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Paul Spooner

Paul James Spooner was born in Preston, Lancashire, in 1948. He first went to art school in 1966 but never become a proper artist since there was a movement away from proper art and paintings to figurines and abstract art. During his school years, he was interested in mechanical sculptures and ended up specializing in them at Cardiff but went on to do jobs like school teaching, lorry driving, and building for up to 10 years (*Exploratarium*).

Eventually, in his early thirties, after a serendipitous encounter with Peter Markey, a mechanical-model maker, he realized his passion for becoming an automaton maker (*Cabaret Mechanical Theatre: Paul Spooner and Rosemary Hill*). Peter Markey was working with Sue Jackson's Cabaret Mechanical Theatre and this shop gave him the opportunity to pursue his passion. He first took non-moving elephants that he had carved for his child to Sue's shop and she was impressed by the quality of his workmanship. She requested that he makes something that moves - this was a turning point in his life. Paul came back with a "hand-cranked model of Anubis, the jackal-headed Egyptian god of the dead, drawing a sausage". This moment changed the future of British automata (Plimmer). The Anubis has turned out to be Paul's signature design, showing up in many of his most famed pieces - Anubis doing press-ups, riding a camel, etc (*Paul Spooner makes automata*). The Cabaret also housed pieces from other famous automaton artists including Tim Hunking whom Paul referred to as a mentor.

Paul makes machines that are absurd and fun, hoping that people viewing his work will feel the same way. He is one of the artists whose works fill the Exploratorium

exhibits. The Exploratorium is a museum for artists, science, and technology that is filled with interactive pieces for visitors to play with and learn from (Nakaya). Paul's pieces usually have some writing on them, providing a short story about what the piece does which adds to the experience. Nearly all of Paul's automatons are made out of wood which makes them look like toys for children and he can get wood from old furniture which costs almost nothing. His favorite tool is a 4-jaw chuck lathe but has recently become fond of his late brother's center-hole punch (*Paul Spooner makes automata*).

Paul makes a living through commissions and exhibitions at museums. He doesn't always like commissions because people can have "crap" ideas and it is a pain to deal with those. He also has a short attention span, so he prefers instant gratification from his automatons. He prefers to have someone laugh, usually portrayed by dark humor, by his works than bogle their minds to find out what is going on. He likes things that don't take too long so he rapidly designs and prototypes the ideas that come to mind.

He usually thinks of an idea, sometimes in the shower, then comes out and begins to sketch it out. When he is ready with his designs he would go into his shed to prototype the machine. He accepts failure as a part of his making process. "The only thing you can be sure of about the machine is that it is going to break" (Kramer). His prized book, when it comes to automaton creation, is "Ingenious Mechanisms for Designers and Inventors", edited by Franklin D Jones. He gets all sorts of ideas for mechanisms from there, which he builds out to truly understand how they work (Windsor). Furthermore, when you look at his artwork, you can see the inspiration that

he takes from his favorite artists, especially Picasso. The figurines are shaped and painted in a Picasso style giving them a very unique and abstract look.

The driver for almost all of Spooner's works is the cam. This is the part that drives the movement of the entire contraptions. It is usually accompanied by a following rod which moves up and down based on the rotation of the cam allowing characters in his design to move their arms, heads, and legs. One of his famous designs, "The Barecats", works by rotating a crank handle which in turn moves the arm of a cat. The arm of the cat is also moving to rotate another crank handle attached to a box that moves the legs of a smaller cat sitting on the box. But that is just an illusion since all the movement is really caused by cams and following rods housed in the mechanism. What is interesting about this contraption is that when the smaller cat points up, the bigger cat looks up to see. It is a playful yet deeply philosophical take on who is really controlling who here (Windsor).

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The whole mechanism is driven by the crank that turns a rod with a screw at the center. As the screw rotates, it moves a gear that slowly turns cams on either side of the screw. One of the cams is responsible for the small cat raising its hand up and the other one is responsible for moving the head of the bigger cat. There also seems to be some spring action since the bigger cat's head snaps back into place. It is wonderful to see how the parts need to align perfectly so that the timing of the movement of each of the intricate parts will be accurate. There is no surprise why some of his pieces sell for thousands of pounds. The craftsmanship is also aesthetically pleasing to look at - the mix of sharp edges like the ears and top of the face, along with the smooth curves along the chin, arms and body bring his characters to life in a cartoonish manner.

The dream is also yet another famous piece by Paul Spooner that uses a motorized mechanism to bring eerie objects to life when a man and a woman are asleep in bed. The figures get scared and retreat when the man wakes up shortly after which the woman also wakes up. It is a mildly horrifying yet deeply ingrained experience that most people have with the mystery of the night and the horrors it might bring.

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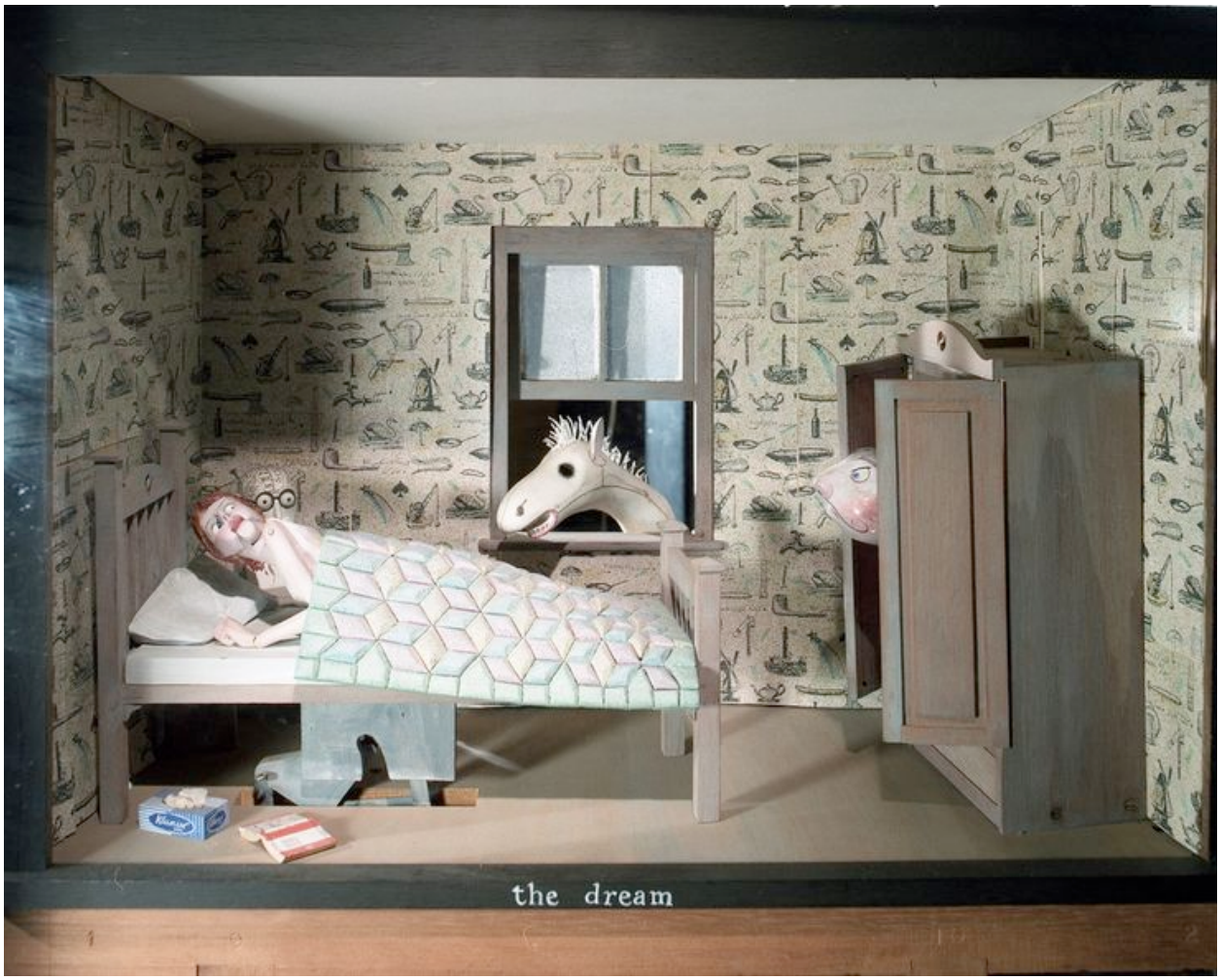

Paul Spooner's pieces now sell for thousands of dollars as they have become timeless pieces in automatons. For example, his piece "The Five Artists reflect on Their Waning Powers" was originally sold for 200 pounds. Now it would sell for nearly 15,000 pounds (Windsor).

There is a lot of inspiration to take from the simple yet elegant designs, fast prototyping, excellent craftsmanship, and Paul's humble attitude to the creative process despite being such a renowned artist.

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