

AI in Photography: Art or Deception?

Adapted from "How This AI Image Won a Major Photography Competition"

In March 2023, a striking black-and-white image of two women embracing won a prestigious award in the Sony World Photography Awards' creative category. The image, entitled "PSEUDOMNESIA: The Electrician," was described as "haunting" and reminiscent of 1940s family portraits.

However, the story took an unexpected turn when the Berlin-based artist, Boris Eldagsen, declined the award. He revealed that his submission was not actually a photograph but an image he had created using DALL-E 2, an artificial intelligence image generator.

"I applied as a cheeky monkey, to find out if competitions are prepared for AI images to enter. They are not," Eldagsen explained on his website. His action sparked widespread discussion about the boundaries between AI-generated work and traditional photography.

Eldagsen described his creative process with AI as liberating: "For me, as an artist, AI generators are absolute freedom. It's like the tool I have always wanted." Rather than requiring traditional photography skills, this new form of artistic creation relies heavily on the artist's ability to craft effective prompts and make creative decisions along the way.

The creation process for "The Electrician" was not instantaneous. Eldagsen explained that it took days of careful refinement, using text prompts and techniques called "inpainting" and "outpainting" to modify and expand the image. "You start somewhere and then you make many different decisions. You delete elements, you add frames. Sometimes the AI has very good suggestions. Sometimes it's just crap," he said.

While Eldagsen celebrates the creative potential of AI, he also expresses concern about its broader implications: "As an artist, I just love it. As a citizen, I'm deeply concerned." He warns that the increasing difficulty in distinguishing between authentic photographs and AI-generated images poses significant challenges for journalism and society. He suggests that by the end of the year, it might become nearly impossible to identify AI-created images without specialized tools.

Eldagsen proposes using the term "promptography" instead of "AI photography" for these new creations, acknowledging that while they may resemble photographs, they are fundamentally different. He believes that society needs to develop a thoughtful approach to categorizing and evaluating AI-generated art, rather than either rejecting it entirely or treating it as equivalent to traditional photography.