ALMINE RECH

Hajime Sorayama
I, Robot

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“It’s your fiction that interests me. Your studies of the interplay of human motives and emotion.”

— Isaac Asimov, I, Robot

Asimov’s seminal story is about the allure and potential ramifications of perfecting humanity through sentient technology—what we now call post-human or transhumanism. And like all of the finest works of science fiction, the book is at heart a philosophical tract. Questioning key assumptions about the nature of life itself, through a discourse with the consciousness of advanced robots, Asimov ultimately queries what it is to be human. For the past four decades, the acclaimed Japanese artist Hajime Sorayama has been asking the same questions.

Sorayama’s ongoing Sexy Robots series ponders the alluring, intimidating imaginary of a cyborg human, merging woman and droid, fleshy anatomy and flashy armor, in a cheeky and unsettling continuum from the Hollywood pin-up to the fantastical future. In his finely rendered, sleek and striking mixed media works on canvas—themselves a seamless hybrid of digital and analog mediums—and his iconic sculptural works in steel, Sorayama channels aesthetic visions from Bert Stern to Mel Ramos, Brancusi to Rolls Royce, Egypt to the Oscars.

Throughout his decades-long career, Sorayama has seen the world change around him—or rather, catch up with him. His visionary early art practice—as well as his award-winning robotics design work— now seem prescient. But in balance with the narrative and symbolic pull of the futuristic transmogrifications, the materiality of the works and their compositional lexicon complexifies that vector. By drawing on centuries and even millennia-old painting conventions, from mythic maidens and goddesses of ancient Greece and the Renaissance to the glamor photography of Hollywood’s Golden Age and the Barbarella-esque fantasy of the erotic future, Sorayama contextualizes his entreprise within an array of cultural settings. However, he in turn disrupts this legacy with the introduction of digital print and photographic elements, so that the works, in their physical form, embody the same kind of hybridity as his subjects and his ideas.

His work is animated by both erotic nostalgia and aspirational futurism. Through acrylic and digital print works on canvas, Sorayama portrays sexualized archetypes of Western feminine beauty and power (Marilyn Monroe, Joan of Arc, Jane Russell; mermaids, goddesses, muses) with an inside-out take on the art history of the male gaze. Call it the sexuality of the singularity, but consider, as the artist does, whether it becomes more or less complex to engage the post-human woman, the cyborg female, as an object of fear and desire?

Furthermore, the works ask us to consider the traditional and subverted status of beauty in art and in sexuality—and to what degree beauty even means the same thing to humans and robots.

What is more beautiful—the impossibly smooth metal or the soft-ness of plump flesh? The flaws that make an individual, or the at - tainment of a flawless uniformity? What if the most beautiful being was also the most fearsome—the hybrid, the otherworldly, the both? What if all of this soul-seeking philosophy becomes clouded by the heady rush of physical attraction? When you want them, what do you really want, exactly? What if it's all a trap? Sorayama lives and works in Tokyo, Japan, his birthplace and where he graduated from Tokyo's Chubi Central Art School. His time in Hol-lywood and especially his work in science fiction graphics, became the inspiration for his iconic work, the internationally acclaimed Sexy Robot series, which has been running since 1978. Featured in per-manent collections such as the Museum of Modern Art (New York) and the Smithsonian Institution (Washington, DC), he is the rare artist who is equally celebrated by prestigious institutions, fashion houses, erotic publications, as well as the multi-national technology corpora-tions.

— Shana Nys Dambrot, art critic, curator, and author