

STUDENT OPINION

Are A.I.-Generated Pictures Art?

A man won an art competition with an image he created using an artificial intelligence program. Was it “cheating”?



By Natalie Proulx

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Have you ever created A.I.-generated art? If so, what did you make, and what was the experience like?

If not, try it out here. Just type any combination of words into the prompt field, choose an art style and click “create.”

What’s your reaction to the generator’s creation?

In your opinion, how do A.I.-generated pictures like these compare to an original piece of artwork that an artist might draw, paint, sculpt or photograph? Are they the same? Do you think A.I.-generated images are art?

In “An A.I.-Generated Picture Won an Art Prize. Artists Aren’t Happy.” Kevin Roose writes about the controversy behind A.I.-generated images, which was front and center at a recent art competition:

This year, the Colorado State Fair's annual art competition gave out prizes in all the usual categories: painting, quilting, sculpture.

But one entrant, Jason M. Allen of Pueblo West, Colo., didn't make his entry with a brush or a lump of clay. He created it with Midjourney, an artificial intelligence program that turns lines of text into hyper-realistic graphics.

Mr. Allen's work, "Théâtre D'opéra Spatial," took home the blue ribbon in the fair's contest for emerging digital artists — making it one of the first A.I.-generated pieces to win such a prize, and setting off a fierce backlash from artists who accused him of, essentially, cheating.

Reached by phone on Wednesday, Mr. Allen defended his work. He said that he had made clear that his work — which was submitted under the name "Jason M. Allen via Midjourney" — was created using A.I., and that he hadn't deceived anyone about its origins.

"I'm not going to apologize for it," he said. "I won, and I didn't break any rules."

A.I.-generated art has been around for years. But tools released this year — with names like DALL-E 2, Midjourney and Stable Diffusion — have made it possible for rank amateurs to create complex, abstract or photorealistic works simply by typing a few words into a text box.

These apps have made many human artists understandably nervous about their own futures — why would anyone pay for art, they wonder, when they could generate it themselves? They have also generated fierce debates about the ethics of A.I.-generated art, and opposition from people who claim that these apps are essentially a high-tech form of plagiarism.

The article goes on to explain the ethical dilemma:

Controversy over new art-making technologies is nothing new. Many painters recoiled at the invention of the camera, which they saw as a debasement of human artistry. (Charles Baudelaire, the 19th-century French poet and art critic, called photography “art’s most mortal enemy.”) In the 20th century, digital editing tools and computer-assisted design programs were similarly dismissed by purists for requiring too little skill of their human collaborators.

What makes the new breed of A.I. tools different, some critics believe, is not just that they’re capable of producing beautiful works of art with minimal effort. It’s how they work. Apps like DALL-E 2 and Midjourney are built by scraping millions of images from the open web, then teaching algorithms to recognize patterns and relationships in those images and generate new ones in the same style. That means that artists who upload their works to the internet may be unwittingly helping to train their algorithmic competitors.

Students, read the entire article, then tell us:

- What is your reaction to Mr. Allens artwork? Do you think it is prize-worthy? Do you think it is “cheating”?
- Should pictures created with artificial intelligence be considered art — equal to what an artist might create with a pen, a brush or a lump of clay? Why or why not?
- New art-making technologies have long been the subject of controversy in the art world. Do you think fears about A.I. are overblown? Or are artists rightfully worried about how the technology how might affect their own livelihoods and art itself?
- Mr. Allen claims, “Art is dead, dude. It’s over. A.I. won. Humans lost.” What do you think of this statement? Do you agree? Is A.I. the future of art?
- What is the value of visual art in our world? What role does it play in your own life? What might we gain from A.I.-created art? What might we lose?

Students 13 and older in the United States and Britain, and 16 and older elsewhere, are invited to comment. All comments are moderated by the Learning Network staff, but please keep in mind that once your comment is accepted, it will be made public.

Find more Student Opinion questions here. Teachers, check out this guide to learn how you can incorporate them into your classroom.

Natalie Proulx joined The Learning Network as a staff editor in 2017 after working as an English language arts teacher and curriculum writer.