Contradictions and Curiosities: Navigating Critical-Creative Engagement with GenAI in the Studio Classroom

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As a visual art professor, I encountered generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in late 2022, not only as a cultural and technological phenomenon but as an urgent pedagogical challenge. In my classroom I saw an increasing number of written assignments that I suspected were AI-generated, while simultaneously observing students struggling anxiously with GenAI, moving between fear and curiosity, fueled by social media and peer opinions. I could not answer their questions or offer solutions to their anxieties and thus found myself learning alongside them. This paper is based on my experiences trying to respond to those tensions through the design of a third-year special topics course, "Explorations in Art & AI," and an accompanying Research Ethics Board (REB)–approved Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) research project, completed at Thompson Rivers University from 2023–25.

In art, like elsewhere in education, GenAI provokes polarized responses ranging from enthusiastic adoption to ethical refusal, especially regarding issues of authorship, appropriation, and labour. My own feelings are similarly complex: I am disgusted by the blatant disregard for copyright law and horrified by the environmental costs of GenAI while also being curious about its possibilities and delighted by some of its outcomes. I reject the notion that, because GenAI carries ethical complexity, artists should not engage with it. This isn't true of any other material, process, or subject matter in the studio. I worry that, if art schools and educators refuse to engage with GenAI in favor of simply vilifying it, we risk losing the opportunity to add more artists' voices and perspectives to debates about its role in education, artmaking, and culture. As experts in image-making, interpretation, and critical inquiry, our voices are indispensable to these conversations.

While GenAI has become synonymous with large language models such as ChatGPT and Claude and image diffusion models such as Midjourney and DALL·E, these represent only the most visible and widely used systems in a long and complex history of computational creativity, extending from early neural networks and machine learning systems to decades of generative and algorithmic art practices. American artist Stephanie Dinkins' long-running conversations with the social robot Bina48 (*Conversations with Bina48*, 2014–ongoing),[1] probe whether friendship, identity, and care can exist between humans and machines, inviting viewers to reflect on how machine learning shapes ideas of personhood and social relations. In her 2025 work *If We Don't, Who Will?*[2], Dinkins transforms a shipping container into a GenAI Art Lab where community-generated stories become live AI-generated images, foregrounding human-centred and culturally responsive models of artificial intelligence. Turkish artist Memo Akten's digital animation *Boundaries* (2024),[3] combines custom code, latent diffusion models, choreographed dance, and fluid simulations to produce a pre-rendered moving image that explores hybrid systems of control and emergence. The work is a meditation on the imagined boundaries between self and environment, the material and immaterial, inviting contemplative reflection on our interconnectedness with the universe. These works (and many others)[4] demonstrate that GenAI has a history and a presence in contemporary art discourse, not only as novelty but as material, method, and concept.

My studio and classroom differ from the conditions under which media-based GenAI-centred contemporary art, like the above examples, is produced. I teach sculpture, drawing, professional practices, and community-engaged art. I work with students who have limited resources, within an institution with no access to high-level media equipment or technical support. We make things with our hands using wood, fibre, plaster, clay and wire. My own art practice[5] centers on physical materials and labour-intensive hand-crafting techniques. I create drawings, sculptures, and installations that explore intersections of technological materials and organic forms through slow material transformation and embodied making. The media practices that engage GenAI to create works supported by networks of computers and expert technicians don't

resonate with the reality of my studio or my classroom. This disconnect led me to wonder how GenAI might be useful and interesting when applied to hands-on studio contexts.

In 2023–24, I dedicated significant time to learning about GenAI and how it could relate to my practice as an artist and art educator. I attended workshops and online courses, researched GenAI privacy and copyright agreements, learned about how GenAI tools are trained, deep-dived ethical, copyright and environmental horrors, read up on how post-secondary institutions were approaching its implementation in the classroom, and researched artists working with GenAI.[6] I looked to Canadian artist Carol Epp, who uses Midjourney to imagine new ceramic works as an example of how an artist might approach using GenAI outside of media arts.[7]

I fed images of my own artworks to Midjourney, DALL·E, Stable Diffusion, and Draw Things. I used my artworks as character references, blended multiple works together, experimented with prompts related to my studio research, and trained a LoRA (low rank adaptation) on seventy-five images of my sculptures. While I am not currently comfortable claiming anything made with GenAI as my own art, using my works as a part of the image-generation process gave me unexpected iterations useful in brainstorming for my own practice and challenged me to look at my work through another lens. These experiences informed the development of a third-year visual arts special-topics course, "Explorations in Art & AI." The course invited students to critically assess and creatively employ GenAI while remaining attentive to its ethical, environmental, and cultural implications. Students were given autonomy over what they made, how they made it, and which platforms they used. They could engage with GenAI as a tool, collaborator, medium, and/or conceptual framework. This required students to confront the consequences of their choices, including data privacy, cost, their own ability and skill to work with GenAI, platform ethics, personal values, and authorship. Course content was accompanied by discussions around originality, copyright, appropriation, GenAI training, environmental impact, artist use, ethical engagement, and artistic control.

In art school, students already grapple with issues of originality, authorship, process versus product, inspiration versus appropriation, artistic control, copyright, environmental impact, bias, cultural influence, labour, value, and skill. These are not new problems, but they have been intensified by the rise of GenAI. The art-school studio should be a safe space to explore ethical dilemmas, uncertainty, strategic use and/or informed refusal. Art-making allows and embraces slow processes, visible labour, embodied making, critique as a learning method, critical making, discomfort, and contradiction as productive states.

At the beginning of the course, I asked students about their initial thoughts and feelings regarding GenAI in relation to art making. Responses ranged from hesitation ("AI Art = Bad") to boredom ("AI art just bores me") to outright rejection ("AI-generated images are not art") to cautious intrigue ("a technology with a lot of potential, but an unregulated beast"). My pedagogical approach was to employ these statements as starting points for curiosity and engagement. Over the semester, students worked through research, brainstorming, presentations, proposal writing, art production, critique, and writing artist statements, exploring how GenAI could be used and answering reflective questionnaires about their experiences at each stage. The following five examples show the range of ways students engaged with the technology and the works produced. All students chose to be identified with their works through REB-approved consent forms. Choosing identification was important to students who felt that GenAI makes artists invisible and anonymous.

Aidan McPhee created an analog critique of the painting-like works that AI artist Daniel Ambrosi[8] generates from photographs. Using ChatGPT, he prompted interpretations of his own photographs and assigned them colour

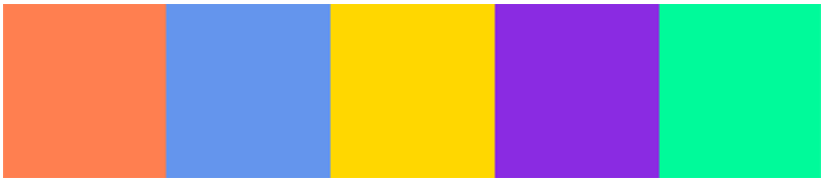


fig. 1 (top)
Image generated by ChatGPT 3, October 2024, from the prompt "create a colour palette."

fig. 2 (bottom)
Aidan McPhee, *An Experimental Trio (3 of 3)*, 2024. Acrylic on canvas, 24 × 36 in. Photo: Nicole Favron.

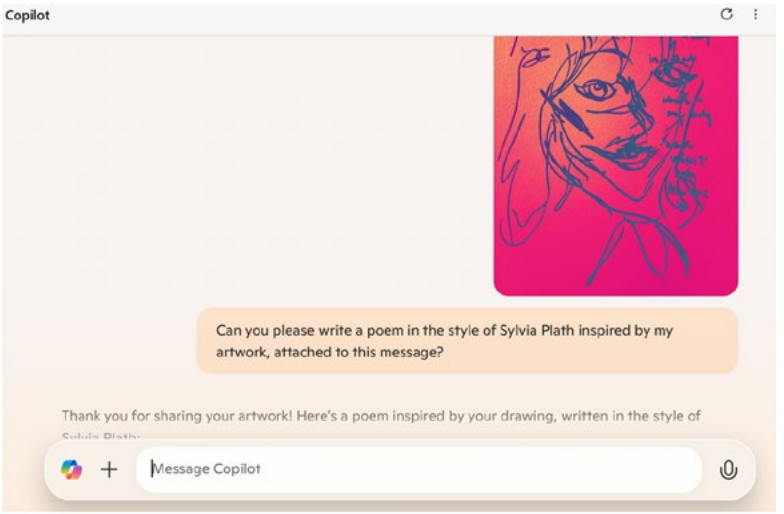
palettes (fig. 1), committing to work with GenAI's results even when he disliked them. Through this process, he created *An Experimental Trio*, three acrylic-on-canvas paintings (fig. 2). These works posed a central question: "If the AI determines artistic vision, whose vision is it?"

Dre Levant fed Copilot their original poems and asked it to generate images based on those poems (fig. 3), and also fed Copilot their original paintings, asking it to generate poems in the style of Sylvia Plath, based on those paintings

chaos colour cacophony: a curved creature, wings pinned to shoulders. an undone dream like threads ripped from stitches. we fragment in rotten fruit. eat your reflection out of the canvas. salt solidified, somehow making limestone. always limestone, sweet salted pillows, a corset of crystallized pale green. love me, in my despair, in my turmoiled fantasies, i'm making something chaotic, i am at peace.

fig. 3 (top) Image generated by Copilot, October 2024, from the prompt "Can you please create an image inspired by my poem, attached to this message?," in response to the provided poem written by Dre Levant (shown above).

fig. 4 (bottom) Text generated by Copilot, October 2024, from the prompt "Can you please write a poem in the style of Sylvia Plath inspired by my artwork, attached to this message?," in response to the provided painting made by Dre Levant (shown above).



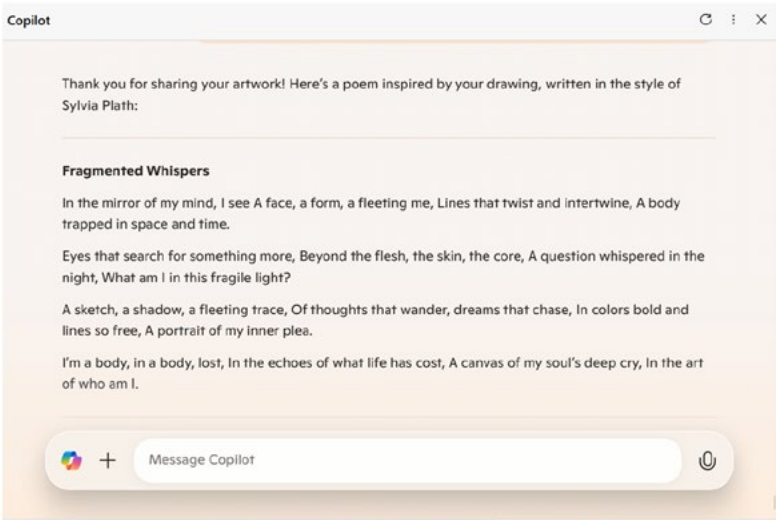


fig. 5 Dre Levant, *Egesta*, 2024. Mixed media on canvas, 24 × 18 in. Photo: Nicole Favron.

fig. 6 (top and middle)
"My Sketch": Avery Stainton, *Sketch*, 2024. Digital drawing. "Gerald Brom, Annie Stegg, Dariusz Zawadski" images generated by MidJourney, November 2024, from the prompt "C-ref (use my sketch as a character reference), generate an image of it (the drawing) in the style of Gerald Brom, ...Annie Stegg, ...Dariusz Zawadski."

fig. 7 (bottom)
Avery Stainton, *Bane of the Prodigious*, 2024. Oil on board, 14 x 8 in. Photo: Nicole Favron.

(fig. 4). Not wanting to present either of these outcomes as their art, they printed parts of their conversations with Copilot, cut them up, and collaged them into mixed media works (fig. 5). Their project asks, "Can something made by AI really be called art? And what happens when artists take that material and reshape it with their own creativity?" The title of this work, *Egesta* (waste material carried out from a body or cell), communicates Dre's feelings about GenAI.

Avery Stainton fed a hand-drawn unicorn sketch into Midjourney as a character reference, generating images of her composition in the style of artists she admires and whose work Midjourney already had in its training set (fig. 6). She combined elements from these outputs to create an oil-on-board painting, *Bane of the Prodigious* (fig. 7). This painting illustrates a captive unicorn, and Avery states about the work: "The act of collaborating with AI can mirror the act of trapping a unicorn for its power, an endeavor fraught with ethical dilemmas and the potential for exploitation."

Ral Ojah fed images of his own artworks to ChatGPT with the prompt "please create an interesting way to add collage to these works." When it provided text-based suggestions, he prompted it to make a visual example (fig. 8). It could not, but instead made a new image in a similar style (fig. 9). Ral decided to use this image and recreate it in handmade physical form, reinterpreting it in his own style. As a Nigerian artist living in Canada, Ral's art explores the blending of cultures through material and visual elements. In *Lanaya Meets AI* (fig. 10), Ral explored that blend through the lens of AI.

Bry Dyer enrolled in the course despite their ethical rejection of the use of GenAI in art creation, stating that they were there to "learn more about their enemy." They chose to engage with GenAI as a conceptual framework for their project and created *AM*[9], a twenty-four-page digital comic (figs. 11–12) that adapts Harlan Ellison's 1967 short story "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream." They were drawn to the themes of Ellison's work due to the parallel between today's AI image generators and Ellison's haunting cautionary theories on technological advancement. Dyer noted, "My version of AM doesn't wield nuclear weapons but instead possesses full access to the internet, a tool that wields its own kind of psychological destruction, eroding individuality and controlling perception."

These are a few examples of projects from a larger selection of works produced by students. All students in the course chose to create hand-made artworks using both physical and digital media. None used GenAI as a medium in and of itself or produced an image with GenAI and called that image their final artwork without making significant changes or alterations to it. All students used GenAI in the iterative process, except one (Dyer) who engaged with it as a conceptual framework only.

What emerged was not straightforward acceptance or rejection but an increase in the complexity of how students thought about GenAI. Students described GenAI as a sometimes-useful tool fraught with ethical dilemmas. They experienced excitement alongside worry, curiosity alongside resistance. Many discovered that working with GenAI demanded significant labour: crafting prompts, evaluating outputs, rejecting results, and translating digital material into physical form. Even after investing time in tutorials to learn how to prompt desired outputs, students frequently found that GenAI failed to produce what they imagined. GenAI did not reduce effort in art production, it changed and made labour visible in different ways, often leading students to revalue their own skills and processes. The result of this for most students was a reimagining of their projects in order to work with the quirks of GenAI as opposed to trying to force it to do something that they could have made on their own. This process of GenAI "accommodation" resulted in works that inevitably engaged with the technology conceptually instead of it being simply a tool or medium for work that had other conceptual intent.

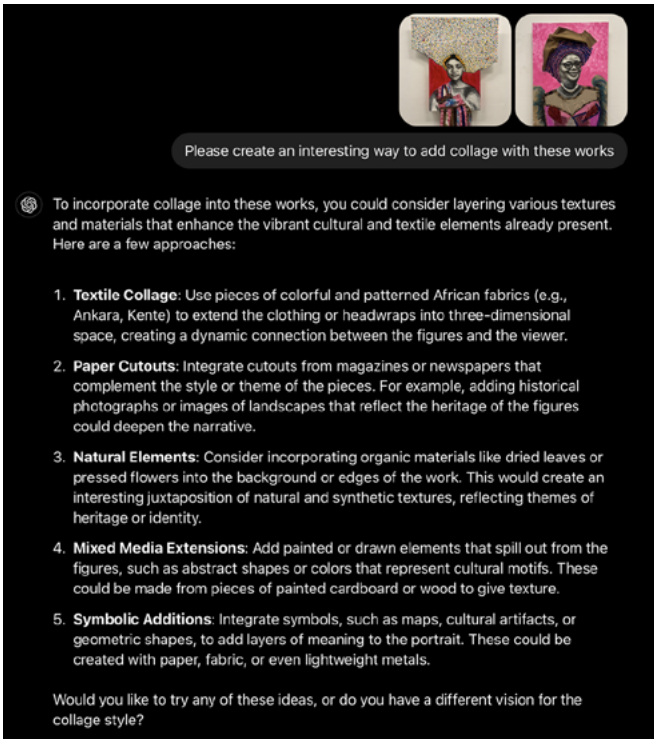


fig. 8 Artworks: Ral Ojah, *Ifunanya II* (left), *Sweet Mother* (right), 2024. Mixed media on board. Conversation with ChatGPT 3, October 2024, from the prompt "please create an interesting way to add collage with these works."

fig. 9 Image generated by ChatGPT 3, October 2024, from the prompt "can you create an image example," following the conversation and artworks provided in fig. 8.

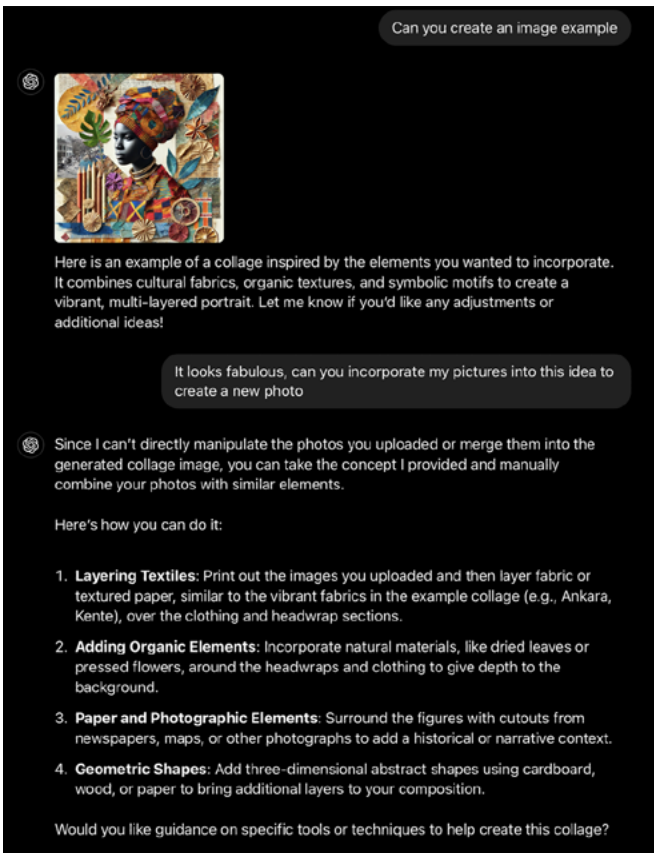


fig. 10 Ral Ojah, *Lanaya Meets AI*, 2024. Mixed media on board, 36 x 48 in. Photo: Nicole Favron.

figs. 11 and 12 Bry Dyer, *AM*, 2024. Digital comic, pp. 18 and 19 of 24.

At the conclusion of the course, all students expressed some form of ethical concern, skepticism, and/or discomfort toward producing artwork with GenAI because of the broader implications of its impact on artists, the biases present in its training, and/or the environmental costs of its use. The majority of students indicated that using GenAI in administrative aspects of being an artist, such as writing proposals and statements, and engaging with it for certain kinds of critiques, could be helpful. All students indicated that they had fewer ethical dilemmas using text-based GenAI than they did about using image-based GenAI. This outcome demonstrates that students feel most strongly about GenAI as it impacts them and their own area of expertise. Image diffusion models may directly impact the copyright of their works, their role as artists in society, and their future employment prospects.

Through engagement with and about GenAI, rather than avoidance, students came to recognize its potential and its limits, as well as how they felt about employing it in their own practices. The course asked students to confront contradictions in authorship, control, and value. They did not learn what GenAI can do in abstract terms; they learned where it fails, where they lack the skills or resources to use it as desired, and where it deviates too far from (or ethically impedes) their vision. For some, this led to increased skepticism rather than greater acceptance. For others, it clarified how GenAI might be strategically incorporated into existing practices without displacing authorship or labor. On our last class, I asked students how their thoughts and feelings about GenAI evolved over the duration of the course. Here are two representative examples:

> What's changed for me is that I feel like I now have a greater understanding of how AI is integrated into art practices as well as a better idea of the practical applications of it. My opinions toward the practical applications has changed: I genuinely see and support how AI can make tasks and life easier for many people. However, I still do not support relying on AI

> for creativity. I do not believe creativity can be replicated by AI, nor do I support replacing the artist's creativity. I think if you surrender the creative aspect of art to AI, it ceases to become art.
>
> I used to think AI was just a fancy tool that helped with tasks. Now, after trying it out, I see it more as a creative partner that can suggest new ideas I wouldn't have thought of. It has changed how I think about creativity and who gets to be called an artist. I've also learned more about what humans bring to art – we're the ones who give meaning to what AI creates and decide how to use it.

For me, teaching this course required bravery and involved emotional, ethical, and institutional risk. Engaging with GenAI in the art-school studio is controversial and can result in conflict with some faculty and students who are opposed to its use. Leading students to navigate GenAI is ethically complex and, because the technology evolves so rapidly, it is impossible to remain current on all of its platforms, applications, and controversies. I continue to struggle with my own complicity in using platforms built on extractive and exploitive practices, even as I encourage critical engagement. However, avoiding GenAI altogether would have denied students the opportunity to think critically, experiment thoughtfully, and learn through the messy contradictions that define both GenAI and art. "Explorations in Art and AI" didn't offer solutions, but did create a safe space for critical navigation. Students left the course with informed and experience-based awareness, questions, tensions, and tools for artistic agency in a landscape where authorship, labor, and control are in flux.

Further Information

For further examples of student projects, read: "Explorations in Art and Artificial Intelligence," a special issue of *Future Earth: A Student Journal on Sustainability and Environment* (June 2025), a Thompson Rivers University Open Press publication.[10]

Disclosure

This written work was developed with the support of OpenAI's ChatGPT 40 (*SoTL Writing Assistant: Explorations in Art & AI*, a custom GPT developed from my course content, including course outline, assignment parameters, reflection questions, online resources, lesson plans, my own journal entries, presentations, and lectures), as part of an REB-approved SoTL research initiative that I conducted in the context of the course "VISA 3830: Explorations in Art and AI" at Thompson Rivers University in 2024–25. The GenAI assistant contributed to the refinement of ideas, organization of content, and summaries of information from my own written works and presentations. I have critically reviewed and edited all content and I take full responsibility for the final version.

The use of GenAI in this context aligns with the pedagogical goals of the course and broader research aims, which include exploring how artists and educators might engage with GenAI in their creative and scholarly practices.

Acknowledgements

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ENDNOTES

1 See https://www.stephaniedinkins.com/conversations-with-bina48.html.
2 See https://sdshare.my.canva.site/iwdww-mini-deck-webpage-no-funding-info.
3 See https://www.memo.tv/works/boundaries/.
4 For some further examples of artists engaging with GenAI, see https://aiartists.org/.
5 See https://www.twylaexner.com/.
6 For examples, see https://aiartists.org/.
7 See Carole Epp, "AI and Ceramics Research," https://www.caroleepp.com/ai-and-ceramics-research.
8 See https://www.danielambrosi.com/
9 For full version of Bry's comic, see https://barabus.tru.ca/future_earth/FinalZine.pdf.
10 See https://publishing.bceln.ca/index.php/future-earth/issue/view/28.