THE SHIFT

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

"I won, and I didn't break any rules," the artwork's creator says.

By Kevin Roose

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This year, the Colorado State Fair's annual art competition gave out prizes in all the usual categories: painting, quilting, sculpture.

But one entrant, Jason M. Allen of Pueblo West, Colo., didn't make his entry with a brush or a lump of clay. He created it with Midjourney, an artificial intelligence program that turns lines of text into hyper-realistic graphics.

Mr. Allen's work, "Théâtre D'opéra Spatial," took home the blue ribbon in the fair's contest for emerging digital artists — making it one of the first A.I.-generated pieces to win such a prize, and setting off a fierce backlash from artists who accused him of, essentially, cheating.

Reached by phone on Wednesday, Mr. Allen defended his work. He said that he had made clear that his work — which was submitted under the name "Jason M. Allen via Midjourney" — was created using A.I., and that he hadn't deceived anyone about its origins.

"I'm not going to apologize for it," he said. "I won, and I didn't break any rules."

A.I.-generated art has been around for years. But tools released this year — with names like DALL-E 2, Midjourney and Stable Diffusion — have made it possible for rank amateurs to create complex, abstract or photorealistic works simply by typing a few words into a text box.

These apps have made many human artists understandably nervous about their own futures — why would anyone pay for art, they wonder, when they could generate it themselves? They have also generated fierce debates about the ethics of A.I.-generated art, and opposition from people who claim that these apps are essentially a high-tech form of plagiarism.

Mr. Allen, 39, began experimenting with A.I.-generated art this year. He runs a studio, Incarnate Games, which makes tabletop games, and he was curious how the new breed of A.I. image generators would compare with the human artists whose works he commissioned.

This summer, he got invited to a Discord chat server where people were testing Midjourney, which uses a complex process known as "diffusion" to turn text into custom images. Users type a series of words in a message to Midjourney; the bot spits back an image seconds later.

Mr. Allen created his artwork with Midjourney, an artificial intelligence program that turns lines of text into hyper-realistic graphics. Saeed Rahbaran for The New York Times

Mr. Allen became obsessed, creating hundreds of images and marveling at how realistic they were. No matter what he typed, Midjourney seemed capable of making it.

"I couldn't believe what I was seeing," he said. "I felt like it was demonically inspired — like some otherworldly force was involved."

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Eventually, Mr. Allen got the idea to submit one of his Midjourney creations to the Colorado State Fair, which had a division for "digital art/digitally manipulated photography." He had a local shop print the image on canvas and submitted it to the judges.

"The fair was coming up," he said, "and I thought: How wonderful would it be to demonstrate to people how great this art is?"

Several weeks later, while walking the fairground in Pueblo, Mr. Allen saw a blue ribbon hanging next to his piece. He had won the division, along with a $300 prize.

"I couldn't believe it," he said. "I felt like: this is exactly what I set out to accomplish."

(Mr. Allen declined to share the exact text prompt he had submitted to Midjourney to create "Théâtre D'opéra Spatial." But he said the French translation — "Space Opera Theater" — provided a clue.)

After his win, Mr. Allen posted a photo of his prize work to the Midjourney Discord chat. It made its way to Twitter, where it sparked a furious backlash.

"We're watching the death of artistry unfold right before our eyes," one Twitter user wrote.

"This is so gross," another wrote. "I can see how A.I. art can be beneficial, but claiming you're an artist by generating one? Absolutely not."

Some artists defended Mr. Allen, saying that using A.I. to create a piece was no different from using Photoshop or other digital image-manipulation tools, and that human creativity is still required to come up with the right prompts to generate an award-winning piece.

Olga Robak, a spokeswoman for the Colorado Department of Agriculture, which oversees the state fair, said Mr. Allen had adequately disclosed Midjourney's involvement when submitting his piece; the category's rules allow any "artistic practice that uses digital technology as part of the creative or presentation process." The two category judges did not know that Midjourney was an A.I. program, she said, but both subsequently told her that they would have awarded Mr. Allen the top prize even if they had.

Controversy over new art-making technologies is nothing new. Many painters recoiled at the invention of the camera, which they saw as a debasement of human artistry. (Charles Baudelaire, the 19th-century French poet and art critic, called photography "art's most mortal enemy.") In the 20th century, digital editing tools and computer-assisted design programs were similarly dismissed by purists for requiring too little skill of their human collaborators.

What makes the new breed of A.I. tools different, some critics believe, is not just that they're capable of producing beautiful works of art with minimal effort. It's how they work. Apps like DALL-E 2 and Midjourney are built by scraping millions of images from the open web, then teaching algorithms to recognize patterns and relationships in those images and generate new ones in the same style. That means that artists who upload their works to the internet may be unwittingly helping to train their algorithmic competitors.

"What makes this AI different is that it's explicitly trained on current working artists," RJ Palmer, a digital artist, tweeted last month. "This thing wants our jobs, its actively anti-artist."

Even some who are impressed by A.I.-generated art have concerns about how it's being made. Andy Baio, a technologist and writer, wrote in a recent essay that DALL-E 2, perhaps the buzziest A.I. image generator on the market, was "borderline magic in what it's capable of conjuring, but raises so many ethical questions, it's hard to keep track of them all."

Mr. Allen, the blue-ribbon winner, said he empathized with artists who were scared that A.I. tools would put them out of work. But he said their anger should be directed not at individuals who use DALL-E 2 or Midjourney to make art but at companies that choose to replace human artists with A.I. tools.

"It shouldn't be an indictment of the technology itself," he said. "The ethics isn't in the technology. It's in the people."

And he urged artists to overcome their objections to A.I., even if only as a coping strategy.

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

Kevin Roose is a technology columnist and the author of "Futureproof: 9 Rules for Humans in the Age of Automation." More about Kevin Roose

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