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Museums

In the galleries

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Philip Beesley. "Sentient Chamber," on view at the National Academy of Sciences. (Copyright PBAI/Courtesy National Academy of Sciences)

Sentient Chamber

Someday, the technology of "Sentient Chamber" might qualify as architecture. For now, the installation at the National Academy of Sciences seems more like art: beautiful, intriguing and without apparent practicality.

The structure was designed by a multidisciplinary team led by Canadian architect Philip Beesley. The group's statement calls the thing a "free-standing pavilion," but it can be just as easily seen as a grove of cyber-trees. Some 20 metallic posts, floor-to-ceiling and tightly grouped, support LEDs, plastic fronds and liquid-filled vials. Sensors react to people who pass near or through the technological thicket, triggering lights, movement and metallic music.

The algorithms that produce these responses are said to “mimic curiosity” and be so complex that they essentially never repeat themselves. (In this, they’re like the ones Leo Villareal employs to drive his unpredictable light pieces.) The idea is that this semi-conscious edifice might lead to buildings that react to, and learn from, their inhabitants. The creators even suggest that tomorrow’s residences and office blocks might “care about us.”

In fiction, artificial smarts and feelings usually don’t work out for the best. Yet “Sentient Chamber” is a long way from passing the Turing test. Within its metal and acrylic chassis, computers cue buzzing, blinking and murmuring. The effect is beguiling, but more akin to wind through branches than a chat with C-3PO.

Also at NAS, “Large Hadron Collider” is a series of seven big renderings of particle accelerators. Jonathan Feldschuh, a data scientist and artist, drew the massive machinery in pencil on Mylar and then added acrylic washes. The light-colored, freely applied pigment resembles watercolor, and its drips and splashes add an abstract feel. They also evoke the subatomic action the devices are designed to observe.

Feldschuh made the images roughly twice as wide as tall in homage to CinemaScope, once the preferred format for Hollywood epics. But even though these vignettes might look like storyboards for a sci-fi flick, they show a place where science trumps fiction.

Sentient Chamber and **Jonathan Feldschuh: Large Hadron Collider** On view through May 31 and July 18, respectively, at the National Academy of Sciences, 2101 Constitution Ave., N.W. 202-334-2415. cpnas.org/exhibitions.