© Harold Cohen, *First Athletes, Athlete Series*, 1986.

© Harold Cohen, *First Sighting*, detail, 2012.

Harold Cohen:
The AARON Retrospective

Preview Date: 13 October, 6—8 PM (BST)
Exhibition: 14 October — 19 November, 2022

"Many of the things we see computer programs doing today would have been regarded as impossible a couple of decades ago; AARON is surely one of them."

— Harold Cohen, 1999

Gazelli Art House marks their worldwide representation of the Harold Cohen Estate by announcing the UK's first AARON-focused solo exhibition, spanning four decades of Cohen's influential machine work. Moving through the 1970s until the artist's passing in 2016, displayed works will elucidate the ways in which Cohen both noticed and navigated evolving spaces of artistic possibility through the world's first example of Meta-Art. The retrospective celebrates Cohen's appreciation of abstract sensibility, mathematical discipline, and creativity as arising once "the individual starts to question the unquestioned assumptions of his field."

Now, AI technology is almost inseparable from our everyday lives, subconsciously driving many of our actions with once unthinkable sophistication. AI's understanding of human complexity has been a vast project, with the early work of Cohen and his peers playing a crucial role in its evolution. Thus, *The AARON Retrospective* serves as a lens through which to recognise how artists of Cohen's era laid the necessary foundations for our contemporary AI landscape.

In 1968, Cohen relocated to the U.S. as a visiting lecturer at the University of California, San Diego. On this transition, Pamela McCorduck — author of 'AARON's Code' — claims Cohen entered a "spiritual and geographical wilderness" that radically shifted his practice. Here he marked his entry into the world of computer-generated art with the code-controlled Turtle drawing machines. The output, alongside a prototype, will be displayed this autumn.

From what eponymously became his 'Turtle Era', Cohen delved into a life-defining exploration and dialogue with AI technology. Reflecting upon his shift, he explained: "it is characteristic of our culture both that we search out things to satisfy current needs, and also that we restate our needs in terms of the new things we have found."

Most notably, Cohen proceeded to create AARON as "the first profound connection between art and computer technology." With a career evolving during a pivotal development period, the artist refined his practice at the intersection of artificial intelligence and abstraction. Crucially, in exhibiting pieces from such a broad timeline, works such as *Untitled Amsterdam Suite II* (1977), *First Athletes, Athlete Series* (1986), *Jerry* (1992), and *First Sighting* (2012) have been carefully curated to depict each decade's level of machine learning. In chronologically locating Cohen's work, the exhibition becomes a window into the current technological popular cultural focus on AI.

Into the early 2000s, digital increasingly assumed a role within the global art landscape; Cohen redirected his focus again. This time taking a more analogue path in designing new painting brushes and pens, shifting autonomy away from the computer in the later years of his life.

The AARON Retrospective at Gazelli Art House salutes the colour and movement that characterised both Cohen's life and artistic career in myriad ways, namely through AARON. Although quietly, computer development disruptively "brought with it a cultural revolution of massive proportions." Carrying experimental colour work inspired by abstract expressionism across the Atlantic, through his transition from painting to programming along the global tide of technological change, Cohen's subversive work charts a unique period of artistic development alongside rapid digitisation.

"By bringing this important selection of AARON work to the UK, we are excited to see the reinstatement of Cohen's position as the forefather of computer art. Our relationship to the estate reinforces the gallery's commitment towards revisiting historical movements and towards digital art, and we are thrilled to be able to merge the two in this fascinating reveal of Cohen's lifelong research."

— Mila Askarova, CEO & Founder of Gazelli Art House

Notes to Editors

- This is the second showing of Cohen's work, the first of which was during the *Code of Arms* show in 2021
- For this retrospective, there will be other machines on display (besides the Turtle)
- Cohen created three painting machines. First one only drew. Second was on display and demonstrated itself at the Computer History Museum Boston early 1995. Third one was retired and donated to the Computer History Museum
- From educational videos to seminal artworks, all facets of Cohen's creative journey will be displayed
- Accompanying the exhibition, there will be talks throughout October and November
- There will be a publication accompanying the exhibition available to purchase after the show
- References: Harold Cohen "On Purpose: An enquiry into the possible roles of the computer in art" (1974), Harold Cohen "Driving the Creative Machine" (2010), Invited Talk in Edinburgh Conference (1999), and Pamela McCorduck, "AARON's Code" (1991)

About the Artist

Harold Cohen (1928 – 2016) was a British artist whose innovations at the forefront of technology changed the face of computer art. Unfolding where art and artificial intelligence intersect, Cohen's artistic practice was punctuated by his famed invention of AARON, a computer programme designed to create art independently. Cohen's work attracted global attention and was exhibited at major institutions such as Tate London and SFMOMA.

Having graduated from Slade School of Fine Art, Cohen's first solo exhibition was held at Ashmolean Museum, Oxford in 1951. Further solo shows followed, including at Whitechapel Gallery in 1965. Cohen represented the UK at the 1966 Venice Biennale, Documenta III, the Paris Biennale, and the Carnegie International.

Cohen relocated to the United States as a visiting lecturer at the University of California, San Diego, in 1968. It would be almost three decades Cohen remained at UC San Diego as professor, chairman of the Visual Arts Department and eventually in 1992, director of the Centre for Research in Computing and the Arts. During this time Cohen began work on AARON, a venture to which he would devote the next five decades, instigating new areas of study and pioneering generative art.

After his retirement from UCSD he continued to work on AARON and produce new artwork in his studio in Encinitas, California. In 2014, Cohen received the ACM SIGGRAPH Distinguished Artist Award for Lifetime Achievement in Digital Art.

About the Gallery

Founded in 2010 by Mila Askarova, the Gazelli Art House in London brings a fresh perspective to Mayfair – through championing artists from all corners of the globe. Focusing on artists at the height of their practice, the gallery showcases their work through a diverse programme of exhibitions and events. Along with its sister site in Baku, Gazelli Art House specialises in promoting art from Azerbaijan and its neighbours to introduce a greater understanding of the rich linguistic, religious and historical ties that connect these areas to international audiences. In 2015, the gallery further expanded to support artists working in digital art through its online platform: GAZELL.iO, comprising an online Residency programme, NFT drops and collaborations, a dedicated Project Space holding monthly exhibitions, and a permanently installed VR Library – all in the heart of Mayfair.

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