



Cover, insert left & above: **Floribots**, 2005

**Geoffrey Drake-Brockman** was born in Woomera, South Australia in 1964. He completed a Bachelor of Science (Computer Science) at the University of Western Australia in 1985 and a Master of Arts (Visual Arts) at Curtin University of Technology, Perth in 1994. Geoffrey has been exhibiting since the mid 1980s, and has participated in a number of group exhibitions, including *Sculpture by the sea*, Cottesloe (2005); the *Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award*, Melbourne (2004); *Luminous image IV*, Collaborative Concepts, New York (2002); the *Biennale of Electronic Arts*, Perth (2002); and the *National Sculpture Prize*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra (2001). He has also held several solo exhibitions, and in collaboration with Richard Kuhaupt presented *Essentialiser*, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (2002) and *Geoffrey, The Verge*, Perth (2001). Geoffrey was awarded the Sir Charles Gardiner Annual Art Award in 1993 and the AIIA Telstra AFR National Award for Excellence in Information Technology in 1997. In 2005, his robotic work *Floribots* was a finalist at the *National Sculpture Prize* at the National Gallery of Australia and won the People's Choice Award.

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# GEOFFREY DRAKE-BROCKMAN FLORIBOTS

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Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts



## Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts

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While we expect intellectual depth and substance from science and technology, these spheres of human enquiry have always offered an extrospective scope to artists, with poetic implications that some would not suspect.

Geoffrey Drake-Brockman's first degree was devoted to the rigorous study of computer science. Whereas this training has had an acknowledged effect upon his prodigious intellection, and is reflected in the organisational acumen and clear thought that one might predict, it has also been an implicit factor in the orientation of his developing imagination. These days what piques Geoffrey's intrigue most keenly are the philosophical connotations in 'the *social realities* consequent to the technologies of simulation'<sup>1</sup> in which (as a professional programmer – an aspect of his 'other' life) he sees himself implicated.

In a perfectly viable sense, *Floribots* itself presents as a *social* organism, simulating behaviours that are those of both an individual and a colony. By way of some complex feedback cybernetics, a number of absorbing social realities arise in the interaction that an audience is able to experience with the work.

*Floribots* operates at so many levels and in such multiple sets that it's tempting to start out with a list of the referents that come immediately to mind. But I'll resist for now, and in any case the work's effect is quite different in varying contexts and at different times. With its cross referential delights for so many viewers, it will come as no surprise that *Floribots* won the People's Choice Award at the *National Sculpture Prize* in Canberra just over a year go. Its breadth of appeal has already covered a public ranging from the hard bitten art critical, to the simply art loving. Today and here, *Floribots* is fresh once more and creating a new fuss for a new audience.

As with any worthwhile artwork, sustained viewing is rewarded, especially if you are to experience anything like the full range of sequences *Floribots* can display. If you spend enough time observing and being observed by this odd entity, your own gamut of potential associations, allusions and readings of the work will mount, as will the satisfaction you derive from the interaction.

How does he do it? Geoffrey Drake-Brockman has regularly welcomed highly specialised procedural problems that might arrest the progress of any other artist. Solving problems in one field requires contextual knowledge in those adjacent. In order to address his self-set briefs and develop his vision, Drake-Brockman has developed an enviable expertise in, and in some cases broken new ground for, technologies as diverse as chrome plating (including that of plastics), various forms of electrical and electronic engineering, high-end software systems, systems analysis, casting, plastics chemistry, optics and laser engineering. He has acquired great proficiency in painting, colour theory, contemporary art and literary theory, if not (though I wouldn't bet on it)... astrophysics, quantum mechanics and neurosurgery.

In the hands of an alert, appropriately tuned and open-minded artist, the narratives underpinning prognostications about human/machine relations, the dreams of science and the implications of scientific abstractions become an endless stream of fruitful stimuli and restless production. As has usually been the case with his extraordinary artistic enterprises, bringing *Floribots* to life required Drake-Brockman to overcome specific and extraordinary technical challenges. The artist elaborates:

I like figuring out how to get the technical process to work - to make reality match the vision. However, it's the idea, the 'vision' that comes first and it's a matter of working through the technical problems to realize it. It intrigues me though that, usually, there is a way, somehow, of getting the technical stuff to behave the way I want it to. I seldom have to give up because something is just impossible. Like chrome plating over plastic, getting the mixture right for cast marble, de-bugging electronics, or finding a way for origami to operate with robotics; the process can be tricky but it can be done if you're patient and careful. For technical stuff though, I mainly like getting something new to work, to match the vision, rather than exploring the possibilities of a particular medium. I like to think that I don't fetishize the technology itself and that I'm not process driven. There is an aspect to well implemented technology that can attract people's attention though, that can act as a 'hook', and I appreciate the power of that.

Technology may not be a fetish for this artist but it seems to me that it is a prod. Its effect is to *provoke* the author but also to provide a subsept signifier along with a unique experience for the audience. For Drake-Brockman it must remain intrinsic, sexy but seamless, transactional but transparent. If he opts for the tricky technology entailed in chrome plating non-metallic surfaces for instance, as he has in some earlier works, it's because:

...chrome is interactivity itself. It reflects. Usually it reflects back a view of the viewer. I'm into chrome and equivalent mirror-reflective surfaces like polished stainless steel for practical reasons - they can pack such massive processing power, in terms of receiving and processing visual information, all from a completely 'passive' surface. Chrome is a cyberpunk signifier. It's been set up culturally in movies like Terminator II and The Matrix and in the traditions of science fiction to equal slick, seamless, deep technology. I can hint at potentials like this with this material... Every *Floribot* has a reflective plate facing up to the viewer. I don't think anyone should be allowed to think they can get away clean; and the chrome helps to signal that.

Always aroused by the possibilities of painting, Drake-Brockman has never foregone the expressive capacity of the surface in his pursuit of depth. *Floribots* is no exception to these fascinations. The artist is also intentionally mining a culture that includes what has been theorised, if not colonised, by Baudrillard, and has it in mind that as with the use of specular surfaces for instance:

...reflection will be more than mere appearances. It will involve an appearance of an appearance and simulacra will be multi-order: simulations of simulations of simulations.

What then are the potentials at which the artist is hinting with mirror faced robotic origami?

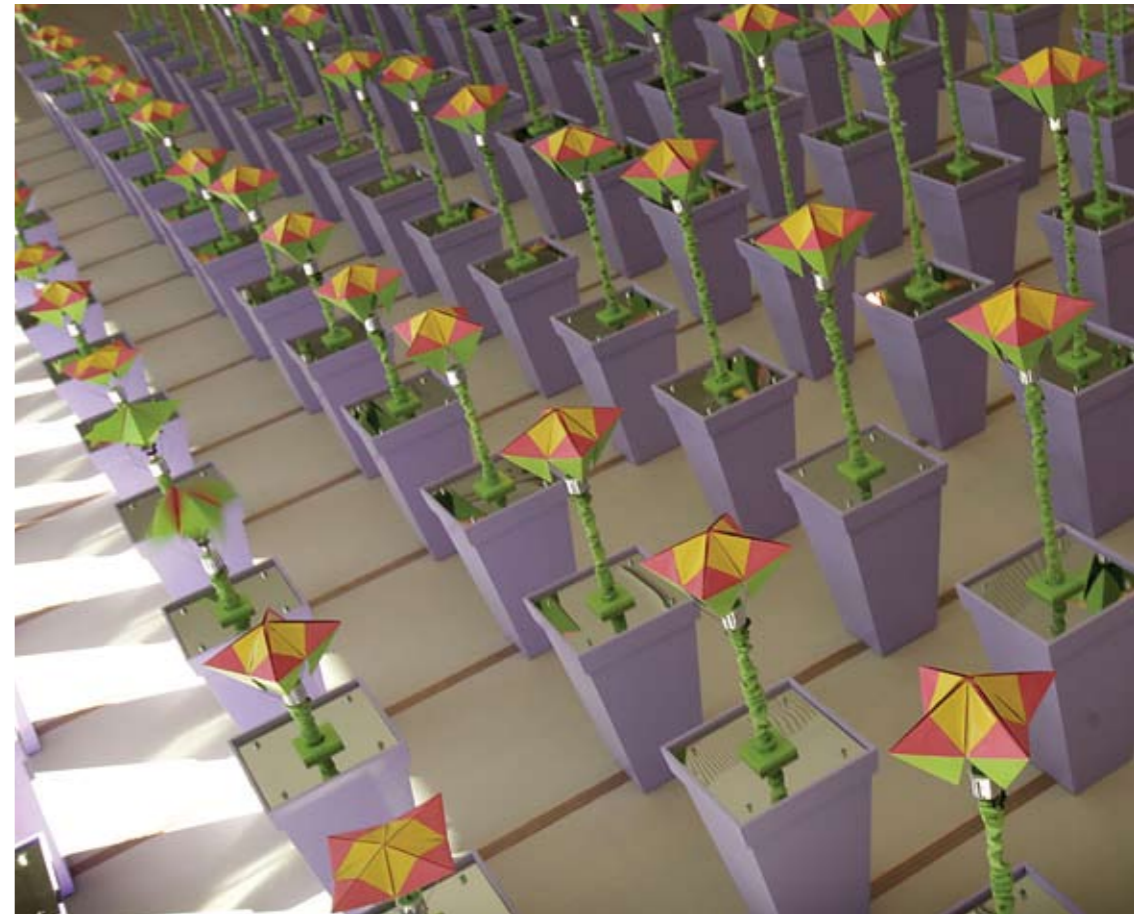
As has been suggested above, for an artist there have always been innumerable multivalent conceptual prompts in science and technology, and increasingly this has been a contemporary truism. Western Australia not least, has its own Biennale of Electronic Arts (in which Drake-Brockman has been an exhibitor) as well as the art and science collaborative research laboratory SymbioticA. Where there are evident implications in social phenomena or for social models, these cues are arguably at their most motivating. The physics of wave motion provides in a single example a profusion of analogies for which neither art nor articulation needs hyperbole nor hyping. It is now canonical that at the atomic scale all objects have both wave and particle nature. None the less, as is the case with the pulsing dynamics of massed human behaviour to which in part *Floribots* may allude, there remains, encouragingly, a great deal yet to be understood, defined or explained.

In its own scalar dimension *Floribots* exhibits both wave and particle behaviours, and takes this analogy among others to spectacular limits and into intriguing outcomes. *Floribots* dances in waves. For me its contextual overtones also arch oddly from dance and pattern aesthetics into hypnosis, horticulture and horror movie culture. *Floribots* hints too at the controlling patterns of self-organisation that arise in cellular structures of any sort; biological, social or machine-based. Its chattering chorus asks disturbing questions like: 'What is a mind... or for that matter a *hive-mind*?' Philip K. Dick wondered if androids dream of electric sheep. *Floribots* learns, it sleeps, it wakes. Does it dream?

Ben Joel  
December 2006

*Floribots* comes hard on the heels of a string of Drake-Brockman projects seen here in Perth, interstate and abroad. <sup>2</sup> Soon to follow will be *The Coppelia Project*, 'a culturally located vision, about automata and the boundaries of humanity'.

<sup>1</sup> All statements by the artist are taken from artist's notes prepared in December, 2006.  
<sup>2</sup> Some in partnership with his long time collaborator, Richie Kuhaupt.



Floribots sequence, 2005