

Artists are making ‘anti-slop’ to rebel against AI: ‘It’s been rammed down our throats’

In response to AI’s hyperrealism, artists and creatives are gravitating toward the homespun and imperfect

Earlier this year, a group of film-makers, commercial directors and AI industry influencers gathered in New York City for the Runway AI Summit – a daylong fest, trumping up the potential of this new technology. During one talk, Rob Wrubel, co-founder and managing partner at San Francisco ad firm Silverside, talked up his work on the Coca-Cola company’s AI-generated 2025 Holiday Caravan ad. “What’s incredible about AI,” Wrubel said, “is that you can go from script to production in just two weeks!”

What Wrubel failed to mention was that the ad – with its computerized polar bears and fake-looking trundling delivery trucks – was widely despised by pretty much anyone who saw it.

Plenty of artists and creative-types have been sounding the anti-AI alarm lately. Thousands have signed open letters opposing infringement on their creative work, and copyrights. Major pop singers are announcing concerts with hand-scrawled notes posted on social media. Some have filed lawsuits against AI companies training off their work.

Now that spirit of rejection seems to be coalescing into its own design aesthetic – a move towards the conspicuously handmade, the janky, even the primitive. Call it **“anti-slop”**.

Where AI slop is slick and uncanny, anti-slop celebrates a more homespun feeling.

It’s present in the work of photographer and designer Michael Schmelling. Schmelling has designed photo books for the Rolling Stones, album art for singer Sharon Van Etten and recently a suite of covers for the novels of acclaimed Chilean novelist Roberto Bolaño. These covers have a crude, scribbly, doodle-in-the-margins-of-a-high-school-notebook quality. They look like basement punk show posters or tattoo flash sheets. They are even a little sloppy – but again, thoughtfully so. But perhaps that’s the point – AI would never.

While Schmelling maintains that these designs weren’t deliberately devised as an affront to the increasingly dominant aesthetic language of AI, he does see a reaction taking place. “This AI stuff has just been rammed down our throats,” he says. “AI is everywhere. And all of a sudden there’s a backlash.”

“From a creative standpoint, AI is made off the backs of other people’s labor, and other people get rich off it,” he adds. “I’m totally opposed to that side of it.” Schmelling was recently commissioned to do some brand work, and asked if they could train their AI on illustrations they commissioned from him. He turned down the offer – “vehemently”.

The present ascendancy of AI calls to mind another revolution in art and design: the arrival of mass-market photography in the late 19th century. As cameras popularized photorealistic images, painters and artists were forced – or, perhaps, freed – to move past realism as a standard. Impressionism, surrealism, cubism and countless other disciplines arose to reinterpret a reality that photography seemed better equipped to merely depict. The surging sophistication and hyperrealism of AI-generated images may offer artists, designers and animators similar opportunities to create work that feels a little more bespoke, DIY and altogether more human. At least – that’s the hope. Schmelling is a little more cynical. He’s anticipating a “backlash to the backlash”, in which some technologists, artists and the general public double-down on AI enthusiasm. He compares it to earlier conversations around programs such as Photoshop, which made it easy for artists and designers to touch up perceived imperfections. In turn, more analog-oriented artists began advertising their work with a big struck-through “PS” graphic. “Those conversations almost seem quaint now,” he says. “Everything comes out of our iPhone retouched.”

John Semley, *The Guardian*, June 2026

anti-slop : slop means a work which is done quickly, by putting no effort into it. AI Anti-slop is a slang way to criticize AI content