Asking for a friend

For his second solo show with the gallery, Harm van den Dorpel proposes a selection of recent works from multiple series of semi-algorithmically generated work. Besides wall works, which function as preliminary material conclusions, software from which the work emerged is also on display.

The expression 'asking for a friend' is used when the person asking feels embarrassed and pretends to be asking for somebody else. The subject that poses the sensitive question introduces an imaginary constructed proxy onto which feelings of shame or guilt might be projected.

Similarly, Harm van den Dorpel does not create his work directly himself. Rather, he devises software which stands in for him, raising questions about artistic agency and identity in our era of artificial intelligence and increased automation.

Underlying the most recent works are "tree" shaped chromosomes. The use of a tree as a recursive structure is derived from his interest in natural language analysis, such as the X-bar theory of Noam Chomsky. The artist asserts that in human language, the essential meaning of a word is indefinitely deferred, and can only be approximated by taking into account the definitions of all the other words that it is not.

Harm's software simulates biological processes such as learning, reproduction and growth. Each artwork has virtual chromosomes, parents and relatives. Using evolutionary and genetic algorithms he crossbreeds pieces, emphasising desired traits and eliminating unwanted aesthetics, akin to the process of breeding dogs or flowers. By ascribing anthropomorphic properties to the works, they - according to the artist - become more alive and gain a sense of autonomy.

He trains his software by judging and recombining its generated output, which happens over many generations. Through this feedback loop the population evolves. Multiple factors such as promiscuity, fertility and interconnectedness of specimen inform the artist's decision as to whether or not a work is contingently 'fit' enough to be materialised. In this possibility space, the final works are haunted by the eliminations of all the potential pieces that were not meant to be.