ACM SIGGRAPH Distinguished Artist Award for Lifetime Achievement in Digital Art

Harold Cohen

The 2014 ACM SIGGRAPH Lifetime Achievement Award in Digital Art is awarded to Harold Cohen for his pioneering achievements in creating art through artificial intelligence and machine autonomy. Best known for his creation of the art-making system AARON, Cohen began his career as a painter after graduating from the Slade School of Fine Art in London in 1951. Exhibited widely in galleries and museums, Cohen's work represented Great Britain in the Venice Biennale, Documenta 3, the Paris Biennale, and many other important international shows. In 1968, Cohen was invited to be a visiting lecturer at the University of California San Diego. Within two years, he became Professor and Chairman of the Visual Arts Department. During this time, his research interests turned to artificial intelligence, and in 1971 he was invited to be a visiting scholar at the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory at Stanford University. What grew out of this period of his life was AARON, a program that simulates the cognitive processes underlying the artist's approach to drawing. The initial version of AARON produced autonomous black-and-white drawings and later incorporated color, an important element of Cohen's creative research. In particular, he is interested in the cognitive processes behind representation that allow our vision to infer patterns and objects through line and color. His imagery is abstract, fluid, dense, and highly suggestive of natural forms. While mathematical in nature, his computer images are stylistically linked to his early paintings depicting figurative and plant elements as their subject matter. His creative practice continues to this day, and Cohen sees AARON as his creative partner, as evidenced by his recent exhibition Collaborations with My Other Self, at UC San Diego, 2011–2012. AARON has produced original autonomous drawings in museums and science centers in the US, Europe, and Asia, including the Tate Gallery and Victoria & Albert Museum in London, Documenta 6, Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Los Angeles County Museum, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the IBM Gallery and the Brooklyn Museum in New York, among others. Science centers that have featured Cohen's creative work with AARON include the Boston Science Museum, the Buhl Center in Pittsburgh, and the California Museum of Science and Technology. AARON is on permanent exhibit at the Computer Museum in Mountain View, California.
Cohen’s academic career spans over fifty years and the institutions he has been associated with include the Camberwell College of Arts and the Slade School of Fine Art in London, Carnegie Mellon University, UC Berkeley, and UC San Diego. He was the Director of the Center for Research in Computing and the Arts at UC San Diego from 1992–1998, and has been Professor Emeritus at UC San Diego since 1994. Cohen has delivered papers at the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Association for Artificial Intelligence, the College Art Association, European Conference on Artificial Intelligence, the International Joint Conference on Artificial Intelligence, and the Tokyo Nicograph Conference. He has lectured at the Computer Museum, National Bureau of Standards, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and many other schools and universities in the US and abroad. He was the keynote speaker at the Cognition and Creativity Conference in 1999.


ACM SIGGRAPH is honored to recognize Harold Cohen, a pioneer who has led the way towards new forms of creative expression using artificial intelligence and robotics. His ongoing creative practice, academic affiliations, publication record and public speaking all point to his unique place in the history of digital art.