

Lou s Daguerre invented the Daguerreotype in 1839. His real invention, however, was a painstaking but simple process. First, a silver sheet was buffed to a mirror finish. It was then, in darkness, exposed to halogen fumes. Iodine was commonly used. This step resulted in a silver halide coating. Carried to the apparatus in a light-tight container, it was exposed to the desired subject. Finally, it was developed through exposure to mercury and some common salt. The product, however, was something that human beings had never seen before – a mechanical image, otherwise known as a photograph. Noted art critic Charles Baudelaire called the Daguerreotype “art’s most mortal enemy,” and observers bemoaned that art, reduced to an easily replicated process, would soon become entirely obsolete.

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Consider how weird it was when a machine drew. Of course, we’d all been used to AI steadily shoving more human workers into unemployment – not that unemployment carries the same stigma now that it did in the old days – but, I’ve been told, people used to think that there was some inviolate, human quality to art that meant we were the only ones who could do it.

People had been using AI to make art for a long time, but it was usually just a clever little algorithmic trick that took good art as an input and spat out slightly different good art as an output, using the patterns it had detected to make another piece. Not much in the way of artistic genius required.

So one day, when a no-name computer scientist out in California figured it’d be a good use of a year to provide feedback to an AI every time it drew two intersecting lines, it was a bit of a culture – or maybe more of a species – shock to everyone. Because at the end of that year, it could make photorealistic paintings as well as any of the old masters. At first, everyone was sure it was just blurring actual pictures until a panel of top-notch computer scientists discounted it.

I mention all of this only because my college roommate, Michael – Michael, not Mike or Mikey, as he makes abundantly clear during introductions – was absolutely obsessed with art. I’m certain he was raised on Renaissance pop-up books. I’ve met his parents, and they’re both absolute art nuts too. One of my friends swears they must have used those prenatal headphones to get *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* into him before Wernicke’s area was even developed enough to process language.

Creative types are always a little spacey. That’s perfectly fine, so long as you don’t have to share a five by seven dorm room with one. Our room was covered wall to wall in canvases, and it reeked of oil paint. I didn’t mind that so much, but his taste grew increasingly contemporary as

freshman year wore on, and before break I had to have an earnest conversation with him about how he would store fecal-based paints during second semester. Of course I had to have the misfortune to live in the era when IBM machines genuinely had a sense of humor.

It wasn't that I didn't respect his commitment. Anyone who's willing to invest that sheer volume of time into something certainly has my admiration. I just didn't understand why it had to be something that humans weren't a part of any longer.

Like almost everyone else, I was at school for computer science. It wasn't like there was much to do professionally besides train AI to kick romantics out of whatever field you had a grudge against. (That was artisanal eyeglass frames, for me. 600 bucks for a halfway-decent pair is outrageous, and my parents insisted that I pay with my own money if I wanted a name-brand on mine.) Most universities had narrowed their curriculum accordingly, but I went to a liberal-arts school that still insisted everyone be inept in as many fields as possible. Accordingly, you would occasionally run into a weirdo who actually decided to major in one of them. The only difference between that crowd and Michael was that most of them at least had the decency to stick to fields their dads thought would be useful. Social inertia being what it was, that almost always meant business, even though just about all commerce was run by machines that could actually be trusted to make rational decisions.

Anyways, art was one that humans hadn't had a hand in since my mom was in college. Once one AI was trained to draw, the proverbial four-minute mile was run. There were more and more every year, and they made such a dizzying quantity of art that it overwhelmed the market entirely. It wasn't just classically styled, either. It got to the point that someone threw together a personality test that would match you with an art style you were sure to like. That, too, was pretty nonfunctional at first, but like everything else in the era of AI it was impossibly accurate after a couple of weeks.

Contemporary tried to argue that intent was what made art meaningful – and there was none to be found in machine learning (My roommate was kind enough to remind me that art without intent is noise every time he noticed my screensaver was an AI-made abstract piece). But who were they going to persuade, when everyone had a piece that was psychologically personalized to them? When any piece of art they looked at was guaranteed to not just look, but *feel* good?

So the artist went the way of the dodo. Except for the one I was stuck sharing a prison-cell-sized double with.

I don't mean to say that his talent wasn't off the charts, at least compared to what I'd seen from the old days. Just that he was wasting my time and that I wished he'd give up.

A few weeks into second semester, he asked me to put together a website for him where he could post his work. Normally, I'd have insisted that Facebook was good enough for him, but I figured if no one looked at it he might get dejected and get out of the room a little more often. So instead, I jumped at the opportunity, and threw together something for him.

He was so thrilled at first – he actually hugged me – I almost felt a little bad. “It’ll be for the best,” I thought. Set aside childish things and all that.

And when he first started posting his neo-Classic paintings on his website, it looked like I was right. Weeks went by, and the web traffic statistics showed that only two IPs had ever checked anything. Michael’s phone and his laptop. He seemed to get a little more normal, too. I even managed to coax him into going out with some of my friends, and he seemed to have a good time, even though he seemed to spend forty seconds out of every minute on his phone. It wasn’t out of social anxiety, either; every time I glanced over, he was refreshing the statistics.

But just when it seemed like he might abandon his makeshift art studio for something a little more sensible, traffic began to pick up. First a trickle, then a flood. I still remember the exact moment when I knew I’d lost him to fantasy forever; he looked at the statistics over my shoulder, and I could see hope bloom in his eyes.

In all the time I’d known him, I have to confess that I’d never looked closely at his work. Maybe it was a sort of change blindness. Once I’d grown accustomed to our room looking like the inside of the MOMA, I stopped seeing the individual projects that populated it. But after he’d reaffirmed his commitment to the one-man world of art, I began to pay attention to the newest painting that made our dorm its home.

I phrase it as though I had a choice; the thing took up the entire left wall of our room. If I ever opened the door too far, he’d go off in a blind rage, yelling about how messing up a work of art at that phase would be like murder and stealing all in one, but worse, because not only would I be destroying a masterpiece that would be an end-in-itself, but I’d deprive so many people of so much meaning and joy that even scratching it would be like strangling a toddler.

I usually remembered after that.

He made me wear a blindfold before I walked in to see it completed. He didn’t have anyone else to show the real thing too, I guess.

What jumped out at my first was how hideous the whole thing was. The place where my eyes went sparkling red, white-tinged splotches that seemed to occupy the bottom third of the painting. When it was a work-in-progress, I'd thought that it was blood. It was evident now that they were eyes; and beneath them, I could just barely make out insubstantial figures; when I walked up closer, I could see that they were painting, too. Though they were tiny, the level of detail in each figure was astounding. They were all tall, and graceful, and each wore a smile so resplendent it was almost unsettling. Their subject, it seemed was the horror of the background. The bright colors in the foreground were such a stark contrast to the image, increasingly leeched of color on the top, that it bordered on offensive to the eye. There, people with bestial features ate, drank, and fornicated shamelessly. I knew Michael was big into Picasso, and he must have taken some inspiration from *El Guernica*. From left to right, the people – insofar as they could be called people – seemed to disassemble. The last visible feature was just a hungry, gluttonous mouth.

“So,” he started eagerly, “what do you think?”

I had to be honest.

“It’s absolutely brilliant.”

I can’t recall the title, but it found its way on to his website later that day. I was watching the data as closely as him. It surged – practically roared – and then it slowed and slowed, the curve turning into a sad upside-down “v” rather than the “j” we’d been hoping for.

We couldn’t figure out what had happened. I thought that this would be his big break, at least so far as anyone could have a big break in a nonexistent industry. A few weeks later, though, we spotted it. A fifth page google article, talking about some Renaissance throwback piece an old algorithmic AI had spat out – one of the ones that took good art in and spat good art out. Pixel for pixel, it was the same as the painting that hung opposite me, absent the intimidating red eyes and the creepy disintegrated people. It was, for all intents and purposes, just a nice painting of people painting. Totally defanged and uninteresting, but nice. Everything else he’d made was just as bland, each another star in an already crowded sky. It didn’t take a genius to figure out where his following had gone.

Even people who wanted to see his art, as it turned out, would rather see it touched-up by an AI.

I didn’t see him for a long time afterwards. I was worried he’d done something stupid or serious or both, but his dad came by to pick up his things shortly thereafter. He let me know he was alright – just needed some time off of school. I remember him looking up at the mural and I

almost thought I saw his eyes smile for a moment, but if I did, they dimmed immediately. He left it behind. I didn't have the heart to let some janitor stuff it into the dumpster, so I used some leftover beer money to rent a storage unit for it.

It was the first week of sophomore year when I saw him next. I couldn't wait to hear what he was doing – what he was working on, where he was going next, what his plans were – and he told me.

He gave up. He's a programmer now, too.