

don't really care about science and technology, per se. I care about contemporary psychology, spirituality, culture, and the Earth's environment. I address technology in my work because our civilization and planet are profoundly affected by it. How can I possibly ignore it?

I should add that electricity is an obsession of mine because it is the magical spark in all life. I especially love old analog electronic components. They are simple, symbolic, and full of personality. I sometimes build functioning circuits into my art, but I am currently focused on painting my beloved electronic *characters* because real circuitry doesn't convey my meaning—not at the moment, anyway.



"Digital Man" (2017). 18" x 22". Digital photo collage (sketch for a painting). Image courtesy of the artist.

JF: Has technological development driven your tendency to work in different styles and mediums?

KH: In 1997, I entered a Master of Fine Arts program at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. I had every intention to be a traditional painter or sculptor, dealing with electrical phenomena as a subject, but I got frustrated with my studies. A friend suggested that I switch from art school to the Media Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—an idea that I found intriguing but outrageous considering my lack of technical education. One thing led to another and I did, in fact, end up at the MIT Media Lab. I think I was a tech-boom experiment in how an artist can inspire a bunch of engineers. I was so unprepared for my classes, it was laughable—nothing short of hallucinatory terror. Nearly two decades later, I am still trying to process my MIT education.

One other note—I don't currently have access to cutting edge shop equipment. So while I continue to work with themes of science and technology, I have returned to artistic media that is available to me in rural Virginia.



"The Beekeeper" (2015). 143" x 67" x 67". Sculpture made of brass, steel, wood, cast epoxy resin, raw pigment, ceramic, paint, electronics. Image courtesy of the artist.

JF: Your work crosses several genres, including poetry.

KH: I wrote a poem for my [Reflection Loop](#) show in 2001. It's pseudocode that describes the psychological condition of the Furbies who I reprogrammed to create *Where Am I?* and *The Pool*.

JF: Your book, [Pollination](#), addresses technical obsolescence and biological mortality. Tell us about that.

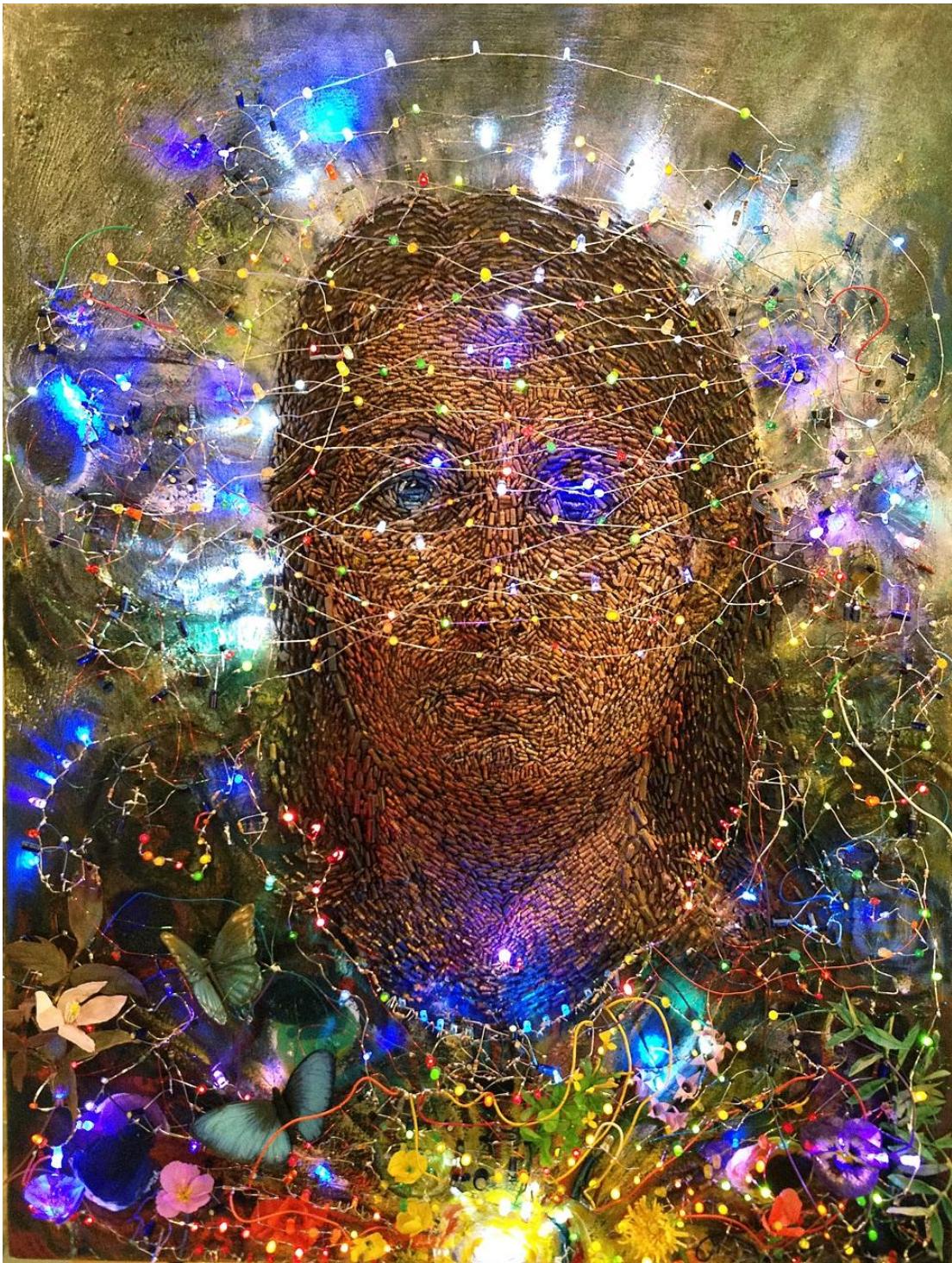
KH: Like us, machines die. They wear out even faster than we do. Factory parts go out of production in a matter of decades. Dead computers are mysterious boxes with one glass face, a

battery, fiberglass boards with strange appendages, wires, and maybe an alphanumeric tablet. Pity future archeologists—there is no telling what an ancient computer did when it was alive. With lost technologies, important aspects of our civilization will vanish along with our data artifacts and electronic tools. Our society's greatest achievements are dependent on an essentially continuous supply of manmade electricity. What happens when the grid goes dark, even for a mere century? Think of the wonders described in the Hindu Vedas: flying ships and weapons of mass destruction. Are these fictional or technologies that lack present-day evidence?

The human-electronic symbiosis poses other dangers besides archiving our legacy. As we become increasingly dependent upon technology, people are distanced from nature and prone to environmental abuse. Moreover, millions or billions of people will die if the electronic grid fails even temporarily.



"Diseases of the Hive (Ear Mites)" (2015). 13" x 20". Archival inkjet print, edition of 10. Image courtesy of the artist.



"Resisto Ergo Sum" (2005 - 2012). 39" x 31" x 5.5". Oil paint, custom electronics, and collage on canvas. Image courtesy of the artist.

JF: You created a fragrance for *Pollination*.

KH: I am a self-taught perfumer. It's an art and science, too. I created a conceptual perfume for [Pollination](#) and I founded a [company](#) to sell perfumes that just plain smell good.

JF: Conventional artistic criticism often suffers from genrefication—the process or idea of classifying music, film, literature, or other such mediums into specific genres or categories. Art inspired by science—SciArt—is often relegated to artistic ghettos or thought to be of interest to a limited audience. Do you feel your art—or any art—should be classified into a specific genre?

KH: We are all connected in a universal experience, and great art speaks to this common truth regardless of medium. Science is just another medium—or subject—that happens to be extremely demanding because it requires the artist to master at least two disciplines.

Why is *SciArt* relegated to a ghetto? A lot of bad art is made by scientists who don't know art theory or history. This ruffles feathers in the art community. Also, art enthusiasts rarely know or care much about science, and I don't see that changing. A professor of mine once said that, at the core, all great art is about the following three topics—birth, sex, and death. These subjects are all that people really care about. So it's my chosen task to figure out why I really care about science and convey my meaning to an audience of humanists. My challenge is no different than any *avant-garde* artist. It takes originality, clarity, universality, and persistence to touch people no matter what media you employ.



"Study for an Electronic Sculpture Garden" (2015). "17" x 24". Archival inkjet photo collage, glue. Image courtesy of the artist.

JF: What challenges do you face as an artist working with science and technology?

KH: I know *starving artist* is a cliche, but it's an ongoing problem, especially for artists who

work with science. Combining science and art requires education, access to research, and expensive equipment. I gave up a lot of opportunities when I moved to rural Virginia, but still, I am amazed by how little funding exists for artists in America. Financial survival is even harder for artists who work with science for reasons that we have discussed previously. We need more collectors and grant programs to support living artists in this country. A huge amount of wealth is invested in a small quantity of art, most of it created by dead artists. I would love to see an American foundation for the support of living artist who work with science.

JF: What direction has your work taken lately? What's on the horizon?

KH: For the past year, I've been making digital images and painting them. I want to merge people and electronics, to create timely portraits of humankind as we exist in symbioses with machines. We created machines—at least members of our species did—and now our machines are co-creating us. *Have we evolved beyond nature?* My portraits are principally concerned with the human condition, notably psychology, spirituality, politics, and the environment of the Anthropocene. I recently painted three such portraits of Trump, Putin, and Clinton. The group exhibition in which my new paintings will appear is called *Art on the Front Lines*. The show runs May 24 - August 19 at [Ronald Feldman Fine Arts](#), 31 Mercer St. NYC.



CITY SIGHTS: Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

9/18/2015 By Julia Buntaine, Editor-in-Chief

CITY SIGHTS: Finding the science-art in New York area art exhibitions

By Julia Buntaine, Editor-in-Chief

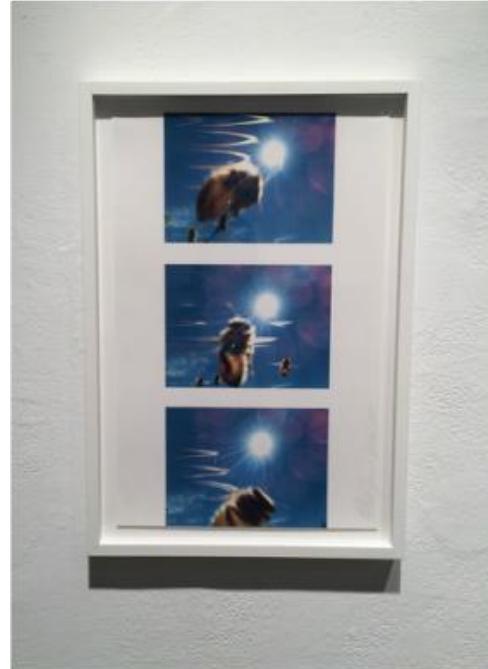
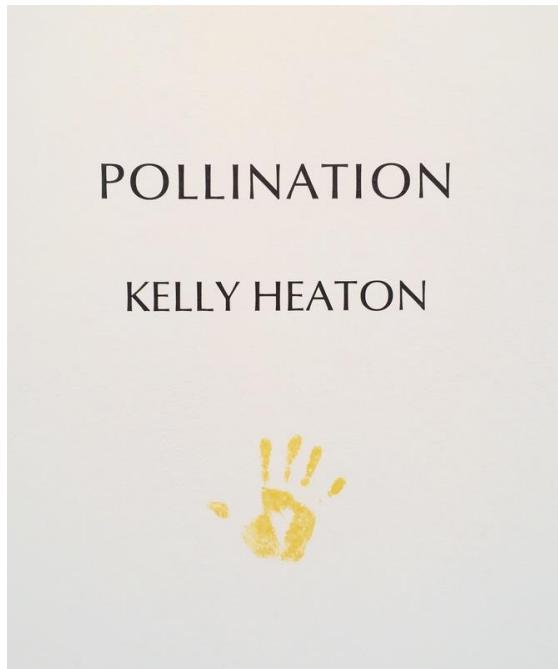
Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

Manhattan

"Pollination," a solo exhibition by Kelly Heaton



Artist Kelly Heaton, wielding a BA from Yale and MS from MIT, merges science, art, and spirituality in this solo exhibition on view until October 24th. Playful yet thoughtful, her pieces have a delightful complexity that begs the viewer to spend a little bit longer looking than many gallery show works. Touching upon themes including colony collapse disorder, the anthropocene, and how technology has infested the human life like a disease, the gallery buzzes, hisses, and whirs from the kinetic mechanisms embedded in many of the works. Tying together the entire generous space of the gallery is yellow 'pollen' piled in the corner here, and on the radiator over there, elevating the show above a typical hung-on-the-wall or arranged-on-the-floor aesthetic into one that like bees, and disease, is a bit more invasive.



Visit this show at 31 Mercer Street, New York NY
www.feldmangallery.com

All photos taken by Julia Buntaine.

The Honeybee as Artistic Messenger

by [Allison Meier](#) on October 19, 2015



Installation view of 'Kelly Heaton: Pollination' at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless noted)

In 2013, artist [Kelly Heaton](#) had a vision of a magnificent bee appearing in the darkness, illuminated by an iridescent aura. Over the next few years, she explored bees from every angle, learning beekeeping, building kinetic sculptures based on hive behavior, crafting perfumes from bee-friendly flowers, and painting an interpretation of that initial insect manifestation. Her multifaceted approach to bees and how they can reflect everything from fertility to technology is on view in [Kelly Heaton: Pollination](#) at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.



Kelly Heaton, "Shamanic Bee" (2013–15), pastel, ink, and acrylic on paper (photo by Casey Dorobek, courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York) (click to enlarge)

Heaton explains in an [accompanying catalogue](#):

I am an artist because I am actively pollinated by the spirit world. Without this, I would have nothing of merit to show you. *Pollination* is not about bees per se, but about a fertile exchange in which supernatural fertility is a priori.

Accordingly, *Pollination* hovers across media and themes, but the highlight is the huge sculpture, "The Beekeeper" (2015), that dominates the first of two galleries. In it, a sun made of white hands looms over an illuminated hive orbited by robotic bees, representing the energetic hub of the exhibition, as well as something of a self-portrait with various "[chakras](#)" contained in the hive. Nearby, the "Emergency Queen Cell" (2014) shows an inverted outline of the Virgin Mary oozing below a hive, referencing the chaos of a colony when it loses its queen. Opposite, the more abstract "Colony Collapse Disorder" (2015) features a larger-than-life bee and electric transistor, responding to a bee colony in disarray. Other works feel more like experiments than completed ideas, such as "Pollen Nation" (2015), a beekeeping frame, and a crossword puzzle charting endangered pollinators.

The precarious balance of hive colonies and the influence of technology (which may be contributing to [the disappearance](#) of honeybees) are ideas also evoked in "Kinetic Studies of Bees" (2013–15). The kinetic bee sculptures activate when viewers come close, inspired by the way honeybees hover at hives when they're newcomers or learning foraging. Then there's a whole wall of perfume, some made from flowers like

thistle, mint, and goldenrod, another from dollar bills. Packed into two galleries, it's a lot to take in, but *Pollinationbuzzes* with energy and encourages a closer consideration of the humble honeybee as messenger, bearing not only Heaton's initial vision but also a bridge between science and art.



Kelly Heaton, "Colony Collapse Disorder" (2015), a sculptural interpretation of a stressed hive



Kelly Heaton, "Emergency Queen Cell" (2014)



Kelly Heaton, "The Beekeeper" (2015)



Kelly Heaton, "Pollen Nation" (2015), a beekeeping frame in the shape of the United States



Kelly Heaton, "Study of Bumblebees" (2013)



Installation view of 'Kelly Heaton: Pollination'

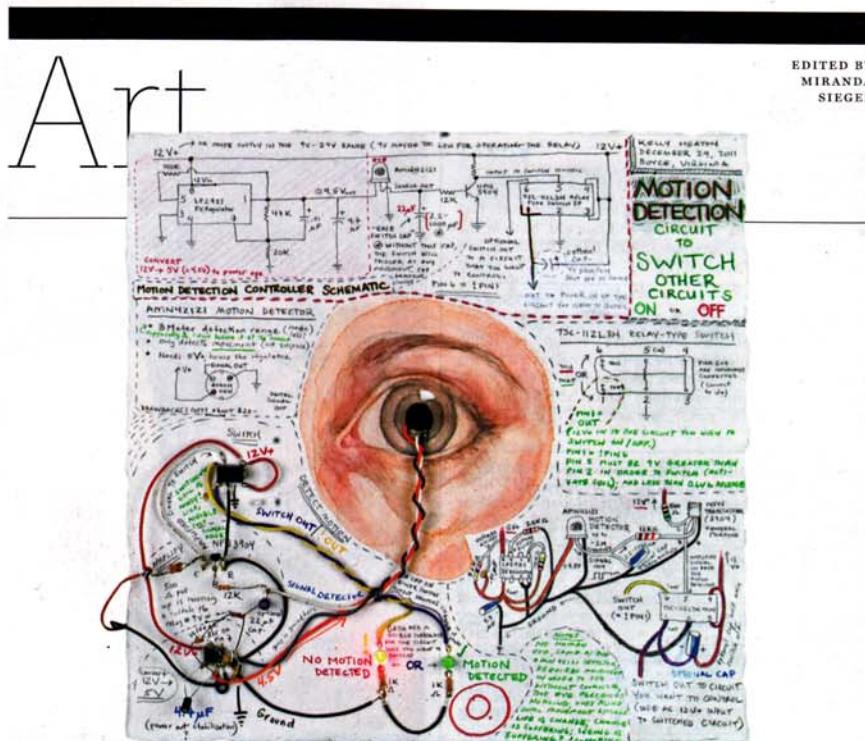


Kelly Heaton, "Bee the Flower" (2015), human pollination kit



Kelly Heaton, "Smells like Weeds (The Queen of Hungry Spirits)" (2015), a bespoke perfume for pollinators

[Kelly Heaton: Pollination](#) continues at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts (31 Mercer Street, Soho, Manhattan) through October 24.



EDITED BY
MIRANDA
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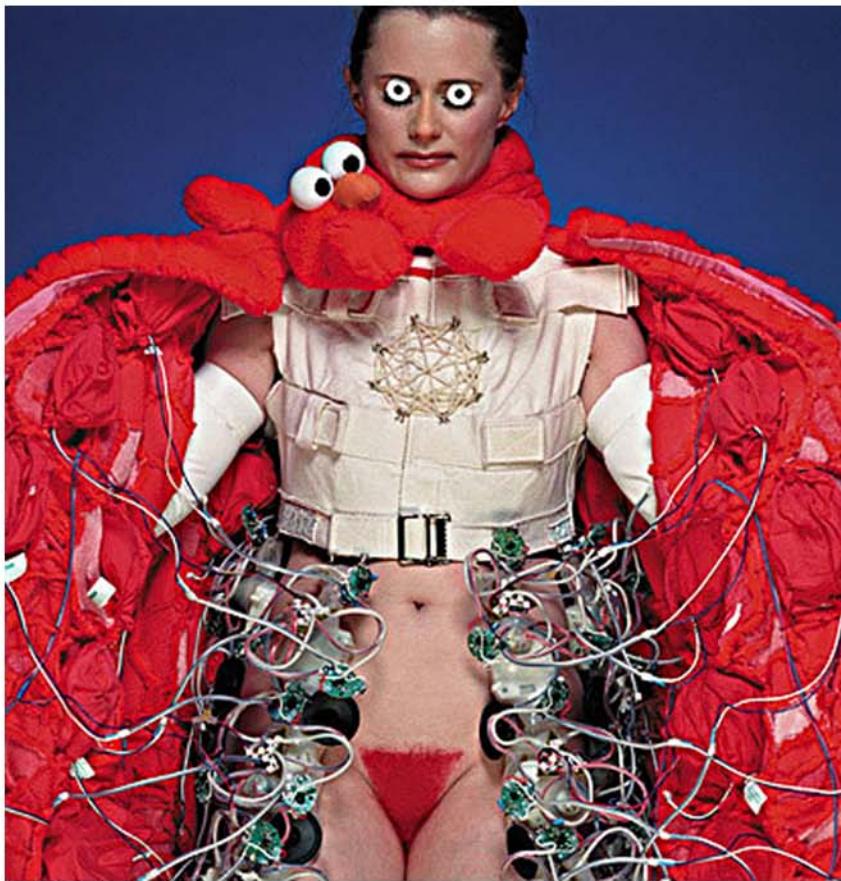
CIRCUITS ARTS Sculptor, seer, scientist, spiritualist Kelly Heaton allows us to glimpse the ghost in the machine. In "The Parallel Series," numerous small-scale, intricately wired wall-mounted abstract tangles generate sounds of the world: chirps, insect calls, rainfall, a beating heart. Mixing this with strange drawings of trees, portraits with lights and odd notations, piles of transistors and transformers, and a possessed mad-hatter intention, Heaton replicates the world while seeming to tap into the cosmic mainframe. Conjuring objects that have life but that are built to die one day makes her cryptic work akin to witnessing engineered Emily Dickinson poems come to life (at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts through October 27).

JERRY SALTZ

Haende, Anitra. "Kelly Heaton's Live Pelt." *NY Arts* (November-December 2003) <http://nyartsmagazine.com/bbs2/messages/1402.html>.

Kelly Heaton's Live Pelt

By Anitra Haende



Threads of Consciousness: Kelly Heaton's Live Pelt at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

"Letter to Mr. Furman:

We ambassadors of the wild agree that the scientific craft of fur men is noble, yet not so noble that it will ever change our animal birthright...if once we were skunk as "animal"we are still skunk as "fur"... no triumph of the industrial man shall ever take [this title] from us - this is our Inalienable Right."

-excerpt from The Live Pelt Files

Kelly Heaton describes her multi-media installation Live Pelt as a documentary of contemporary American culture, tracking our progression through new media with the scent of times past." Fascinated by the American obsession for the Tickle-Me-Elmo doll, she investigates as a scientist (with a Masters from MIT and a MFA from Tufts), and uses humor to embrace the horror of transformations an animal/human moves through. With the historic American fur trade as precedent, Live Pelt explores humanity via a red thread that may run through us all - unseen yet always present, like the threads that piece our clothing together.

Heaton's portrait of a woman with closed eyes, wearing an Elmo fur coat (the exhibition flyer), unfolds with layers of meaning during the experience of Live Pelt. The coat is called The Surrogate, whose stages of conception and production are revealed through detailed environments of characters: The Trapper, Btsy Rss, The Alchemist, The Sociopath, The Industrialist, The Taxidermist, The Debutante, and The Fashionista. Their interactions escalate toward the development of The Surrogate's infrastructure: an elaborate network of the tickle contraptions that cause Elmo to giggle and vibrate.

The 64 Elmos that form the coat were raised across America, then "trapped" through Ebay (the name originates from England trading with the Hudson Bay), and Heaton (or the "characters" she plays simultaneously) takes them through transformations - from posing them in a school portrait, (placed alongside "The Ones that Got Away" - stacks of Elmo faces...!) to skinning them (feet and paws resemble human hearts), to stuffing, to mounting (you can bid for the heads on Ebay and participate in the recycle), to swinging them down the cat-walk!

I appreciated the details, where Heaton's wisdom is communicated. At The Alchemist's busy worktable, behind a magnifying glass, on a page from "Do-It-Yourself Murder" (which is also a component of The Sociopath's laboratory) is written: "definition of mortality: what qualifications must the system possess to be classified as mortal?" Perhaps the omnipresent jack-o-lope doll sitting atop a video monitor may hold the clue!

Like an electron that is a particle and a wave at the same time, one gets the sense that Elmo remains a constant (Elmo's soul?) while being, at the same time, all of these mutations. I enjoyed the 12 inch square oil painting camouflaged behind the gallery desk, in a gilded frame with a light above. The plaque reads T.M. Elmo. It is a still life of a computer board, his energy source (3 AA batteries), his sound piece (speaker), and the plastic case to hold the mechanism. Heaton asks questions – she does not give answers - in a buddha-like, inquisitive, and serious way.

Within a realm of connectivity, I hear in the gallery a wistful operatic slowed-down version of the "Star-spangled Banner", a woman singing "toys like girls," a sped-up auctioneer's voice, a violinist playing The Debutante's Waltz, Elmo's eerie laughter, and talk of other visitors: Heaton's magic enfolds me. I realize that we are each "character," with the potential to become the "other" (in Heaton's diagrammatic calculations industrialist = alchemist = creator = fashionista...). This potential freedom to transform comes with the innate responsibility of that freedom. In the Yearbook of Live Pelt, Heaton thanks the members of the online community. "I hope you will accept this note of gratitude as acknowledgement of your contribution to Live Pelt."

Lastly, what is in a tickle that makes us all laugh and be happy, if only for a moment?

Anitra Haendel is an artist. Contact: anitrahendel@yahoo.com.

Kelly Heaton
Live Pelt
The Ronald Feldman
Gallery

If nothing else, Kelly Heaton succeeds at being distinct—and convincingly weird. *Live Pelt* is a sprawling, obsessive exhibition of her Tickle Me Elmo-inspired art, including several works made from Tickle Me Elmo dolls as well as any and all ephemera relating to Heaton's acquisition of them. While there are obviously several theoretical stabs at work here, most of them jab meekly in the dark.

The most obvious theme of *Live Pelt* is consumerism and fetishization of the luxury commodity. "The Surrogate," the show's centerpiece, is a full-size, bright red woman's coat, made entirely from the fur of skinned Tickle Me Elmos. With the help of embedded electronics, the coat vibrates in a way similar to the quaking movements of the functional doll when tickled. In the words of the gallery, "The Surrogate" functions as a "surrogate lover." The coat is made out of sixty-four dolls, all of which the artist won on eBay. The heads of sixty-one of the dolls are mounted on plaques and presented here as "N-Trophy." Currently, these are being individually resold by the artist on eBay, most of them going for around \$100. It seems pretty obvious Heaton is poking fun at the historical status symbol that is the fur coat, as well as the sad substitution of luxury in place of real companionship. While this deconstruction of the signifiers of status is territory well-trod by first-wave feminists and by a whole generation of artists in the 1980s, Heaton adds some spice by mimicking the already weird and gross writhing of Tickle Me Elmo with this bizarrely erotic coat powered by the same electronics that compose the doll's "guts."

Stillman, Nick. "Kelly Heaton Live Pelt." *The Brooklyn Rail* (October 2003): 12.



Kelly Heaton, (detail) "Portrait of the Live Pelt Debutante" (2003) Digital C-print. Photo by Tom LeGoff. Makeup and hair by Tamah Krinsky. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

Another theme of *Live Pelt* is the new consumer market, specifically the Internet. "New York Times Banner," a blow-up of a 1996 *Times* article detailing the absurd Christmas-time competition to buy Tickle Me Elmos at Toys-R-Us, highlights this. As "Live Pelt—The Trapper" (a meta-installation, part of which is a big box filled with print-outs of emails relating to Heaton's eBay purchases of the dolls) proves, she got most of these at a discount price. Incidentally, you find yourself engrossed in the banal back-and-forth relating to the logistics of shipping costs, batteries included/not included, and so on.

Finally, there are several references to the history of America's fur trade. You see it with the mounted Elmo-heads of "N-Trophy," and you see it much more explicitly in the ephemera pervading this show. As if "N-Trophy" didn't make the reference explicitly enough, Heaton bangs the point home by filling a glass case with objects relating to the fur trade and filling the rest of the gallery with similarly obvious symbols like a photocopy of the cover of a book called *How to Grade Furs* and an issue of *Fur Trade Journal*. And this is where it all starts to feel like a little too much. *Live Pelt* goes wrong in that it feels too self-serious and moralizing. Sure, "The Surrogate" is a pretty funny work on its own. But *Live Pelt* assumes the stance of consumer-culture critique, obviated by "De-Star Spangled Banner," a large "American" flag hanging on the wall, with the stars and stripes in a heap on the floor below, seemingly having slid off the flag into a pathetic pile. It's an angry piece, but also an obvious and clumsy one that gives away so much about the artist's attitude that it starts to feel like you're being preached at. The signifiers of the old fur trade are obvious and say little more than "Here are some objects which are products of the fur trade's history, and here are my objects which are part of the 'fur' trade's present." Unfortunately, this context reduces "The Surrogate," potentially a great piece of jokey, kitschy art, to just a gimmick.

—Nick Stillman

Robinson, Walter. "Weekend Update." artnet.com. <http://www.artnet.com/magazine/reviews/robinson/robinson9-25-03.asp>



Speaking of sexual fetishes, another one of the month's exceptional shows is **Kelly Heaton's "Life Pelt"** exposition at **Ronald Feldman Fine Arts**. This elaborate project involves 64 **Tickle Me Elmo** dolls, which were hunted down and bought on eBay, only to be disembowled in a mad scientist's lair and then transformed into a luxurious red "fur" coat according to the traditional arts of the furrier (once again we are spared the necessity of making an ethical judgment, that goodness, by the absence of any real living creature). The heads of the Elmo dolls are even mounted as trophies, and are currently being sold on eBay (bidding begins at \$1, and early examples have already been knocked down for a high of \$300).

At the core of the work is the fetishistic "live pelt," or the artist's "merkin," died red to match the cybertronic doll. Elmo vibrates and laughs when his sensors are touched, and Heaton's garment, which includes a cloth bodice implanted with the doll's vibrator units, is itself a supersized vibrator for the artist's torso; in one sultry boudoir videotape, she gives the cloak its test run. The sexual component gives the piece its "charge."

In an ancillary project, Heaton solicited parents who were willing to have their toddlers photographed wearing Tickle Me Elmo costumes. The show includes 16 of these pop artifacts, which were made at Sears and are so framed in Sears white plastic frames (that comically resembles **Matthew Barney's** portentous "self-lubricating" ones). Unlike many avant-garde artists, Heaton is actually impressively credentialed, with a M.S. degree from M.I.T.; she recently completed a residency at Duke's department of computer science.

A photograph of Heaton in full "Live Pelt" regalia, taken by **Tom LeGoff**, is \$10,000 in an edition of seven. An eBay auction for the *Surrogate* cloak, made of all 64 pelts, runs Oct. 4-11, 2003, with bidding starting at \$35,000. Buy it now for \$50,000.

Schwendener, Martha.
"Kelly Heaton."
Artforum.com Critics' Picks.
<http://www.artforum.com/picks/>

Kelly Heaton

RONALD FELDMAN

September 06–October 11 2003

Visitors to this show are greeted by a huge blow-up of an article from the *New York Times* that describes a run on Tickle Me Elmo dolls; nearby is *Live Pelt Archives*, a display case filled with antique artifacts of the fur trade. Both objects are touchstones for Heaton's project, an absurdist stunt that involves a collection of used Elmo dolls, a prototype "Elmo fur" coat, and a working "fur studio" set up in the gallery. Linking the fur trade—which to a great extent determined early relations between Europeans and Indians in North America—to contemporary trade routes (all the dolls were bought on eBay), Heaton addresses changing mores in fashion and capitalism. The almost feudalist stratification of the fur industry, with its trappers, skinners, taxidermists, merchants, and buyers, is explicated along with the social meaning of fur (or, in this case, bright red synthetic fur). While the show might come across as an extended joke, if you read between the lines—and past the dopey Elmo faces leering at you from all over the gallery—it's quite a lesson in history, economics, and exploitation.

—Martha Schwendener



Portrait of the Live Pelt Fashionista, 2003.

February 8, 2002

ART IN REVIEW; Kelly Heaton -- 'Reflection Loop'

By KEN JOHNSON

Bitforms

529 West 20th Street, Chelsea

Through Feb. 16

A lot of artists these days are using fancy machines -- cameras, video equipment and computers, mainly -- to create pedestrian art. Far less numerous are those who create interesting machines. Tim Hawkinson and Roxy Paine are two; now there's Kelly Heaton, another uncommonly inventive young sculptor.

The title of Ms. Heaton's project, "Reflection Loop," suggests a work of daunting cerebralism. But it actually has the appeal of a big toy and a fine sculptural presence. Into a freestanding square white slab with a slightly concave front, Ms. Heaton has imbedded in a grid formation 400 mechanical eyes and mouths taken from Furbies, those cute, furry big-eyed toys that resemble Koala bears. As you approach the panel, the eyes and mouths begin to open and shut to the sound of whirring and chattering. The effect is delightful and curiously warming -- you feel as though all these little creatures are happy to see you.

The rear side of the panel, an impressively complicated system of wiring and computer parts, is almost as interesting as the front. Also compelling are Ms. Heaton's diagrammatic plans. They look like what the cartoonist R. Crumb would draw if he were a toy inventor. Whether Ms. Heaton's machine deserves to be credited with deep meaning is unclear. Its effect is more amusing than thought-provoking, but it does leave you looking forward to whatever she will come up with next. KEN JOHNSON