

An A.I.-Generated Picture Won an Art Prize. Artists Aren't Happy

This year, the Colorado State Fair's annual art competition gave out prizes in the usual categories: painting, quilting and sculpture. But one entrant, Jason M. Allen of Pueblo West, Colorado, created his work using Midjourney, an artificial intelligence program that turns lines of text into images.

His work, "Théâtre D'opéra Spatial," won the blue ribbon in the fair's contest for emerging digital artists. This made it one of the first A.I.-generated pieces to win such a prize and sparked a strong backlash from artists who accused him of cheating.

Mr. Allen defended his work, explaining that he had clearly stated that it was created using A.I. and had submitted it under the name "Jason M. Allen via Midjourney." He argued that he had not deceived anyone and that he had not broken any rules.

A.I.-generated art had already existed for years, but new tools such as DALL-E 2, Midjourney and Stable Diffusion made it possible for almost anyone to create complex, abstract or photorealistic images simply by typing a few words.

These tools have made many human artists nervous about their future. They fear that people may stop paying for artists' work if they can generate images themselves. The technology has also raised ethical questions, with some critics arguing that A.I.-generated art is essentially a form of high-tech plagiarism.

Mr. Allen, 39, began experimenting with A.I.-generated art in 2022. He runs a studio called Incarnate Games, which makes tabletop games, and he was interested in comparing A.I. image generators with the human artists he normally commissioned.

He was invited to a Discord server where people were testing Midjourney. The program uses a process called "diffusion" to transform text into images. Users enter a series of words, and the system generates an image within seconds.

Mr. Allen became fascinated with the technology and created hundreds of images. He was impressed by how realistic they were and felt that almost anything he imagined could be produced.

After winning the competition, he posted a photograph of his work on the Midjourney Discord server. The image later reached Twitter, where it generated an angry reaction from many artists.

Some users argued that A.I. was threatening artistic creativity. Others, however, defended Mr. Allen, saying that using A.I. was not fundamentally different from using Photoshop or other digital tools. They argued that human creativity is still necessary to create effective prompts and select the best results.

Olga Robak, a spokeswoman for the Colorado Department of Agriculture, said that Mr. Allen had adequately disclosed Midjourney's involvement. The competition rules allowed any "artistic practice that uses digital technology as part of the creative or presentation process." The judges had not initially realized that Midjourney was an A.I. program, but they later said they would still have awarded him the prize.

The controversy surrounding A.I. art is part of a much older debate about new technologies and artistic creation. When photography was invented, many painters feared that it would undermine human artistry. In the 20th century, digital editing and computer-assisted design were also criticized for reducing the amount of skill required from artists.

However, critics argue that the new generation of A.I. tools is different because of the way they are trained. Programs such as DALL-E 2 and Midjourney were developed using millions of images collected from the internet. The algorithms learn patterns and relationships from these images and can then generate new ones. Artists therefore worry that their work may have been used to train systems that could eventually compete with them.

Digital artist RJ Palmer argued that this technology is particularly threatening because it has been trained on the work of contemporary artists. Other observers, while impressed by what A.I. can produce, have also expressed concerns about the ethical questions surrounding the technology.

Mr. Allen said that he understood why artists were afraid that A.I. could take away their jobs. However, he believed that their anger should be directed toward companies that decide to replace human artists with A.I., rather than toward individuals who use these tools.

For him, the technology itself is not necessarily unethical. The responsibility lies with the people who choose how to use it.

He also believes that artists will have to adapt to the development of A.I., because the technology is unlikely to disappear.

"This isn't going to stop," Mr. Allen said. "Art is dead, dude. It's over. A.I. won. Humans lost."