

Paolini investigates this in *Untitled*, a subtitled video of a conversation between two models of the same toy cat. The older, outdated model expresses concerns about its mortality and agency in deciding when to end its life rather than allowing fate to determine its outcome. In this exchange, a mirroring occurs similar to that in *Crying Cat*, prompting us to consider how our perception of the other influences evaluations of ourselves, and the serious consequences this threatens to effect.

"Hello, Schrödinger?" presents us with a series of puzzling works that catch us questioning the emotions inanimate objects impact upon, complicating their simple use for fulfillment beyond everyday functions. By giving these robots a veneer of liveliness, and playing upon their susceptibility to failure as surrogates for desire, Paolini creates interactive entry points for considering larger issues of intimacy, communication, technology and self-awareness.

Essay by Elizabeth Underhill

Elizabeth Underhill is an emerging curator and writer. She holds a BA in Fine Art History from the University of Toronto, and has been involved most recently with exhibitions at Gallery 1313, XPACE and the Art Gallery of Mississauga.

Laura Paolini is an emerging artist and a recent graduate of the Ontario College of Art and Design. Her work is primarily conceptual and is expressed through media-based installations. She is also an active writer and her columns and reviews have appeared in FUSE magazine and other national and international publications.

"Hello, Schrödinger?"

January 8 to February 26, 2010

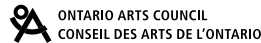
Opening: January 8th, 7–11 pm

The artist will be in attendance

Laura Paolini



Crying Cat (Crocodile Tears) Photo credit: Laura Paolini



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HAMILTON ARTISTS INC
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A conceptual problem posed by quantum mechanics resonates within this exhibition of manipulated robotic devices by emerging artist Laura Paolini. The example of Schrödinger's cat, a theoretical experiment conceived by Erwin Schrödinger in 1935, is integral to a paradox in quantum theory: a cat may be placed in a box with a decaying radioactive particle that will eventually cause its demise. Using quantum theory to ascertain the cat's condition, we can learn that the cat is possibly in two opposing states at once: dead and alive. Only until the box is opened do we know the cat's definite condition. "Hello, Schrödinger?" is an introduction to Paolini's concerns with issues that test the indefinite in concepts of duality, the transformative, and desire. Using electronics ranging from cute toy animals to objects from very private realms, Paolini has transformed these inanimate devices to appear responsive and lively, alluring and disarming us with humour and cunning. Like the problem of Schrödinger's cat, this collection of new and recent works investigates what it is to occupy dual states simultaneously.

In *Blowing Hot Air*, Paolini has repurposed an average bathroom hand dryer into an interactive and somewhat cheeky installation. With its nozzle unusually pointing upwards, the dryer emits a dull buzz of comments typically made at a gallery opening. Enticingly, the upturned nozzle beckons us to draw nearer and easily listen in, but when we are close enough to hear what is being said, the device switches back to its utilitarian function and blasts out warm air as if it has a playful mind of its own. Caught up in the fantasy of an alternate state of existence for this machine and lured in to discover the secrets it contains, we are duped and denied the fulfillment of our curiosity. Through animating this machine, Paolini suggests also that communication functions differently depending on physical presence. The expression "blowing hot air" reminds us that what we are privy to hearing in public is perhaps drastically altered from the more private things shared when no one is close enough to hear.



Crying Cat (Crocodile Tears) Photo credit: Elizabeth Underhill

Again in *Instant Gratification* the artist reverses our expectations of another robotic object from the realms of intimacy: a motorized sex toy shaped like a tongue gets turned on when a participant speaks into a phone. That is, the toy is prompted to carry out its mechanical action by a sensual act performed by a real tongue. Coyle drawing on a concept of Marshall McLuhan's, in which he describes tools as extensions of our senses, Paolini here raises the idea of desire as being one such extension. And yet, with the toy stranded alone on an old fashioned vanity, its purpose unfulfilled, this context suggests such an extension to be a failure of function. How often are our own limitations reflected in the tools meant to heighten our experiences? What lack becomes apparent through this failed prosthesis for desire?



Blowing Hot Air Photo credit: Laura Paolini

Central to this exhibition is Paolini's *Crying Cat (Crocodile Tears)*, a curious case of a cat caught between two states. A robotic toy cat in a tableau-like domestic setting, similar to that of a regular North American housecat, sits in front of the television. Eerie in its hyper-cute mimicry of true feline movements, sounds and appearance, the animatronic cat is a surrogate for a living cat, made to satisfy the same basic creature comforts provided by its real counterpart. All it requires, conveniently, is battery power. The artist's exploration of the use of inanimate technologies to satisfy yearnings for affection and company, as replacements for living equivalents, here raises the absence of a necessity for returned care or attention. As such, looking more closely at this cat may prompt a gasp of surprise. The beautiful robot appears to be very sad in this context: it sits bawling its eyes out at the sight of real cats frolicking on the television set to the tune of the classic tearjerker "What a Wonderful World" sung by Louis Armstrong.

Here is Paolini's twist, the duality revealed in her work. Could it be that this robot is actually sad? As suggested by the reference in the title, these tears obviously hold no sincerity or realism. Continuing the narrative Paolini has staged, the mechanized cat appears to learn about its limitations through the mirroring power of the television screen. Images of the robot cat flash in juxtaposition with the playing cats on the screen: the disappointing realization of its true nature is mediated by technology, and it becomes able to see what it is and what it is not.

That it should react so emotionally to "natural cats" finds parallels in philosopher Immanuel Kant's aesthetic theory of the sublime. According to Kant, the sublime is evoked through the simultaneous experience of unpleasant and pleasurable feelings through overwhelming forces of nature. However, it is through intellectual reasoning that the effect of the sublime really occurs, when it is realized that this natural event is dwarfed by the concept of absolute freedom or absolute totality. *Crying Cat*, a physically beautiful product of rational technological construction built to fulfill emotional needs, suggests this power of mind over natural matter is tenuous and vulnerable through the cat's paradoxical state of limitation and freedom. Inherent to any technology is its certain quick replacement by upgraded models, and eventual obsolescence.