

**KENZIE  
HOUSEGO  
I ♥ U**

# KENZIE HOUSEGO I ♥ U

Art Gallery of Alberta  
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## **Kenzie Housego: I ❤️ U**

In a lot of ways, flirting is one of the most sophisticated and highly nuanced forms of communication. Flirting, when done well, is a balanced and playful ballet that requires a high level of emotional and intellectual intelligence. There are subtleties of meaning, innuendo, tone, body language and non-verbal cues passing back and forth between people that, if picked up on correctly, can result in a fun and rewarding interaction. If cues are not interpreted in the right way, however, this interaction can quickly devolve into something very uncomfortable or even dangerous.

Contemporary courtship is a highly technologized process and a lot of any prospective couple's initial witty banter now takes place online. Today, tone, a well-timed brush of the arm, or even a sly bite of the lip can be replaced by emojis or online slang. Online flirting and courtship are highly coded in every sense of the word. Kenzie Housego is interested in this coded nature of courtship communication and how courtship has used technology over time. She draws a direct line in her work between once common Victorian embroidery patterns used to convey emotions and intentions to online dating profiles and flirting over text with suggestive emojis.

Emojis both subvert the directness of written language and elucidate intention to give online communication the nuance of in-person communication. Some emojis are clearer or more obvious in their meaning and intention; the eggplant and the peach, for example, directly reference sexualized body parts. The expression I ❤️ U is more ambiguous. It is both direct and guarded and lies somewhere between the very serious "I love you," and the platonic (and sometimes condescending) "love ya." The use of the emoji softens the sentiment and could be used when dating to test the waters for a proper expression of romantic love. It might also be used with someone with whom you have a purely sexual relationship to express that very specific sort of affection. Like the subtleties of IRL flirting, emojis allows the texter to circle around something without being too literal.

The classic emoji heart is particularly nuanced considering the many interpretations of its nine different colours (red, orange, yellow, green, blue,



purple, black, white, brown). In *Primary Data: The Language of Red, Yellow and Blue Roses*, 2021 Housego uses floriography or the language of flowers. Floriography is similar to the visual language of emojis wherein different flowers and their colours convey varied social meanings. Floriography meanings are imbued in both the literal flower and its representation as you might find in many art forms, including embroidery. Like the emoji heart, roses have varied meanings based on the multitude of their colours found in nature and in artistic representation. Interestingly, there is some crossover between the meanings of emoji heart colours and those of roses. In *Primary Data*, Housego used red, yellow and blue roses to separate common dating profile messaging and shorthand into what she sees as three main categories: jealousy (yellow), romantic love (red), and the unattainable (blue). She has grouped words, acronyms and sentiments that she has seen come up repeatedly in dating profiles into these three ranges of emotion. While Housego draws a thread from Victorian embroidery and floriography to online dating profiles, she also references more ancient forms of romantic communication. The repeated text that shows up in dating profiles also recalls common love spells that are among some of the first things humans rendered onto papyrus or pressed into clay tablets.<sup>1</sup> When using dating apps, simplified repeated texts become very familiar and start to come across as incantations chanted into the digital ether to both purge oneself from past heartache (no drama, no liars) or conjure the perfect mate (DTF or Soulmate) and then bind oneself to them (true love, other half). Love magic has a long history. It is not hard, for example, to imagine a young Victorian girl in the meditative act of embroidery trying to conjure a suitor, and likewise today it is common for young children to make up love spells or love potions in an attempt to catch a crush's attention.

Equally as meditative and hypnotic as chanting a love spell or stitching an embroidery pattern is the repeated swiping through apps like Tinder, Grindr and Bumble. Unlike the methodical repetitive act of stitching, however, the monotony of swiping periodically results in a match, complete with audio and visuals. The match triggers "the release of a cascade of neurotransmitters, including a flood of dopamine, a powerful reward agent that underlies many addictive behaviors."<sup>2</sup> This gamification of dating apps transforms the act of seeking a partner into swiping towards a payout and chemical reward that is similar to slot machines.<sup>3</sup> The interactive works in *I ❤️ U* emulate dating apps'

“gamified interface [that] captivates our insatiable needs for novelty and validation.”<sup>4</sup> In the dating world this can result in receiving greater validation from interacting with the app itself than the much less immediately fulfilling act of going out on a date and spending the lengthy time and effort it takes to get to know someone. Housego capitalizes on the attention holding nature of the digital to make visitors spend more time with the works than they might on a straight analogue experience.

*Flirt Bot* and *Emoji Bot I, II, and III* use simple AI chatbot technology. This is the same technology commonly used by websites as a small pop-up window that asks if you need help. The chatbot will recognize key words and phrases and offer you answers or direct you to certain areas of the website or to a real person. Depending on how sophisticated the technology is, it can feel like there is someone on the other end of the chat. *Flirt Bot* and *Emoji Bot I, II, and III* in *I* 📞 have their own phone numbers that visitors to the exhibition are instructed to text. *Emoji Bot I, II, and III* can only interact with the visitor by sending emojis, and it is up to those who interact with the works to determine their meaning. *Flirt Bot* has greater possibility for interaction and reacts to texters with short phrases. Simultaneous with *Flirt Bot*'s texts is an LED screen imbedded into its embroidered surface that lights up with seven possible emoji animations (💕💕, 😊, 🤔, 😊, 😊, 😊, 😊) that echo whatever *Flirt Bot* is texting. Like with human flirting, it is possible to offend *Flirt Bot* and the *Emoji Bots* and for the conversation to get derailed.

Underlying the critique of the gamification of dating apps, and AI communication more generally, is a fear that digital communication will shift to communication *with* the digital, eventually replacing human connection altogether. Being “replaced by robots” is a recurring fear with any new technology and there is an uneasiness about whether technologies are a tool to improve our lives or something that will replace humans and/or their connections with one another. When interacting with *Flirt Bot* it is not such a stretch to consider the dystopian film *Her*. In this 2013 science-fiction film, Theodor, played by Joaquin Phoenix, is one of many humans who fall in love and start a relationship with their operating system. In her research for her chatbot works Housego also came across programs like Slutbot. Slutbot is a chat bot developed by sex educators as a tool for people to explore their



Kenzie Housego and Gabrielle Odowichuk, *Flirt Bot*, 2023. Embroidery, LEDs, Arduino micro-controller, textiles. Courtesy of Kenzie Housego and Gabrielle Odowichuk. Photo: Louie Villanueva.



sexuality and practice consent through erotic chat.<sup>5</sup> Although most sex bot apps are marketed as practice apps, it is not hard to imagine that chatting with the sex bot becomes the goal and reward in and of itself and not a means to build confidence in human interactions outside the app.

There is an easy slippage with digital technologies where, through human usage, technology shifts from tool to agent. This results in a conflation of who and what is active and for what ends. *Selfie Guys*, 2021 and *Selfie Ladies*, 2023 shift and blur focus between the active and passive roles of viewer and artwork and muddy the expected gaze and agency of artworks and technology. The figures in both works are modeled after real individuals who have volunteered bathroom selfies to Housego to use in the works. The bathroom selfie became interesting to Housego as a mainstay of dating profiles, particularly male dating profiles. The bathroom selfie is one that is taken using the bathroom mirror in both private and public bathrooms. The subjects of this specific category of selfies are more often than not shirtless. The missing bathroom mirror in *Selfie Guys* and *Selfie Ladies*, however, means that the cameras of the figures are instead focused on the viewer. When one approaches the selfie works, a motion sensor triggers blinking lights placed in the cell phone cameras, creating the illusion they are taking photos of the viewer. The many blinking flashes are similar to the experience of a red carpet. The feeling while interacting with these works is simultaneously one of flattery and of being exposed to a group of embroidered individuals who are able to both sense and engage with human presence.

The work of Kenzie Housego both scratches at the edges of technological anxieties and revels in the novel joys of relatively recent dating tropes. While online dating apps may be skillfully designed to keep you on the app people are still finding their way together and using technology to do it. The work traces a very clear lineage of courtship communication from the Victorian age but also taps into a much more historic and timeless human preoccupation with seeking various types of love and validation. In many ways, *I♥U* offers visitors carefree interactions and in doing so asks, what is the harm in engaging playfully with technology?



Kenzie Housego, *Selfie Guys*, 2021. Embroidery, LEDs, Arduino micro-controller, textiles. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Louie Villanueva.

## Endnotes

- 1 J. F. Borhouts, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978).
- 2 Samantha Beck, "The Brain and Swiping for Love," *Scientific Kenyon: The Neuroscience Edition*, vol. 5 (May 2021), <https://digital.kenyon.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1045&context=skneuro>.
- 3 Alina Liu, "Why Dating Apps May Be Keeping You Single," *Psychology Today*, February 10, 2022, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/therapists-education/202202/why-dating-apps-may-be-keeping-you-single>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 <https://www.juiceboxit.com>

## **ARTIST'S BIOGRAPHY**

### **Kenzie Housego**

Kenzie Housego recently completed a Master of Fine Art specializing in new media at the University of Calgary, Mohkinstsis, in Treaty 7 region southern Alberta. As a multidisciplinary artist her practice includes fibre, embroidery, new media, and assemblage mediums. The use of technology such as LEDs, Arduino micro-controllers, texting, and screens within her research is symbolic of the virtual realms in which we participate as a society. The virtual encompasses social media platform activity, online personas, online dating, and online branding. The digital world has become ubiquitous in communication, shaping contemporary society, particularly in relation to online representation.

It's important to her that her artwork always offers an invitation for interactivity, encouraging viewers to shift from passive observers to active co-producers as they engage with the digital media, experience other points of view, and ultimately, form their own individual meanings. Her recent series titled “❤️❤️❤️” explores contemporary courtship, romance, technology and historical signs and signifiers connected to dating and romance.

Housego has had the opportunity to showcase her art nationally and internationally at Beakerhead festival in Calgary, CURRENTS festival, Santa Fe New Mexico, Rome MakerFaire, MakerFaire Bay Area in California, Fashionwear New York, CES Vegas, Xiamen Fashion Week, China, CES ASIA, Shanghai, China, Dublin Ireland, and at a two-week art residency in Shenzhen, China.

Housego currently lives and practices in Calgary Alberta.

Follow her: @kenziehousego, kenziehousego.com

## **WRITER'S BIOGRAPHY**

### **Lindsey Sharman**

Lindsey V. Sharman is Curator at the Art Gallery of Alberta. She has studied Art History and Curating in Canada, England, Switzerland and Austria, earning degrees from the University of Saskatchewan and the University of the Arts, Zurich.



Kenzie Housego and Gabrielle Odowichuk, *Flirt Bot*, 2023. Embroidery, LEDs, Arduino micro-controller, textiles. Courtesy of Kenzie Housego and Gabrielle Odowichuk. Photo: Louie Villanueva.



Kenzie Housego, *Selfie Guys* (detail), 2021. Embroidery, LEDs, Arduino micro-controller, textiles. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Louie Villanueva.

### List of Works

#### *Hot Bot*, 2023

Embroidery, LEDs, Arduino micro-controller,  
textiles  
Courtesy of the Artist

#### *Emoji Bot*, 2023

Embroidery, LEDs, Arduino micro-controller,  
textiles  
Courtesy of the Artist

#### *Selfie Girls*, 2023

Embroidery, LEDs, Arduino micro-controller,  
textiles  
Courtesy of the Artist

#### *Primary Data: The Language of Red, Yellow and Blue Roses*, 2021

Embroidery, LEDs, Arduino micro-controller,  
textiles  
Courtesy of the Artist

#### *Selfie Guys*, 2021

Embroidery, LEDs, Arduino micro-controller,  
textiles  
Courtesy of the Artist

#### *Send Nudes*, 2021

Embroidery, LEDs, Arduino micro-controller,  
textiles  
Courtesy of the Artist

#### Kenzie Housego and Gabrielle Odowichuk *Flirt Bot*, 2023

Embroidery, LEDs, Arduino micro-controller,  
textiles  
Courtesy of the Kenzie Housego and Gabrielle  
Odowichuk



