



This image just won an award in a major AI art competition.

It was selected by a jury of experts from The New York Times, Christie's, and Getty Images.

There's just one problem.



It's not an AI image. It's a real photograph.

This is the story of how photographer and art activist Miles Astray flipped the script on the art world to ask a crucial question: in an age of artificial intelligence, what is the value of human creativity?

The art world was already in the midst of an AI cold war.

For years, artists and photographers watched as AI image generators evolved from creating strange blobs to producing photorealistic art. The tension peaked in 2023 when German artist Boris Eldagsen won a prestigious Sony World Photo Award with an AI piece, which he then refused. A line had been crossed, and many artists feared their skills were being devalued by code.

An artist saw a challenge, not a threat.

Photographer Miles Astray was watching this debate unfold. A storyteller dedicated to capturing the world with minimal editing, he felt the conversation was missing a key point: the real world's own surreal and surprising beauty.

"I had seen a few examples over the last couple of years where people had entered AI art into real photography competitions... I thought, why not turn this story around and enter a real photo into an AI competition?"

— Miles Astray, to CBS News



The plan: Prove that reality can out-create the algorithm.

Astray conceived a simple but powerful idea. He would find a real photograph so unbelievable it looked artificial and submit it to a major AI art contest.

His goal was to prove that “human-made content has not lost its relevance, that Mother Nature and her human interpreters can still beat the machine.”



He needed a Trojan horse. He found it in Aruba.

The image was one Astray had taken in 2022. He captured a flamingo at dawn as it bent its neck to scratch its belly, completely obscuring its own head. The resulting photograph was surreal, almost anatomically impossible.

He named it 'FLAMINGONE'.

"Of course, I deliberately chose a picture that is so surreal... it could easily be attributed to AI being at play."

The stage was set at one of the world's premier competitions.

Astray submitted 'FLAMINGONE' to the AI category of the 1839 Awards.

The jury was a panel of industry heavyweights, with experts from:



The New York Times

GETTY IMAGES

CHRISTIE'S



Centre Pompidou

Getty Images

Christie's

The impossible happened. The real photo won. **Twice.**



Astray's real photograph not only fooled the expert panel, it won Third Place in the AI category. In an even more telling twist, it also won the People's Vote award.

Even when pitted against actual AI-generated art, the public was more drawn to the real, human-captured moment.

A statement, not a trophy.

As soon as the winners were announced on 11 June, Astray contacted the organisers and revealed the truth. His goal was never to cheat, but to spark a conversation.

“My picture ‘FLAMING ONE’ won the People’s Vote and a Jury Award in the artificial intelligence category... the twist: the photo is not AI-generated. Nature still outdoes the machine and you helped prove it!”

— Miles Astray’s public announcement

The organisers' response was as surprising as the stunt itself.

The 1839 Awards team could have reacted with anger. Instead, they responded with grace. While Astray was necessarily disqualified to be fair to other artists, the organisation embraced the dialogue his submission had created.

'An important, relevant and timely statement.'

— Lily Fierman, 1839 Awards



Fierman confirmed they had "no hard feelings" and wanted to collaborate with Astray on a public discussion about AI.

'This made my day more than any of the press articles.'

— Miles Astray

The story of the headless flamingo went viral, sparking a global conversation.

Astray's work was a brilliant piece of performance art that **submitted a question, not just a photograph**. What does it mean when reality is so bizarre it can be mistaken for a machine's dream? He challenged the narrative that humans are becoming obsolete in creative fields.

The most telling detail? We are still drawn to what is real.

Winning both the jury and public vote suggests that even when we think we are looking at something artificial, we are subconsciously drawn to authenticity, emotion, and life. A simple, quirky moment of a flamingo scratching its belly had more emotional pull than anything an algorithm could generate.

Art is not just about perfection; it is about perspective, emotion, and the story behind the image. It's about getting up at five in the morning to see what the world might show you.





So, who really won? The machine that can
create anything, or the human who can see
the magic in everything?