

Facebook Is Being Overrun With Stolen, AI-Generated Images That People Think Are Real

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Jason Koebler

December 18, 2023

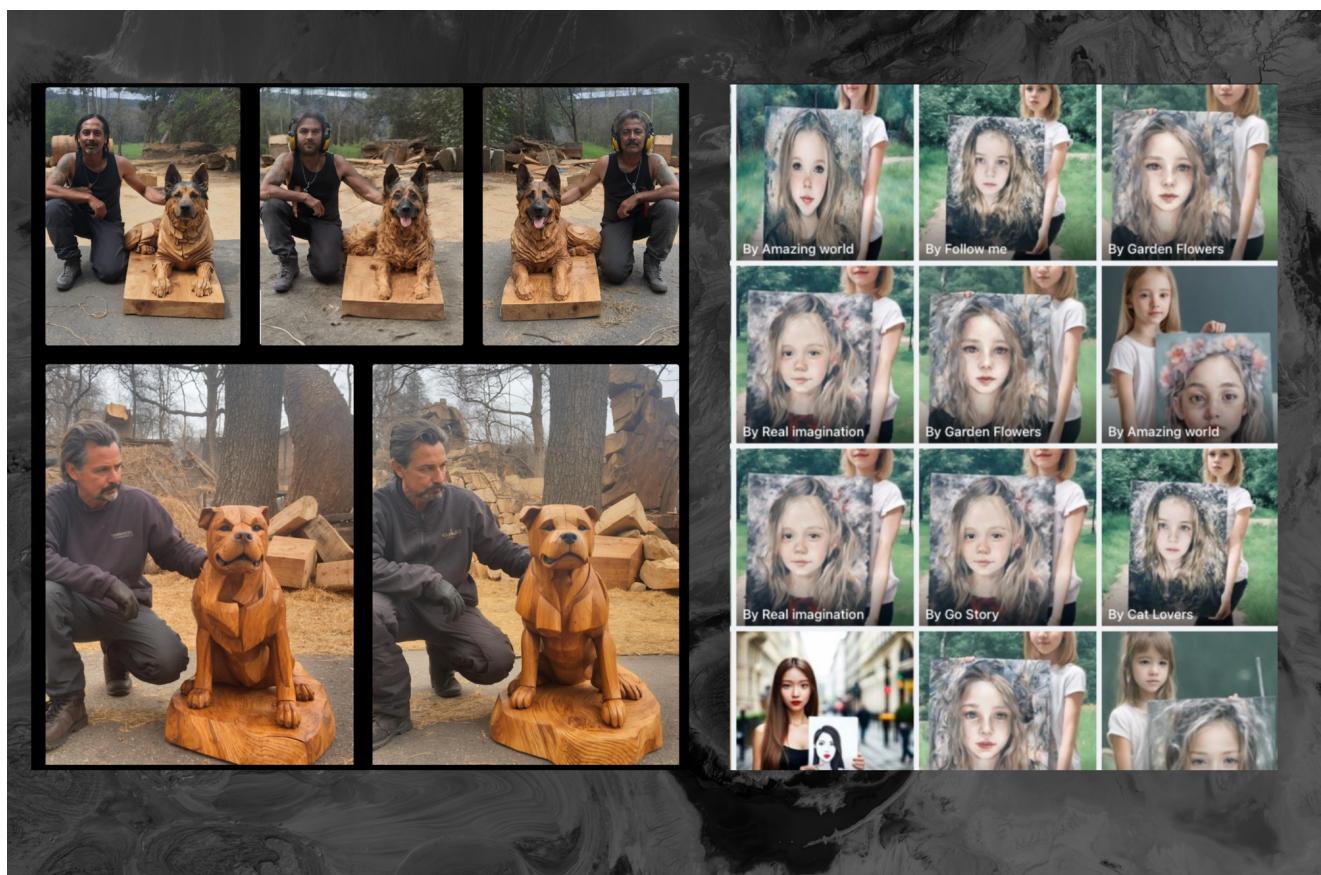
AI



Jason Koebler

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The once-prophesized future where cheap, AI-generated trash content floods out the hard work of real humans is already here, and is already taking over Facebook.



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In the photo, a man kneels in an outdoor sawmill next to his painstaking work: An intricate wooden carving of his bulldog, which he proudly gazes at. “Made it with my own hands,” the Facebook caption reads. The image has 1,300 likes, 405 comments, and 47 shares.

“Beautiful work of art,” one of the comments reads. “You have an AMAZING talent!” another says. “Nice work, love it <3!” “Awesome work keep it up.”

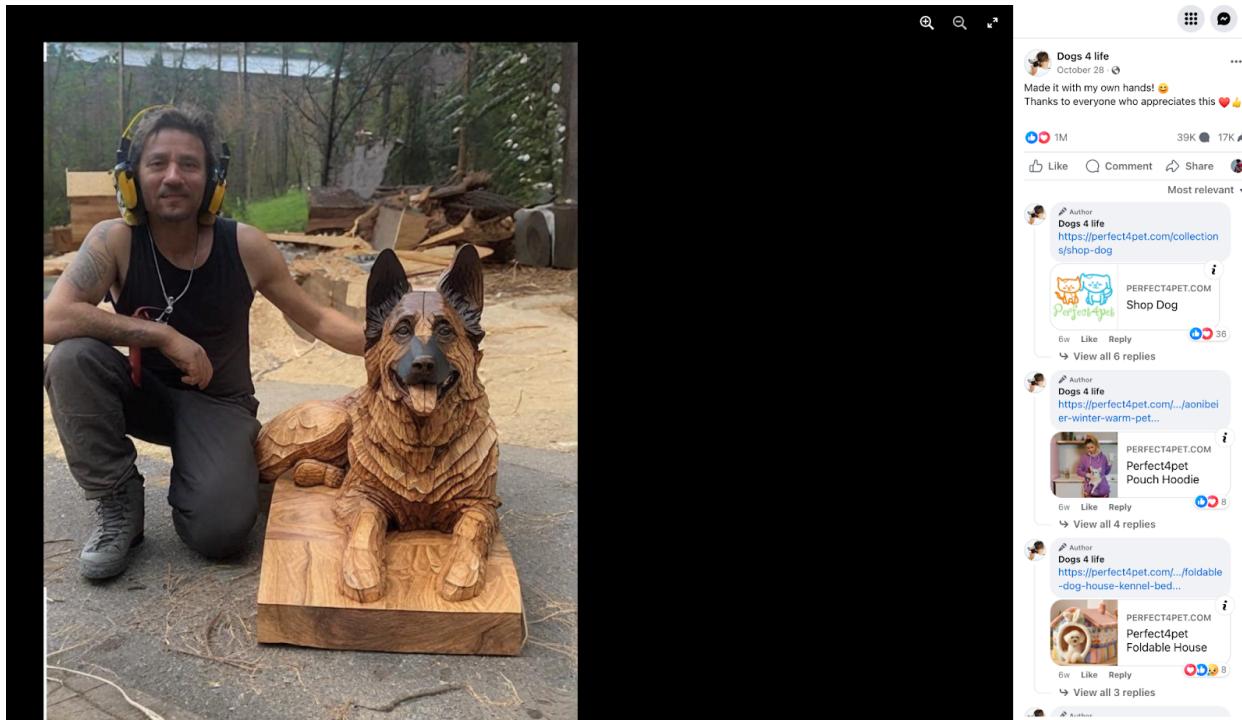
This incredible work of art, a “wooden monument to my dog,” has been posted dozens of times across dozens of engagement bait Facebook pages. But every time, the man and the dog are different. Sometimes the dog is hyperrealistic. Sometimes the bulldog is a German Shepherd. Sometimes the man’s hair is slicked back, sometimes it stands up. Sometimes the man sits on the other side of the dog. Sometimes the man looks Latino, other times he looks white; clearly, it is a different man, and a different dog, in most of the images.







All of these images are AI-generated, and stolen from an artist named Michael Jones.



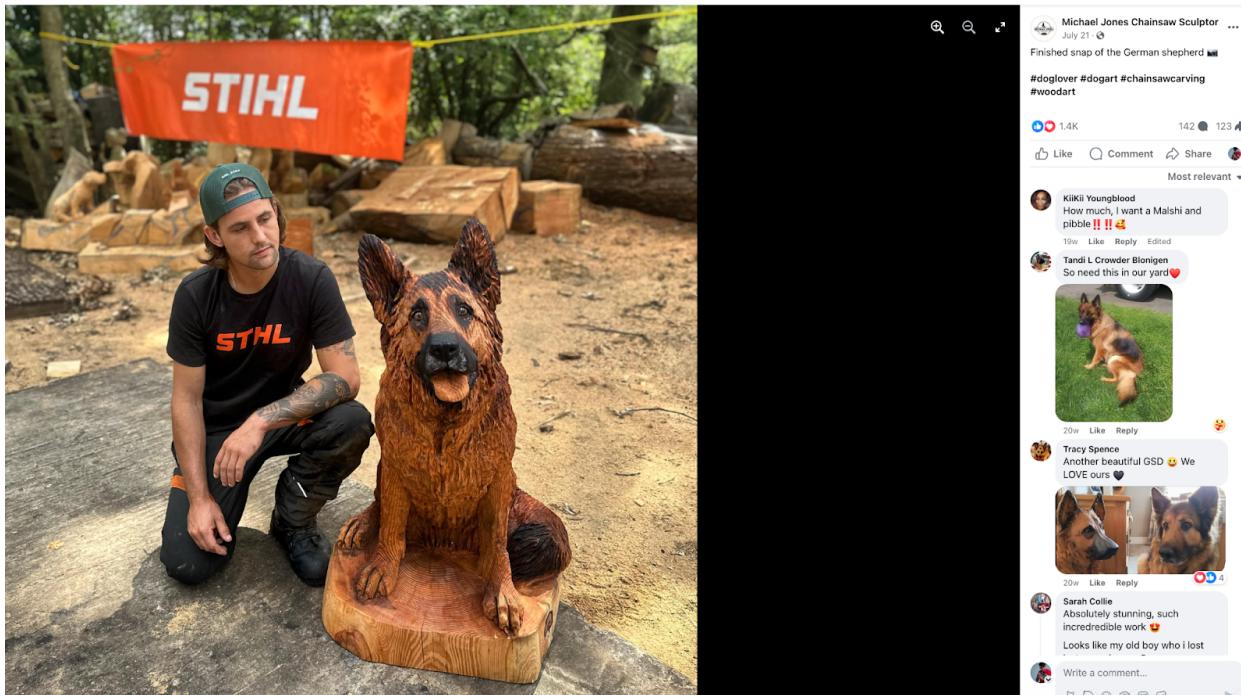
One of the images has more than a million likes.

Depending on the image, it is obvious, to me, that the man and the dog are not real. The dog often looks weirdly polygonal, or like some wood carving filter has been applied to an image of a real dog. Sometimes the dog's ear has obvious artifacts associated with AI-generated images. Other times, it's the man who looks fake. Variations of this picture are being posted all over Facebook by a series of gigantic meme pages with names like "Go Story," "Amazing World," "Did you know?" "Follow me," "Avokaddo," and so on.

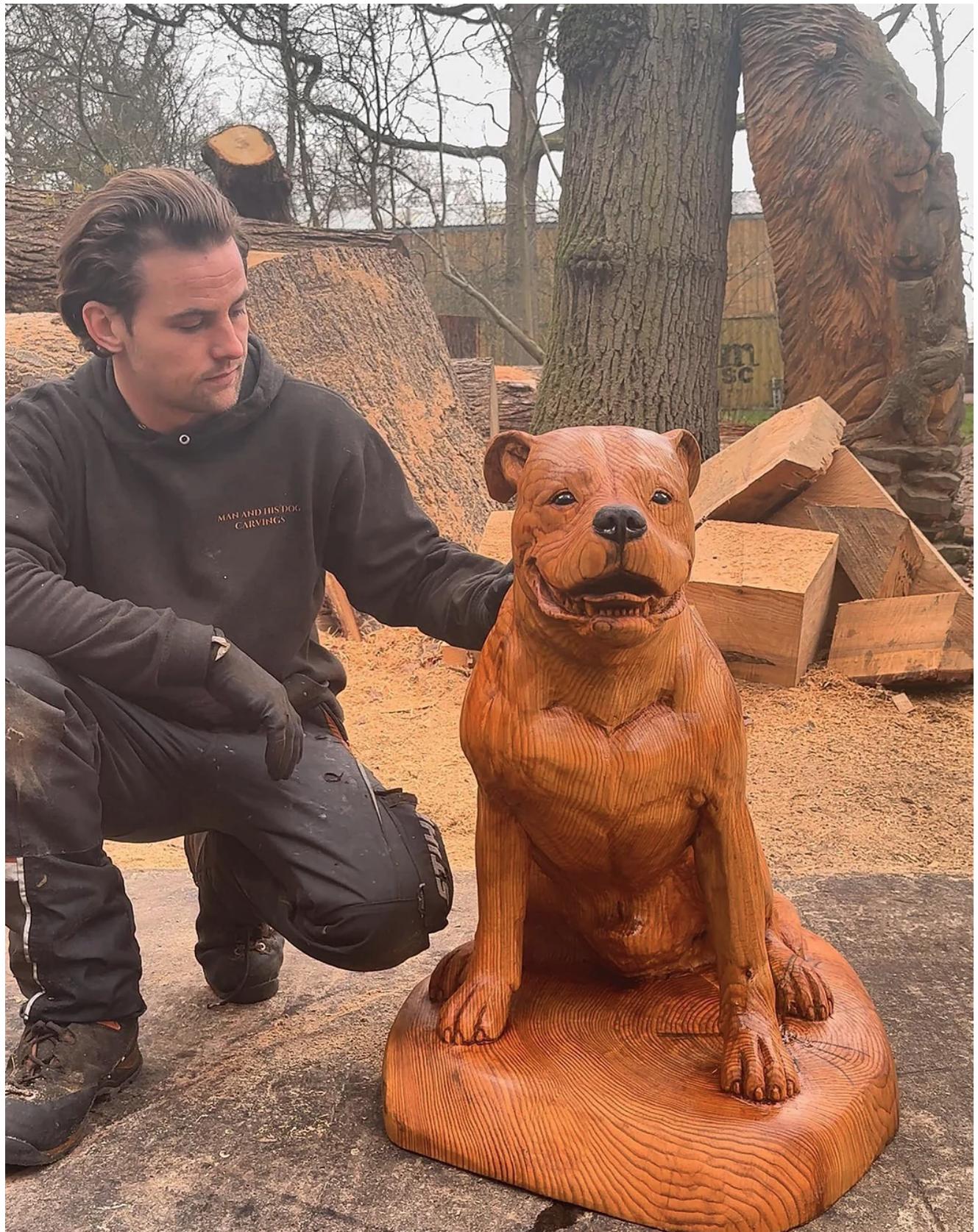
Universally, the comment sections of these pages feature hundreds of people who have no idea that these are AI-generated and are truly inspired by the dog carving. A version of this image posted on Dogs 4 life has 1 million likes, 39,000 comments, and 17,000 shares. The Dogs 4 life account has spammed links to buy cheap, dog-branded stuff to the top of the comments section.

In many ways, this is a tale as old as time: people lie and steal content online in exchange for likes, influence and money all the time. But the spread of this type of content on Facebook over the last several months has shown that the once-prophesized future where cheap, AI-generated trash content floods out the hard work of real humans is already here, and is already taking over Facebook. It also shows Facebook is doing essentially nothing to help its users decipher real content from AI-generated content masquerading as real content, and that huge masses of Facebook users are completely unprepared for our AI-generated future.

The dog and the carving were real, at one point. The real German Shepherd carving was made by a UK-based professional chainsaw sculptor named Michael Jones, who detected his work in a series of videos and photos posted over the course of the summer. Jones' work has since been stolen and turned into endless variations. Those images are then turned into endless inspiration bait by spammy Facebook pages that are presumably looking to monetize the stolen work of artists like Jones.



Jones' real carving



Another of Jones' real carvings



Another of Jones' real carvings

"This is something that is a huge issue for us and other carvers all over the world who are sadly missing out on the rightful credit exposure to their work," Jones told me, "as well as setting unrealistic expectations when it comes to creating chainsaw carving art or any art for that matter!"

The strategy relies on "image-to-image" generative AI, which takes an input image and generates a new one based on that input. "Every time you generate an image, you get something completely different because it's randomly seeded, and [the model] is looking for semantic consistency," Hany Farid, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley who

specializes in AI disinformation and deepfakes, told me. Different generators let a user select the “strength” of the new image, which is a number between zero and one “where zero essentially means ‘ignore this image,’ and one says ‘give me this image exactly back,’” Farid said.

Elaine Gottschalk

Beautiful 😍😍😍😍😍



2

5d Like Reply

↳ View all 2 replies

Monika Fuhrmeister

Beautiful 😊



4d Like Reply

↳ View 1 reply

Bobby Chatooria

Great Job



5d Like Reply

Julie Hughes

Beautiful, well done! ❤️

5d Like Reply

↳ View 1 reply

Anthony Tudino

Very good job you are a gifted person

Thais White



4d Like Reply

◆ Top fan

Bobby L Williams
Awesome photo

4d Like Reply

Rose Rathmann

That's very nice u did a great job

5d Like Reply

Jeanie Reed

Your a fantastic artist ❤️

3d Like Reply

Janet Howard

Awesome

2d Like Reply

A very standard comment section on one of these images.

I learned about the dog carvings from Brian Penny, a freelance ghostwriter, who shared Jones's original image and copies of it on Threads.

"All these people are engagement farming off really shitty versions of his work and it's giving his art a bad name," Penny told me. "He's having to compete against these versions of his work and it could easily destroy his business."

Penny told me that a group of AI enthusiasts, skeptics, researchers, and interested parties had been researching and documenting the fact that stolen, AI-generated clones of viral images are taking over Facebook with impunity, where unaware boomers click "like," "share," and say things like "wow, incredible," all day every day.

“STOP THE EXPLOITATION OF AI-GENERATED CHILDREN”

Penny invited me to the Facebook group “Um, isn’t that AI?,” which has 2,700 members documenting Facebook posts containing obviously AI-generated content that is going viral on Facebook (and which are also designed to trick users into thinking they are real). The first thing I saw when I joined was this image, posted on a page called “Happy day,” which has 261 likes and 71 comments like “This is really beautiful. You are really talented.”

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The image is a composite of two parts. On the left, a photograph shows a large, intricately carved wooden bear standing on a tree trunk. A man in a blue jacket and red gloves stands next to it, and two small children are playing in the dirt around the base. On the right, a screenshot of a Facebook post titled "Happy day" is shown. The post includes the same image of the bear and has 261 likes and 71 comments. Some of the comments are visible, including one from Linda Sarallo saying "Great job hope you enjoyed making it as much as we do seeing it".

If you look at this image, you will notice that the bear is standing on, essentially, an amorphous blob that seems to have a human foot. If you look slightly more closely, you will see two impossibly tiny fake children playing in the dirt.

The next image I saw was this meme, which made me laugh: “STOP THE EXPLOITATION OF A.I. GENERATED CHILDREN!,” it reads. “Little Juan is forced to carve wooden dogs for FACEBOOK SCAMMERS, and they won’t even share the ‘likes’ with him. By commenting on this page you are contributing to the ongoing abuse of millions of artificially generated children from all over the world, or you could just be a target for future scams. LEARN TO RECOGNIZE AI GENERATED IMAGERY.”

STOP THE EXPLOITATION of A.I. GENERATED CHILDREN!





This is Jaun A. BeaLive. Little Jaun is forced to carve wooden dogs for **FACEBOOK SCAMMERS**, and they won't even share the "likes" with him. By commenting on this page you are contributing to the ongoing abuse of millions of artificially generated children from all over the world, or you could just be a target for future scams

LEARN TO RECOGNIZE AI GENERATED IMAGERY

Jason Weiesenbach, the creator of the meme, posted that commenters on AI-generated images "are literally praising—in a religious sense—non-reality ... imagine if instead of trying to sell someone an adoption certificate for an AI generated monkey, they started feeding these folks fake news articles, complete with artificially generated photographic evidence, or go to their photos grab a random picture of their grandchild, put into an artificially generated hostage situation, and then uses that to scam them out of their life savings. These are not far-fetched ideas, that's literally the extreme side where this is headed. My point is these people are not ready for the world that is coming."

Um, isn't that AI? grew out of Facebook groups dedicated to Midjourney and other AI image generators. Penny and others in that group, including Um, isn't that AI? founder Molly Huxley began to notice that images originally posted as AI-generated art were being posted elsewhere on Facebook as though they were real images.

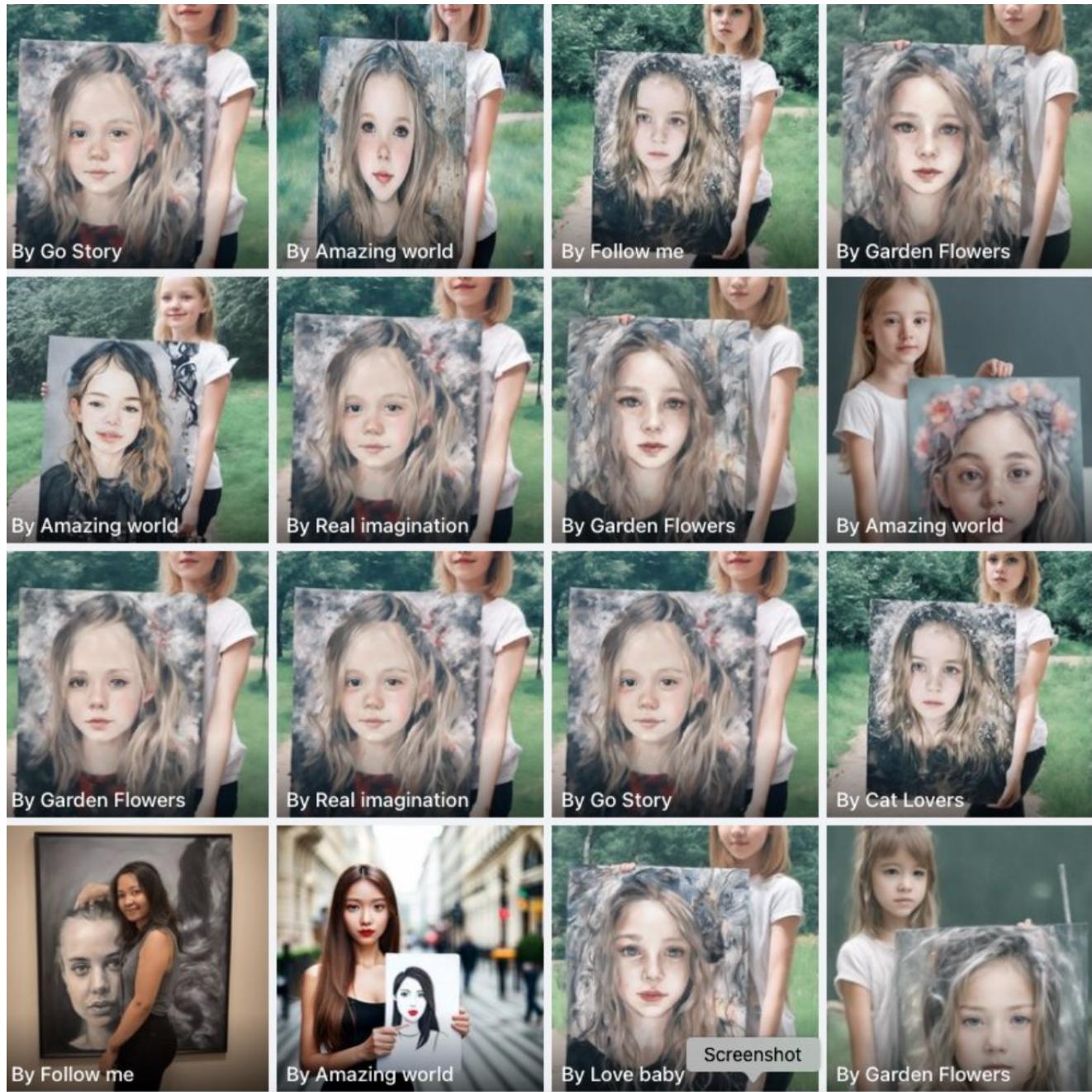
"People would take the AI images and post them elsewhere as if they were real, and commenters thought they were real," Penny told me. "Molly started the group and it was originally people from the AI art community who thought it was funny and weird that people were believing this shit, and it grew from there."

The group has noticed that many of the "remixes" are posted by the same set of 10 or 15 engagement bait Facebook pages. They often repost the same images or versions of the same images and themes over and over again. There's "Bread House Man," "Victoria's Art," "Jesus in a Nut Tree," "Sand Castle Kid," and dozens of other variations of images that get

posted over and over again. Penny said his own involvement in the group started as a curiosity but eventually he became alarmed when his family members began commenting on AI fakes on Facebook as though they were real.

"My own dad shared one of these things, and I thought 'You cannot think this is real,'" Penny said. "Then I saw my aunts and my dad's friends share it—it gave me this whole existential crisis."

In Search of Victoria and The Bread House Man



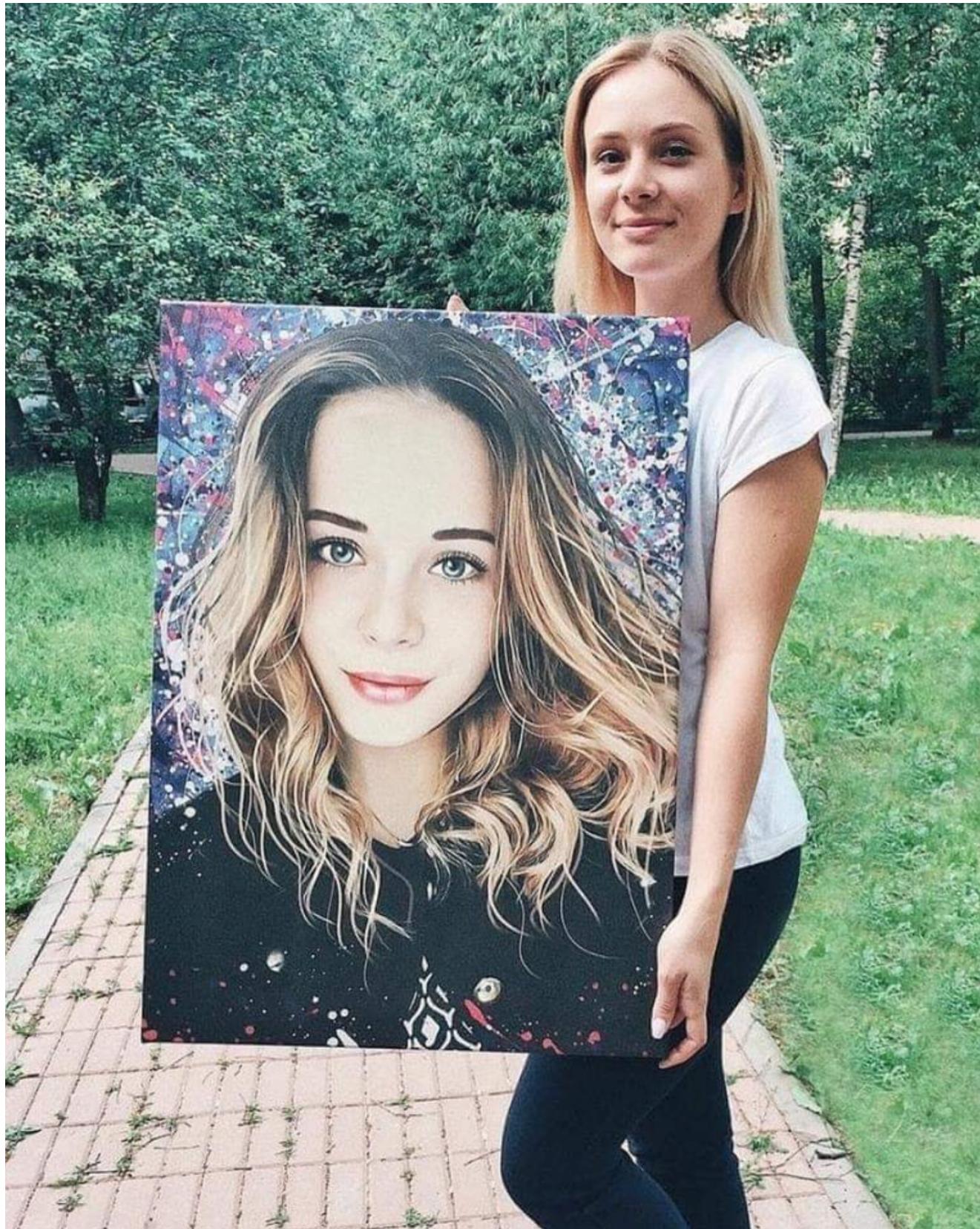
The MVP of Um, isn't That AI? is Catherine Hall, a woman from New Zealand who has been systematically trying to trace the different versions of AI-generated duplicates all over Facebook, and has painstakingly searched for the original works that they were based off of.

I was amazed by Hall's Google Sheets spreadsheets that trace every version of an image she can find. Originally, I saw her spreadsheet for "Victoria's Art," an image in which Victoria stands on a dirt path, proudly holding a self-portrait she painted. "I am a young artist Victoria. Please appreciate :)." Hall has identified 116 different variations of Victoria. In some she's young, in others she's a grandma. Sometimes, Victoria is Asian, Black, or mixed. Sometimes she has blonde hair, other times it's red or gray.

"I wanted a way to show others how these images are being used. I discovered the majority of them were created from an actual artist's original work, rather than a text based prompt so I became interested in finding the originals. It is frustrating me that so many mindless 'wows!' get spewed out over a fake copy of a real artist's work," Hall said. "Basically I will choose an image to research. Then hit up my list of fb pages and search through their back catalog to find all the renditions, I paste the information into a Google Sheet as I go then I can sort by date to see how the image has developed and morphed. Often they will have used a stolen original back at the start of things which can be searched back to find the source. I still am not sure why they do it."

Hall has made similar spreadsheets for "Leaping Horse," (stolen from an artist named Brandon Wilson), "Man/boy with a wooden owl," (original unknown), "sand sculpting masters," (stolen from an Indian teenager whose name on Facebook is Sn Art Sadananda), and "Jesus in a Nut Tree" (artist unknown). I asked Sadananda how he felt after seeing the spreadsheet of clones of his work: "yes, upset," he said.

Over the course of two hours on Wednesday, Hall and I chatted and began to try to find Victoria and where she came from. Hall already had a few candidates. I did some additional reverse image searching and found a screenshot of a VKontakte post featuring the image, from 2021, with the caption "Я молодая художница Виктория. Написала свою первую картину," which translates to "I am a young artist Victoria. I painted my first picture." I searched this and was able to find an identical post on Facebook from 2021 from a page called "Сладкая жизнь," which means "Sweet Life." This post has 16,000 likes and 829 comments. The image appears to be real, with some light Photoshopping in the grass near the path.



The original image of "Victoria"

I shared these links with Hall. She started looking at the images Sweet Life had posted over the years. The floodgates opened.

"Oh wow" she said. "The bread house," she added. An image of a man with, uhh, a bread house popped up.

oh wow...

[https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?
fbid=526255513048910&set=pb.100
069933968592.-2207520000&type=
3](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=526255513048910&set=pb.100069933968592.-2207520000&type=3)



Сладкая жизнь



Самый богатый дом на свете! Хлеб
- всему голова👍😊😊

Facebook



the bread house



A document of bread house men Hill created.

She immediately followed up with 15 additional, AI-generated remixes of the bread house, each of which have a different man or different version of the house. “This page you found with ‘Victoria’ has a lot of the mother images that had been used to generate the AI versions,” she said. She sent me a series of real photographs of people that had been used as a “seed” image for future AI clones that she’s been tracking for months.

“I am finding the source image of so much of this stuff. I wonder if the owners of this page are the same group, but have moved on to generating the AI, or if the AI groups are just using this page as a source,” she said. “This page you found is pure gold.”

What seems to be happening is that some of the new Facebook pages sharing these AI-generated clones are pulling from old meme pages, which themselves had previously just reposted stuff that went viral on Reddit, Tumblr, or elsewhere.

We weren’t able to find the actual “Victoria,” or the Bread House Man, but we were at least able to peel back another layer of the onion. No one operating any of the Facebook pages responded to messages for comment. Hall’s theory, a common one in the Um, isn’t That AI? Group is that some of these larger groups will sell their accounts once they’ve amassed large numbers of followers, pivot to political disinformation, or try to monetize what they’re doing. A few of them have begun posting links to sites outside of Facebook, while others add

links to online stores in the comment sections of their posts once an image has gone viral. The fact that all of these pages are stealing the work of artists upsets Hall: "Often I feel like I am just shouting my observations into a raging storm and no one hears," she said.

ARTIFICIAL REALITIES

Of all of the awful things we've seen artificial intelligence used for, engagement baiting with stolen content on Facebook is relatively tame. And yet, I couldn't help but feel a mix of wonder and dread while reporting this story. Every time I started researching the origins of a new stolen image, I would click through dozens and dozens of stolen versions of it.

There is no polite way to say this, but the comments sections of each of these images are filled with unaware people posting inane encouragement about artwork stolen by robots, a completely constructed reality where thousands of talented AI woodcarvers constantly turn pixels into fucked up German Shepherds for their likes and faves. I tried to determine if the commenters, too, were bots. The vast majority of them clearly are not. Most commenters I looked into are people who have been judiciously posting family photos, political arguments, and status updates on Facebook for decades.



ALL AI FAKES 😳

WHEN ARE ALL YOU SWOONING FOOLS GOING TO WISEN UP?

Both Penny and Farid made the same observation I did. Farid said that, currently, “when I look at the harms being perpetrated from generative AI from nonconsensual imagery, child sexual abuse, fraud, and disinformation, this isn’t even on the bottom of the list. Somebody’s posting a photo, real people like it—it’s Facebook, who cares, right?”

But he added that this AI dreck isn’t *good* and that in the long term we could see some bad consequences grow out of the rapid spamming of AI-generated crap. Farid published a study on “nepotistic” AI, where generative AI tools are trained on *other* AI-generated outputs, creating highly-distorted images: “Once poisoned, the models struggle to fully heal even after retraining on only real images,” his study found. “The slightly less kind word is inbreeding, which we didn’t feel we could use in a scientific paper,” Farid said.

The other big problem is that, while more digitally literate people can tell that these are AI-generated images *now*, the technology is advancing so quickly that the typical artifacting and deformities seen in AI-generated images today could be gone tomorrow.

“The images [being generated] are more and more photorealistic,” Farid said. “So we really are entering this era where you can just type and get a hyper photorealistic image. And if it’s not true today will eventually be true that it will be devoid of obvious visual artifacts that the average person looking at would be able to discriminate.”

“There’s something to be said for the fact that our ability to discriminate reality from fiction is important for a functioning society and democracy,” he added. “If every time you see a photo, you think it’s real because it’s a photo, that has consequences beyond the silliness we’re seeing here.”

Penny said he thinks that studying these images might eventually give him the opposite problem: “20 years from now, I don’t know what it’s going to be like then, but I’m not going to believe a single thing anyone shows me on the internet ever again.”

About the author

Jason is a cofounder of 404 Media. He was previously the editor-in-chief of Motherboard. He loves the Freedom of Information Act and surfing.

More from Jason Koebler

