

AI and Art — A Continuing Conversation

In periods of technological change, the arts have often found themselves obliged to re-examine familiar definitions. Photography was once dismissed as mechanical rather than creative. Early digital art met similar scepticism. Such reactions are not surprising; new tools tend first to unsettle before they are understood.

Recent commentary (Published by the Daily Telegraph, 30 January 2026; author Ruth Millington), has suggested that imagery produced with artificial intelligence should not be regarded as art, and that such works are little more than automated fabrications. Views such as these are important to consider seriously, not least because they invite us to look more closely at what we believe constitutes artistic practice.

Yet one difficulty in this emerging discussion is the tendency to treat all AI-assisted imagery as though it were a single, uniform activity. It is not.

Between the casual generation of decorative pictures and the disciplined development of a personal visual language lies a wide and meaningful spectrum of human involvement.

At its core, art has never been defined solely by the tool employed, but by the quality of attention brought to its use.

A camera does not create a photograph by itself. Pigment does not organise itself upon a canvas. Likewise, an algorithm does not independently produce work shaped by reflection or intent.

What remains constant is the artist's role in judging, selecting, refining, and sometimes rejecting what emerges.

Human judgement is not a minor editorial step; it is the centre of the process.

The artist decides when an image carries emotional resonance and when it does not. The artist recognises coherence — or its absence. The artist determines whether a work merely attracts the eye or sustains attention.

Without that discriminating presence, images remain visual noise.



Emotional intent is equally indispensable. Tools may assist in rendering form, but they do not supply meaning. Meaning arises from the sensibility brought to the work, from memory, observation, patience, and lived experience.

For my own part, the images I create begin with photographs of real landscapes. They are subsequently transformed, not to display technological novelty, but to express something felt rather than merely recorded — atmosphere over description, memory over literal detail. The aim is not replication, but interpretation.

In that respect, the process stands within a long artistic tradition: artists have always altered reality in order to reveal it more fully.

To acknowledge the legitimacy of such work is not to suggest that every AI-generated image should be considered art. Clearly, many are not — just as countless photographs or paintings fall short of artistic seriousness. The existence of weaker work has never invalidated an entire medium.

In scientific research, critical commentary is essential to progress. Claims are tested, methods are clarified, and distinctions are drawn with precision. The same principle applies here. Broad assertions about ‘AI art’ often describe unconstrained generative output. Refractist practice differs in structure, intention, and discipline.

What deserves attention is not the presence of a new tool, but the seriousness of its use.

It may be that we are still early in learning how best to evaluate these emerging practices. Cultural understanding rarely arrives fully formed; it develops through thoughtful examination rather than swift dismissal.

For that reason, the conversation surrounding AI and art is one worth continuing — with curiosity, with care, and with a willingness to distinguish between novelty and intention.

The question is perhaps not whether a machine can make art.

The more searching question is whether the human being guiding it is bringing to the process the attentiveness, emotional depth, and critical judgement that art has always required.

Tools evolve. The artist’s task does not.

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Appendix: Clarifying Distinctions Regarding AI and Refractist Practice

The article makes several broad claims about AI-generated art. For clarity, the following table outlines how Refractist practice differs from the generalised category described.

Claim in the Article

AI art is an 'illusion' and lacks authentic authorship.

AI operates through pattern recognition rather than artistic decision-making.

AI produces homogenised, generic imagery. Absent from AI "art" is creative process, which should take more than a few seconds. This is apparent in the low-quality, *generic slop* that's produced. Lacking a distinctiveness of style and voice, it can only offer a dynamic of smooth homogeneity.

AI bypasses craft.

Clarification from Refractist Practice

In Refractist work, authorship begins with a human-made photograph. The artist selects the subject, defines the emotional register, and constrains transformation. AI functions as an interpretive tool, not an autonomous creator.

That is correct. Artistic decision-making therefore remains entirely human. Selection, rejection, tonal restraint, structural preservation, and final judgement are exercised by the artist at every stage.

Generic outcomes arise when structural constraints are absent. Refractism imposes strict anchoring principles: horizon, geometry, cloud architecture, and perspective must remain intact. Outputs that drift are rejected. Images are developed over time, often weeks, until they satisfy the artist's creative intent.

Craft has historically meant disciplined use of available tools. As tools evolve, so does craft. In this practice, craft resides in compositional fidelity, tonal control, restraint, and iterative refinement under explicit principles.



Turner and Constable 'looked and observed' in ways AI cannot.

Refractist works also begin with direct observation: specific places, specific light, specific weather. Transformation seeks to express remembered atmosphere while preserving structural truth. The tool differs; the act of reinterpretation does not.

AI artists resemble clients instructing designers.

That description may apply to prompt-based generative systems. In anchored, photograph-based practice, composition is not delegated. The artist retains structural authorship throughout.

AI contributes to cultural stagnation.

Cultural stagnation arises from imitation without judgement. When disciplined selection and intentional interpretation are applied, new tools can extend visual language rather than diminish it.