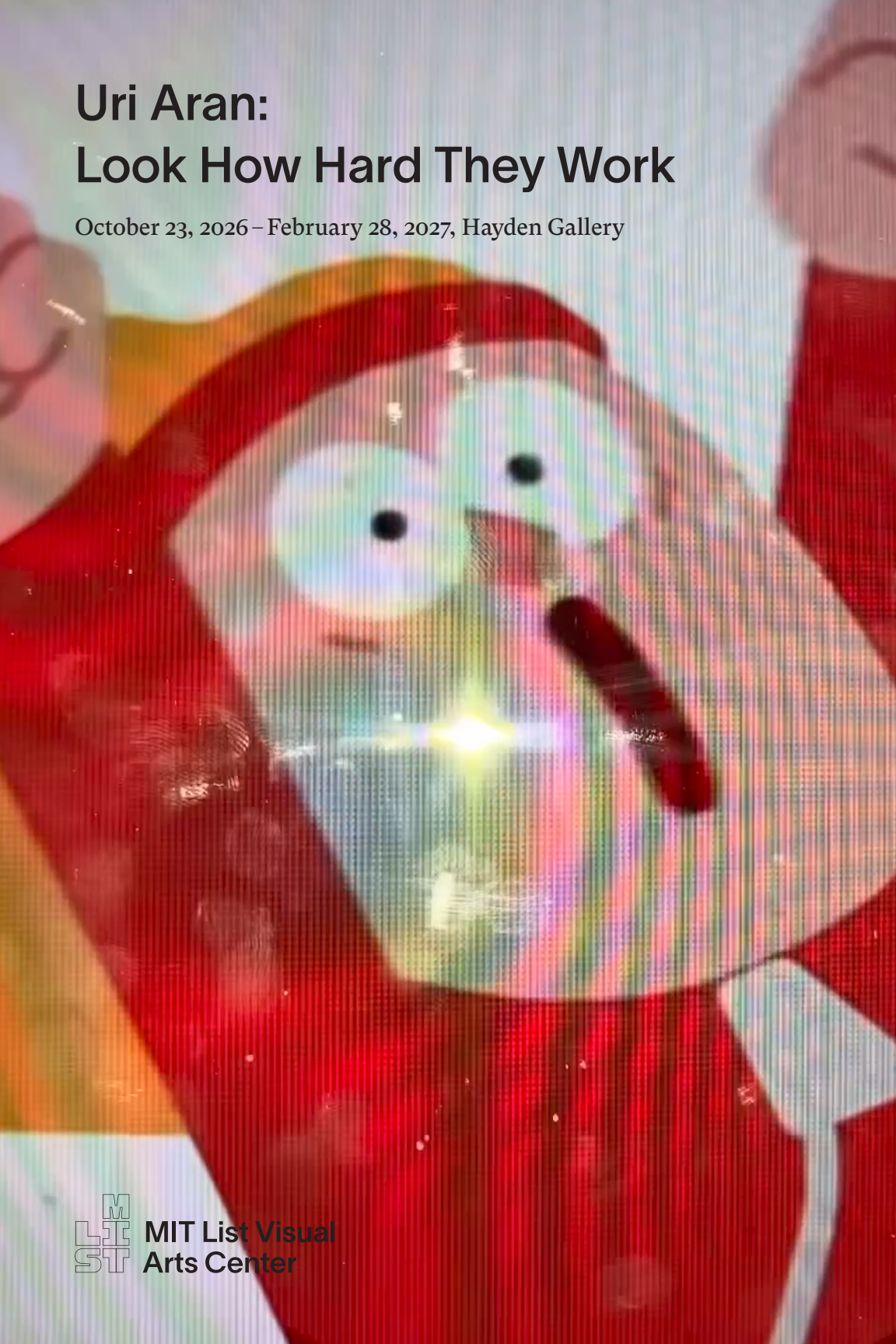
Uri Aran:
Look How Hard They Work

October 23, 2026 – February 28, 2027, Hayden Gallery



MIT List Visual Arts Center



Front cover:
Untitled (Eddy), 2026 (still). Five-channel video, color, sound. Courtesy the artist; Matthew Brown Gallery; Sadie Coles HQ, London; and Andrew Kreps Gallery

Above:
Want, 2024 (still). Single channel video. © Uri Aran. Courtesy the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London

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Uri Aran's work can appear both deeply idiosyncratic and oddly familiar: Drawing on the stuff of everyday life, he turns a private vocabulary public. To follow it is to tinker alongside the artist, to be let in on an invention, or perhaps a shorthand between friends.

Aran arranges objects and images the way one might spatially illustrate a scene with whatever is on a dinner table, letting a salt shaker stand for a person and a napkin for a museum. His sculptural materials often evoke the home and the schoolroom—pompom fringe and floral upholstery, cookies and fish food, sticker sheets, and children's characters—and his formal gestures of repetition, quotation, and misalignment allow ordinary things to take on the air of characters, acquiring an artifice that is tender, elusive, abject, and humorous.

The exhibition's title emerges from a central video work, in which a group of musicians rehearses a song with this singular refrain. Within these lyrics, they stretch and practice the first word—"Look, look, look"—until the directive loosens into a beat. Repetition has long been central to his method: In past videos, he has instructed performers simply to "say this sentence ten times," and he has asked his friend Harry Acland, whose British accent lends any line an air of authority, to recite phrases until their content thins and their delivery—accent, register, class—comes to the fore and outweighs content.[1] At once specific and nearly empty, "Look how hard they work" can sound admiring or condescending, poetic or pathetic, implying an observer who measures effort without naming that observer.

Learning, and the effort and reward that sustain it, run throughout the exhibition. "The concept of rewards is one I use a lot," Aran has said. "It has to do with a child's world and an affinity with games and the game board."[2] Here, a sculpture bearing "Look mum" in its title alludes to a child's eagerness to be seen and praised. Sheets of animal stickers, a micro-currency of approval, are enlarged to the scale of tapestries, and music stands titled *Stay*, *Stage*, and *Pleasure* (all 2026) offer wire, fabric, and ceramic in place of a score.

Presiding from monitors hung high on the walls, the cartoon people and animals of Duolingo, the app on which Aran has been learning Italian, brighten at correct answers and slump at wrong ones. Shot through layers of screens (Aran uses his phone to record video playback on his computer monitor), the clips loop and bounce back and forth like a lesson repeated until it sticks.

Aran has referred to animals and children as "outsiders to language" in the sense that we train them and project onto them,

1 Uri Aran, quoted in Beatrix Ruf, Fredi Fischli, and Niels Olsen, "Typography and Topography: Uri Aran in Conversation," in *Uri Aran*, ed. Margot Heller and Ruf (JRP Ringier, 2015), 88.
2 Aran, quoted in "Typography and Topography," 80.







Exhibition view: *Untitled (I love you)*, Madre, Naples, 2026. Courtesy the artist and Fondazione Donnaregina per le arti contemporanee, Napoli – museo Madre. © Uri Aran. Photo: Amedeo Benestante

and, as such, they become screens for the feelings and lessons we bring to them.[3] He populates the exhibition with other similar stand-ins. On twelve vintage televisions placed on pedestals, Simon Soundman, a Sesame Street character who speaks in sound effects rather than words, appears in a looped black-and-white clip that is slightly out of sync from set to set. Encased in a Plexiglas hood, each Simon is alone muttering to himself; barely audible, his effort at mimicry is drained of meaning. The misalignment, isolation, and repetition are deliberate; Simon, as an outsider to language, is a better teacher.

Masks recur in many of Aran's recent drawings, in which quick lines are built up through layers of oil and pastel. A beaked nose reappears across many sheets, operating less as a feature than as a device that turns a figure into a character. Gender signifiers are often unclear or absent; a vagueness that seems deliberate and leaves each figure open to the desires of a viewer. Some faces are loosely inspired by historical paintings, and others are drawings of drawings, so each becomes, in Aran's words, "a mask on a mask on a mask."[4] Beneath some drawings, passport-style photographs of people and animals appear like faces looking out the windows of a school bus. Their repetition is what makes them matter, and also what empties them. Each face becomes a type rather than a person; yet, they keep looking and invite us to wonder and look, too. Other drawings sit above enlarged animal stickers or fish food labels, which work as strange semiotic captions, naming nothing and everything at once.

Aran has defined sentimentality as "an exaggeration of emotional conventions or tropes," and much of the exhibition, from the emotional pull of a musical phrase to heaps of tiny googly eyes, courts it openly.[5] The results can be tender or, as Aran puts it, "humorous and potentially abject," and are often both at once.[6] He does not hold himself above these devices. What interests him is "the moment in which I find myself sentimental despite myself," a moment he then undoes: "I pull the rug from under my own feet."[7] *Look How Hard They Work* extends this double movement to visitors, who may find themselves responding to a cue they can plainly see—amused, perhaps, at how easily they have been trained.

3 Uri Aran, "Sam Anderson + Uri Aran," == no. 2 (2014): 8–9.
4 Uri Aran, conversation with the author, October 2026.
5 Uri Aran, quoted in Cecilia Alemani, "I Believe in Mimicry," *Mousse*, no. 26 (2010), 119.
6 Uri Aran, quoted in Sadie Coles HQ, *Uri Aran: Two Things About Suffering*, press release, 2016.
7 Aran, quoted in "Typography and Topography," 88.

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Uri Aran lives and works in New York. He studied at Bezalel Academy of Art and Design and Cooper Union and received an MFA from Columbia University. Recent institutional exhibitions have taken place at Madre Museo d'arte contemporanea Donnaregina, Naples, IT (2026); The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin (2023); Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne (2016); South London Gallery (2013); and Kunsthalle Zürich (2013). Aran's work is included in the collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, ICA Miami, Dallas Museum of Art, and RISD Museum, among others.

Uri Aran: Look How Hard They Work is organized by Natalie Bell, Chief Curator.

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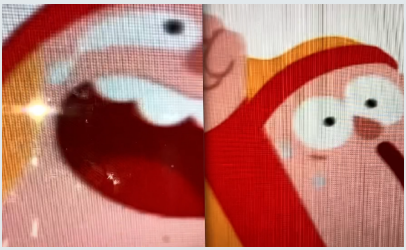
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