

Louis Morlæ
'Purgatorio'

Liste Art Fair Basel
Booth 4
10 – 16 Jun 2024

Rose Easton

Text by Philippa Snow

With *Purgatorio*, a presentation conceived specifically for Liste 2024, the Melbourne-born, London-based visual artist Louis Morlæ has continued his ongoing exploration of the relationship between technology and the body by filtering these themes through the prism of his own experiences with chronic illness. Typically, Morlæ's practice operates at the intersection between industrial-style manufacture and character-driven narrative, resulting in work that does not look to a distant and abstracted future, but to the furthest edges of the present. In contemporary life, few experiences make the status of the body as a flesh-and-blood machine more obvious than that of a long-term medical condition, which can reduce the sufferer to a sentient robot experiencing a series of malfunctions; even pain itself, in frequent enough doses, can begin to feel repetitive and automated, as if has been programmed to recur. The therapeutic language that addresses chronic illness, too, frequently relies on the terminology of contemporary technology: uncharged batteries, broken circuits, and system overloads. This dehumanising view of sickness – which defines the patient in relation to their (in)ability to participate in social life, or to effectively perform as a worker, earning capital either for themselves or for others – raises questions about what the 'ideal' body really is, and those questions are both biological and ethical.

Drawing on the work of Elaine Scarry, who proposed in *The Body in Pain* (1985) that pain itself is "a driver for innovation," Morlæ has used resin and plastic

3D printing, as well as CNC wood, to produce five new sculptures, which take up both the floor and the walls of the booth. His strange, lumpy creatures are meant to provoke the blend of sympathy and horrified revulsion that is offered to the permanently sick, and it is by design that we cannot tell whether they are meant to be frightening or funny. The word “robot” has its roots in the Czech word “robota,” which refers to forced labour, nodding once again to themes of productivity. Here, elements of the robotic are combined with human features: *Haywain Sower* has an arm dangling limply from its torso, and *The Beggar (Gaberlunzie)* has a face peering out from its groin. The effect is of something vestigial, nearly phased out either by evolution or by technological advancement, as if to suggest the pain of occupying a form that is no longer seen as adequately useful. Where many of the artist’s previous works have sleek, flawless surfaces, these figures have a more organic texture, swapping science-fictional perfection for a mix of paint and sand that evokes rough mutant skin – a body that might actually degrade. Morlæ’s titles, and his character designs, are inspired by depictions of purgatory from throughout art history, in particular those by Bosch and Bruegel. The chronically ill person – who is tasked with trying to improve themselves, but who can never again be well – is themselves trapped in a purgatorial state: a struggle to regain as much as possible of the optimal function of their body, and thus to become an ‘ideal’ and ‘productive’ individual in the eyes of both the medical establishment, and society at large.

The works in *Purgatorio* remind us that the machine of the self can be many things at once: loveable, creepy, horrifying, humorous, dysfunctional, inherently politicised, sort of gross, and above all else fascinating to behold.

Louis Morlæ (b. 1992, Melbourne, Australia) lives and works in London. He received his BA in 2014 from Manchester School of Art before completing a Postgraduate Diploma at the Royal Academy of Arts, London in 2023. Recent solo and two-person exhibitions include: *All Watched Over by Emissaries of Loving Grace*, Duarte Sequeira, Braga, Portugal (2023); *Machinochrome Dreams*, Rose Easton, London (2022); *Press* (with Lucas Dupuy), Final Hot Desert, Isle of Sheppey, UK (2022); *Bubblegum Tung*, Asylum Studios, Suffolk, UK (2018) and *Behold a Figure, Serpentine*, Soft Opening, London (2018). Group exhibitions include: *SL x RE*, Silke Lindner, New York (forthcoming); *Premiums*, Royal Academy, London (2021); *Fight or Flight*, Roman Road at The Columbia, London (2020); *Grot*, The Horse Hospital, London (2019) and *The Belly and the Members*, Cob Gallery, London (2017). In 2023, he was awarded The Keeper's Prize and two of his works entered the permanent collection of The Royal Academy of Arts, London. Later this year, Morlæ will have his second solo exhibition with the gallery followed by his first institutional solo exhibition at Somerset House, London.

List of works, clockwise from left

Louis Morlæ
Haywain Sower, 2024
PLA, acrylic, sand,
filler, resin, nylon
110 × 52 × 36 cm
43¼ × 20½ × 14⅛ in

Louis Morlæ
Face of a Tosher, 2024
CNC wood, PLA,
filler, acrylic
24 × 91 × 31 cm
9½ × 35⅞ × 12¼ in

Louis Morlæ
Haywain Reaper, 2024
PLA, acrylic, sand,
filler, resin, nylon, rope
103 × 53 × 37 cm
40½ × 20⅞ × 14⅝ in

Louis Morlæ
The Beggar
(*Gaberlunzie*), 2024
PLA, acrylic, nylon, filler
77 × 86 × 80 cm
30¼ × 33⅞ × 31½ in

Louis Morlæ
St Anthony's
Revenge, 2024
PLA, filler, acrylic,
sand, nylon
77 × 164 × 47 cm
30¼ × 64⅝ × 18½ in

VIP preview, Monday 10 June, 11am – 6pm
Public opening, Monday 10 June, 6 – 8pm
Open, Tuesday 11 – Saturday 15 June, 12 – 8pm
Sunday 16 June, 11am – 4pm

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