



Artist Gavin Turk (above) has produced a 20-minute film in which he poses as the legendary Mechanical Turk



No false moves as chess and art combine

IN 1952, Marcel Duchamp declared: "From my close contact with artists and chess players, I have come to the personal conclusion that, while all artists are not chess players, all chess players are artists."

Almost three decades earlier, Duchamp had effectively turned his back on art, instead devoting his energies to playing and studying the game of chess. The pioneering modern artist went on to become a semi-professional player, and even represented France at several international tournaments.

Duchamp is not the only artist to have been preoccupied with chess. A 1925 Russian propaganda chess set by designers Natalia and Yelena Dankop pitted idealised communists against demonised capitalists. An all-white pacifist set by Yoko Ono from 1966, meanwhile, subverted the warring aspects of the game by having identical white pieces play against each other so that, as the game progressed, it became increasingly difficult to tell your pieces apart from your opponent's, thus causing the battle to collapse. And, in 1944, New York gallerist Julian Levy staged an exhibition entitled the Imagery of Chess, featuring sets designed by key artists including Man Ray, Max Ernst and, unsurprisingly, Duchamp.

That exhibition inspired London-based art-commissioning firm RS&A to initiate the Art of Chess in 2001, an ongoing project in which leading international contemporary artists are invited to design limited-edition chess sets.

From this Friday, all 10 sets will be on display in the Sebastian Guinness Gallery in Temple Bar, Dublin, a major coup for an Irish commercial gallery. The highlight of the show will be the unveiling of the latest Art of Chess commission: a new film by Brit-art enfant terrible Gavin Turk. Unlike the other artists, Turk hasn't created a chess set per se. Instead, he has produced a 20-minute film in which he poses as the legendary Mechanical Turk, a life-size chess-playing automaton constructed in 1770 for the court of Empress Maria Theresa of Austria. The mechanical figure, which was able to play – and often win – games of chess, was toured around Europe and America for some 80 years after its debut in the Austrian court. It baffled the grandmasters of the day and is even said to have outwitted Napoleon and Benjamin Franklin. It wasn't until 1857 that it was revealed to be an elaborate hoax, controlled by a human operator.

Turk's film flips the illusion: his Mechanical Turk is the flesh-and-blood artist pretending to be mechanical. Dressed in Turkish costume and holding a long pipe, he completes a complex puzzle known as the Knight's Tour, in which the knight is moved around the board until it has landed on every square once – and only once.

Turk came to prominence in 1991 when the Royal College of Art in London refused to give him his MA because his degree show consisted of a studio space containing nothing but a plaque which read "Gavin Turk/Sculptor/worked here

1989-1991". Since then, he has become known for making his own "versions" of iconic artworks, for creating works that play on his name and signature.

So when he discovered the story of the Mechanical Turk, he was eager to make a piece based on it for the Art of Chess project. "The fact that he was called the Turk was quite attractive..." he says, "and there was the fact that the character was ... someone from the outside, someone who was a Turk ... challenging the Europeans at their most prized court game – and beating them."

The fixed parameters of a chess set – a board with 64 squares and 32 pieces – seem to have stimulated the imaginations of the Art of Chess artists. "Artists enjoy challenges where there are prescribed boundaries you can break to create new work," says Mark Sanders of RS&A. For example, Cattelan's Untitled (Good versus Evil) pits the black king Hitler against Martin Luther King on the white side. Joining Hitler are Rasputin, Cruella de Vil and, for some reason, Donatella Versace, while King is accompanied by Mother Teresa and Superman.

Some of the chess sets are more playable than others. McCarthy created a set from items from his kitchen, including a bottle of ketchup and a rubber duck. When the Art of Chess exhibition opened in Moscow, grandmaster Garry Kasparov took a particular liking to the Kitchen Set. "He played a game on the Paul McCarthy set, which he said was his favourite because he liked the challenge – the idea of having to remember your pieces was something Kasparov found really intriguing," says Sanders.

The Art of Chess, Sebastian Guinness Gallery, 12 September to 9 October.

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