

GAZELLI ART HOUSE



© Harold Cohen, *Untitled (123-3391)*, 1997



© Harold Cohen, *The Last Machine Age*, 2015

Art Basel 2026

Harold Cohen: *AARON and the Birth of Machine Agency*

Fair Dates: 18 – 21 June, 2026

Location: Messe Basel, Messeplatz 10 4005 Basel, Switzerland

“Creativity – this particular example of creativity – lay in neither the programmer alone nor in the program alone, but in the dialog between program and programmer; a dialog resting upon the special and peculiarly intimate relationship that had grown up between us over the years.”

– Harold Cohen, *Driving the Creative Machine* (2010)

Gazelli Art House presents a solo booth dedicated to pioneering British artist **Harold Cohen** (1928–2016) at Zero 10 Basel 2026. Best known as the creator of AARON, one of the earliest autonomous systems for artmaking, Cohen first rose to prominence as a leading post-war painter, representing Great Britain at the 1966 Venice Biennale before turning toward computer-generated art in the late 1960s. Bringing together historical paintings, drawings, and live-running code systems, the booth offers audiences a rare opportunity to encounter AARON as Cohen intended: not as a historical artefact, but as a living studio collaborator operating in real time.

The booth traces Cohen’s lifelong investigation into systems, perception, and artistic authorship. From his early painterly abstractions of the 1960s through to the vivid machine-generated compositions of the 1990s and 2000s, the booth situates Cohen not only as a foundational figure in computer art, but as one of the earliest artists to interrogate the relationship between human creativity and algorithmic processes. Decades before AI entered mainstream consciousness, Cohen was already exploring many of the questions that continue to define today’s debates around creativity, agency, and machine intelligence.

The booth builds upon significant recent institutional recognition of Cohen’s practice, following recent

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exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Tate Modern, M+, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, alongside Gazelli Art House's solo booth dedicated to Cohen at Frieze Masters 2025. In 2024, the Whitney Museum of American Art acquired AARON codes into its permanent collection, while M+ recently acquired two historic AARON drawings created live at the 1985 Tsukuba Expo in Japan.

Live-running AARON codes will operate throughout the fair: *Reconstruction of Mazes (1970–72/2024)*, *KCAT*, *AARON (2002)*, and *Gijon, AARON (2007)*. Continuously generating autonomous drawings in real time, these works trace more than three decades of Cohen's evolving algorithmic thinking, from the early "freehand line" structures of the *Maze* works through to the increasingly complex compositional and figurative capabilities of AARON's later years.

The booth presentation opens with *All Four (1964)*, a major early abstract painting exhibited in *Harold Cohen: Paintings 1960–65* at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1965. Presented alongside his later machine-generated works, *All Four* highlights the continuity between Cohen's painterly practice and his later computational systems. Its looping biomorphic forms and formal codification already suggest Cohen's growing interest in systems, structure, and rule-based image construction years before he began programming computers.

This formative period was shaped by Cohen's move to the United States in 1968, where he joined the University of California San Diego and began learning FORTRAN programming. Cohen produced foundational bodies of work such as the *Contour Maps*, *Territorial Maps*, and *Maze* drawings, developing the procedural logic that would later underpin AARON. Rather than instructing the machine what to draw, Cohen became increasingly interested in defining the conditions through which drawings could emerge autonomously. A rare example from this period, *Untitled (i23-3578) (1972)* belongs to Cohen's seminal *Maze* series, produced using his First Generation Drawing Machine and early 'freehand line' algorithm. These works marked a pivotal moment in the development of AARON and Cohen's broader investigations into rule-based artmaking.

A key focus of the booth centres on Cohen's 'Painting Machine Era' of the 1990s, when AARON became capable not only of autonomously generating drawings, but also physically applying colour through custom-built robotic hardware.

Works such as *Untitled (i23-3391) (1997)* and *Machine Painting Series TCM #19 (1997)* demonstrate this extraordinary moment in the history of AI art. In *Untitled (i23-3391)*, geometric architectural forms and bold fields of saturated blue, crimson, and yellow reveal the remarkable sophistication of AARON during the late 1990s, as the programme developed increasingly complex relationships between figure, space, and colour, which Cohen would then realise by hand. *Machine Painting Series TCM #19* represents a further development in AARON's evolution, with the system not only generating the composition and colour structure, but also directing Cohen's custom-built Painting Machine to physically apply dyes onto paper without direct human intervention. Together, these works mark a pivotal moment in the evolution of computer-generated art.

The booth further traces the late evolution of AARON through works such as *The Last Machine Age (2015)*,

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created during Cohen's final years. Produced during his 'finger painting' period, the work reflects a renewed dialogue between artist and system, as touchscreens replaced earlier plotters and robotic hardware as the interface through which colour, gesture, and compositional structure were shaped.

The works in the booth reveal Harold Cohen's sustained investigation into the evolving relationship between human creativity and machine intelligence. Across more than four decades, AARON developed from a rule-based drawing system into an increasingly sophisticated artistic collaborator. Together, Cohen and AARON redefined longstanding questions of authorship, establishing a precedent for future generations.

Notes to Editors

Gazelli Art House is the exclusive worldwide representative of Harold Cohen Trust.

Recent institutional exhibitions of Cohen's work include:

- Palazzo Diedo, Berggruen Arts & Culture, *Strange Rules* (2026)
- Tate Modern, *Electric Dreams: Art and Technology Before the Internet* (2024–25) toured to OGR Torino (2025–26)
- M+, *Making It Matters* (2024–ongoing)
- Victoria and Albert Museum, *Patric Prince: Digital Art Visionary* (2024)
- Whitney Museum of American Art, *Harold Cohen: AARON* (2024)
- Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Coded: Art Enters the Computer Age, 1952–1982* (2023–24)

For further information and press kit please contact: Pegah Hoghoughi at pegah@gazelliarthouse.com

About the Artist

Harold Cohen (1928-2016) was a British artist whose innovations at the forefront of technology changed the face of computer art. Working at the intersection of art and artificial intelligence since the late 1960s, Harold Cohen was the creator of AARON, one of the earliest AI computer programs designed to produce paintings and drawings autonomously. His work was exhibited extensively throughout his life at major institutions including Tate London, Institute of Contemporary Arts, Whitechapel Gallery, LACMA and SFMOMA. Having graduated from Slade School of Fine Art, Cohen's first solo exhibition was held at Ashmolean Museum, Oxford in 1950 and by the mid-1960s he was recognized as one of Britain's best regarded painters. In 1966, he was selected to represent Great Britain at the Venice Biennale. Two years later at the height of his career as a painter, he decided to relocate to the United States as a visiting lecturer at the University of California in San Diego. He learned the programming language FORTRAN and in 1971 was invited to spend two years at the Stanford University's Artificial Intelligence Laboratory (SAIL) where he developed his ideas about machine-generated art which would eventually lead to the development of AARON, the AI drawing program that he

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continued to work on for the rest of his life. The first major exhibition of his early work with LACMA in 1972 and throughout that decade his work was exhibited at Documenta 6 in Kassel, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. He continued his work at UC San Diego as professor, Chairman of the Visual Arts Department and eventually in 1992, Director of the Centre for Research in Computing and the Arts. Following his retirement in 1994 from the university, he continued to work on AARON and produce new artwork in his studio in Encinitas, California. In 2014, Cohen received the ACM SIGGRAPH Distinguished Artist Award for Lifetime Achievement in Digital Art. Harold Cohen regarded artificial intelligence as a tool to better understand his own ways of perception and meaning and his work with algorithms and plotters inspired multiple generations of artists who use code in their practice.

About the Gallery

Founded in 2010 by Mila Askarova, Gazelli Art House represents an international roster of artists, from leading figures in Post-War movements such as Pop Art and Abstract Expressionism to ultra-contemporary voices redefining art in the digital age. The gallery champions artists who challenge convention through the creative exploration of a variety of media. Along with its sister site in Baku, the gallery also specialises in art from Azerbaijan and its neighbours, fostering cross-cultural dialogue. In 2015 we launched GAZELLI.iO, an online platform specifically supporting innovation in art and technologies.