

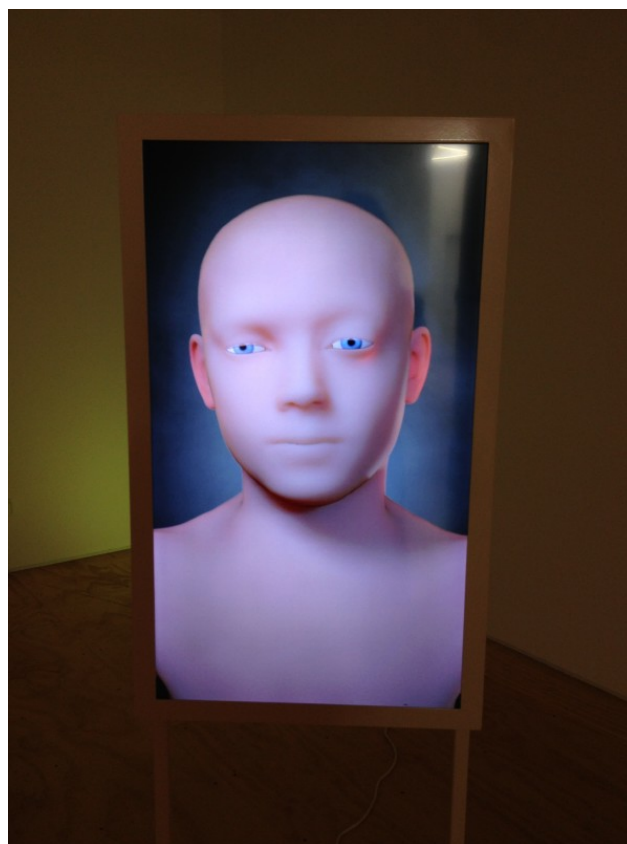
## Antoine Catala: New Feelings at 47 Canal

October 15, 2014 Written by Elspeth Walker

The 2004 hit show *Battlestar Galactica* chronicles a future in which artificially intelligent robots called Cylons seek to destroy the human race as they advance and meld with technology in an almost mystical way. Constructed out of biological material, a bisected Cylon fighter plane actually bleeds—sinews, guts, and all. Other Cylons evolve to look exactly like human copies, and are so intelligent that they experience the complexities of human emotion, including the nuances of love. Antoine Catala's current solo project at 47 Canal, *New Feelings*, is synchronized with this fantasy. Catala delves into the gray area where technology intersects with emotion, and presents a series of experiments in sculpture and video that incite us to feel, both figuratively and literally, through machines.

Catala's sculpture creates abstracted prototypes of human-robot blends, searching for unlikely pockets of emotion within the rigid boundaries of the technological. He uses technology as a tool for the production and replication of emotion. The most captivating issue in *Battlestar Galactica* and in Catala's work can be found in the difficulties humans have in deciphering how to treat these technological models. Should the Cylons be treated like any other malfunctioning, dangerous machine? Are they simulacra of humans? Should they be considered an improvement on the human prototype, or rather as a treacherous blend of straightforward mechanical logic and emotionally manipulative tactics?

The labor of such a dilemma is written across the visage of Catala's *Emobot (Teacher)* (2014), a CGI video of a bald, Caucasian child whose rubbery flesh only barely contains hyper-realistic round eyeballs and aggressive dentures that threaten to escape its face. The avatar vacillates between different declarations, including: "I feel dead... I'm alive..." In Catala's fantasy, which *is* the avatar? If viewers use Catala's prototypes to descend into the imaginative realm his pieces suggest, they can't be sure either. The artist was present when I visited the gallery. Off in the corner, he tinkered with a MacBook and a pile of wrenches, cords, and expensive equipment, performing some adjustments on *Emobot (Student)* (2014). This robotic structure has a balloon-like membrane that inflates like a lung; a hard pink crescent inside performs a series of flips on a pivot, and then the membrane deflates, sucking itself around the crescent like a shiny cassock of skin.



Antoine Catala. *Emobot (Teacher)*, 2014; powder-coated aluminum and steel, computer, sound system, TV; video, color sound, 13:00; 71 x 21 x 18 in.; edition of 3.



Antoine Catala. *Feelings on the Table*, 2014; powder-coated steel, wood, polycarbonate, copper, fur, sand, polystyrene, resin; 37 x 29 x 29 in.

As the artist worked, I walked over to an inverted pyramid pedestal with a seafoam-and-white grid atop it. "You can touch those," the artist pointed out. "Do what you want with them." I found a series of small, textured objects on the pedestal: kinetic sand, a hard, thick piece of frosted glass, and a cluster of small blue balls of hard clay. As I fingered the clay, I flashed back to a childhood memory of rolling orbs out of Fimo clay. I was provoked into remembrance by the distinct *feel* of each of these objects: their weight, their smoothness, the way the sand bounced back when I poked it—as if it were alive. Sensation triggered memory, which triggered emotion. The most successful point of Catala's new experiments is in this invitation to interact with that most basic technology of sensation. Catala acknowledges the treacherous and fascinating ground of the cyborg: when machines can feel, they fundamentally undermine our category of the "natural." As we come into physical contact with technology, it becomes us and we it. In the quest to come to grips with such "new feelings," there is nothing quite as real, nothing as disorienting, and nothing as affective as touch.

Antoine Catala: *New Feelings is on view at 47 Canal through November 2, 2014.*