

Refractism

Shifting the Lens: Affective Realism

Preface

This Working Paper records the current state of an artistic methodology that has emerged through practice rather than theory.

It is neither a manifesto nor an attempt to proclaim a new artistic movement. It is an account of a developing discipline whose principles have been discovered through repeated observation, experimentation and critical revision.

The ideas presented here should be regarded as evolving. They are offered for discussion rather than declaration and are expected to mature through continued practice, criticism and revision. If this paper succeeds, it will be because it asks questions that merit further discussion, not because it provides definitive answers.

Introduction

Every generation inherits the artistic languages developed by its predecessors. Occasionally, artists encounter questions that those languages cannot completely answer. When that happens, a new artistic vocabulary may begin to emerge.

The history of art can therefore be understood not simply as a succession of styles, but as a succession of questions: the Renaissance explored how three-dimensional space might be represented upon a flat surface; Impressionism asked whether light and atmosphere might reveal truths that precise detail could not; Cubism questioned whether a single viewpoint

could adequately describe reality; and photography transformed representation by allowing the visible world to record itself with unprecedented fidelity.

Refractism arises from a different question.

Can the experience of a real place - remembered, accumulated and encountered afresh - be expressed while preserving the recognisable identity of that place?

This first Working Paper argues that it can. It proposes neither a replacement for photography nor an imitation of painting. Instead, it describes a disciplined artistic practice that begins with reality, preserves identity, and then explores experience through memory, present response and interpretation.

Section 1 - Photography, Memory and Artistic Purpose

Photography records with extraordinary accuracy, yet every photographer understands that accuracy alone is not experience. A camera records light, geometry and colour. It does not record anticipation, silence, warmth, familiarity or emotional significance.

Human memory operates differently; it simplifies; it emphasises; it suppresses; it preserves relationships rather than exhaustive detail. The landscape we remember is therefore not identical to the landscape the camera records.

Refractism begins by accepting photography as an indispensable witness to reality. The photograph is not the finished work; it is the beginning of the enquiry. It establishes the factual identity of the place from which artistic interpretation may proceed.

The purpose of Refractism is therefore not to improve photographs. Its purpose is to investigate the space between photographic description and experienced reality: what is remembered of a place, what has accumulated through familiarity, and what appeals or seems significant when the Anchor is encountered afresh.

This process may be imagined as passing reality through what I have come to describe as the Refractist Prism. The original landscape enters as observed reality and emerges still recognisable, but reorganised by accumulated experience, memory, present response, atmosphere and emotional significance. The Prism is not a piece of software; it is a conceptual model for the passage from observation, through experience, memory and judgement, to artistic interpretation.

The photograph records a particular visual instant. Human experience does not. It accumulates memory, mood, association and subsequent encounters with the subject.

Refractism operates within the space between those two forms of seeing. This suggests a form of affective realism: one in which fidelity is not confined to optical resemblance, but extends to the accumulated experience, memory and emotional resonance through which a subject is perceived and recalled.

Section 2 - The Evolution of Artistic Interpretation

Artists have never been satisfied simply to reproduce the visible world. Every enduring artistic movement has altered not only the appearance of art but the relationship between observation and interpretation. The history of painting is therefore less a history of changing styles than a history of changing questions.

The Renaissance sought convincing representation. Impressionism shifted attention from objects to the changing qualities of light. Expressionism privileged emotional truth over literal description. Abstract art questioned whether recognisable representation remained necessary at all. Photography introduced an apparently objective witness to reality, although every photograph still embodies human choices of viewpoint, framing and moment.

Digital technologies have extended those possibilities still further. Images can now be synthesised rather than observed. This development has prompted an important question: if technology can generate convincing images, where does artistic authorship reside?

Refractism answers that question by returning to reality rather than abandoning it. It accepts the photograph as an honest witness, but not as the final destination. The photograph establishes the identity of a place. Artistic interpretation then seeks to express how that place was experienced rather than merely how it appeared.

In this respect Refractism differs both from conventional photography and from unrestricted image generation. It neither confines itself to literal description nor permits unlimited invention. Instead, it occupies the ground between them.

This leads to the central proposition of the Working Paper.

Identity must precede interpretation.

Only when the identity of a place has been secured can colour, atmosphere, simplification and emotional emphasis be altered without severing the relationship between the artwork and the landscape from which it arose.

Section 3 - Identity Before Interpretation

Every artistic discipline eventually discovers a governing principle. Perspective became an organising discipline of Renaissance painting. Light became a defining concern of Impressionism. For Refractism, that governing principle is identity.

This principle did not emerge from theory. It emerged through repeated practice. Early transformations often became increasingly expressive and visually attractive, yet an uncomfortable question repeatedly arose: was the image still unmistakably the same place?

That question proved decisive. Attractive images alone were insufficient. If the essential character of the landscape disappeared, artistic interpretation had become invention. Refractism therefore adopted a different discipline. The objective was no longer to create the most striking transformation. It was to preserve the identity of the place while allowing accumulated experience, memory and present artistic response to reshape its atmosphere.

Identity should not be confused with literal accuracy. Memory does not preserve every leaf, stone or cloud. Instead, it preserves enduring relationships: the line of a coastline, the silhouette of a church, the rhythm of trees, the direction of a path, the balance between land and sky. These relationships allow a place to remain recognisable even when colour, texture and emotional emphasis have changed substantially.

This distinction marks the point at which Refractism separates itself from unrestricted image generation. The transformation remains accountable to the original place. Every artistic decision is therefore tested against a simple question:

Does this strengthen the experienced identity of the place, as remembered and responded to now, or does it merely create a more attractive image?

The answer determines whether the work remains within the discipline of Refractism. Identity is therefore not a limitation upon artistic freedom. It is the condition that makes meaningful artistic freedom possible.

Section 4 – The Anchor

Every Refractist work begins with what I have termed the Anchor. This is not merely the original photograph, nor simply a reference image retained for comparison. It is the factual and philosophical foundation upon which the entire artistic process depends.

The significance of the Anchor lies in the discipline it imposes. Before interpretation begins, the artist makes a conscious commitment to reality. The place existed. The light was observed. The photograph records that encounter. Whatever transformations subsequently occur, they remain accountable to this original witness.

The Anchor therefore performs two complementary functions. First, it preserves identity. Secondly, it permits artistic freedom. These ideas are not contradictory. Once the essential identity of a place has been secured, colour, atmosphere, simplification and emotional emphasis may be explored with confidence because the underlying relationship between artwork and landscape remains intact.

Experience has also shown that not every photograph deserves to become an Anchor. The photograph itself should be reviewed critically before interpretation begins. A horizon may be slightly misaligned. Important elements may have been inadvertently cropped. Temporary distractions may dominate the composition. Such matters should be resolved before the artistic process begins rather than disguised afterwards.

This critical review is the Anchor Review. It is not an exercise in beautification but in fidelity: does the photograph provide the strongest possible foundation for artistic interpretation?

The Anchor Review also reflects an important distinction between photography and Refractism. Conventional photographic criticism often asks whether the photograph is successful as a finished image. Refractism asks a different question: is this the strongest possible foundation from which lived and remembered experience, together with present response, can be explored?

The Anchor is therefore more than a workflow. It is the intellectual discipline that binds observation, experience, memory, present response and interpretation into a coherent artistic practice. Without it, Refractism would become merely another method of image generation. With it, the artwork remains firmly connected to lived experience.

The practical application of these principles is governed by a separate operational framework that has evolved alongside Refractism. The present Working Paper is concerned with the philosophy of the discipline; its practical implementation is described in the Refractist Operating Manual.

Section 5 - Clarification Rather than Beautification

Every artistic practice must decide how it will respond to imperfection. Refractism addresses this question through a distinction that gradually emerged during its development: the difference between clarification and beautification.

Modern software makes alteration remarkably easy. Distracting objects can be removed, colours intensified and compositions simplified within moments. The technical ability to make such changes, however, does not justify their use. Every alteration should serve the experienced character of the place - informed by memory and present response - rather than the desire to produce a more conventionally attractive image.

Clarification seeks fidelity to experienced identity. That judgement may draw upon memory, familiarity and present response. Beautification seeks visual improvement. Although the two may appear similar, their intentions are fundamentally different. A telegraph wire that dominates the eye but plays no part in the remembered experience may reasonably be removed if its absence restores the balance originally perceived. By contrast, removing ordinary features simply because they appear untidy risks replacing an authentic place with an idealised one. The resulting image may be pleasing, but it is no longer truthful to the experience from which the work arose.

This distinction places artistic judgement at the centre of the Refractist process. There can be no rigid rule that determines which elements remain and which are omitted. Each decision must be justified by a single question:

Does this change strengthen the experienced identity of the place, or does it merely improve its appearance?

That question applies equally to colour, simplification, atmosphere and composition. Refractism therefore rejects the pursuit of perfection in favour of authenticity. The purpose of transformation is not to manufacture beauty but to reveal experience more clearly. Clarification rather than beautification has consequently become one of the defining disciplines of Refractism. It preserves trust between artist, place and viewer, ensuring that interpretation remains rooted in reality rather than drifting towards invention.

Section 6 – Refractism and Refractist Variant

The discipline described so far defines Refractism in its strict sense. In practice, however, the same creative process has also produced works in which the boundaries are deliberately relaxed. I describe these as Refractist variants.

A Refractist variant still begins with an Anchor and with the artist's experience of a real subject, but it permits greater freedom in colour, form, atmosphere and stylistic interpretation. The originating scene will often remain recognisable, although fidelity to its identity is no longer the overriding test to the same degree as it is in Refractism proper.

This distinction is important because Refractist variants are not failed examples of Refractism. They represent a deliberate extension of the practice beyond its stricter boundary. In some cases they are bolder and more immediately arresting, and experience with viewers has shown that they may be preferred to the more disciplined Refractism interpretation. Such a preference does not require correction: Refractism describes a discipline; it does not prescribe taste.

The distinction also separates classification from aesthetic judgement. An image may depart substantially from observed reality and still possess visual or emotional power.

Human beings have always responded to imagined as well as observed subjects, and computational image generation does not alter that capacity. The purpose of the terminology is therefore not to rank images by merit, but to make clear the relationship each work retains with its Anchor.

For that reason, Refractism and Refractist variants may properly appear alongside one another in exhibitions, collections and other presentations, provided that the distinction is understood. The disciplined core remains Refractism; the variants demonstrate what may happen when the same artistic enquiry is allowed greater expressive freedom.

Section 7 - Artificial Intelligence: Instrument, Not Author

Few developments in contemporary art have generated more discussion than artificial intelligence (AI). Enthusiasts regard it as a revolutionary creative medium; critics question whether work produced with computational assistance can properly be described as art. Refractism occupies neither position.

The rapid expansion of generative AI has produced an enormous quantity of imagery that many critics regard as superficial, derivative or lacking genuine artistic intention. Refractism does not dismiss that criticism, but neither does it accept that the use of AI determines the artistic value of the finished image. Its concern is the disciplined relationship between observation, lived experience, memory, present response, judgement and interpretation.

Artificial intelligence is therefore not the defining feature of Refractism. It is one instrument within a broader artistic process. The creative act begins with observation: the artist chooses the place, the moment and the conditions under which the Anchor Photograph is made. The Anchor Review then establishes whether that photograph provides a faithful foundation for interpretation.

Only then does computational transformation begin. The software contributes possibilities rather than conclusions. It may generate alternative interpretations, but it cannot decide which one most faithfully conveys the artist's experience of the place or present response to it. Selection, rejection, refinement, titling, sequencing and final presentation remain acts of human judgement.

The distinction is fundamental. The machine possesses neither intention nor memory. It has not stood on the shingle at Cley, walked the paths at Salthouse, nor waited for evening light to soften the landscape. Those experiences belong to the artist.

The relationship between conventional artistic practice and Refractism may be closer than the difference in their means of production initially suggests. A painter looks, sees and interprets, then attempts through paint to make an image that represents the scene as it has been perceived and understood. The Refractist follows essentially the same sequence: looking, seeing and interpreting, but uses photography and computational technology to construct an image intended to recall the experience of the scene. In both cases, observation precedes interpretation and interpretation precedes the finished work. The principal difference lies not in the intellectual or artistic process, but in how the interpreted image is placed upon the page.

This comparison also helps to locate authorship. Neither the painter's brush nor the Refractist's computational instrument determines what deserves attention, what should be emphasised, what should be suppressed, or when the work has achieved its purpose. Those decisions belong to the artist. The technology may differ radically, but the sequence of observation, interpretation, judgement and selection remains recognisably an artistic one.

Artificial intelligence can therefore enlarge the artist's vocabulary without replacing artistic judgement. The defining creative act is not computation but discernment: deciding what deserves to be preserved, what may be transformed, and when a transformed image still carries the unmistakable identity of the place from which it originated.

For that reason, Refractism is better understood as artist-directed interpretation assisted by computational tools than as AI-generated art. Authorship remains human because intention, judgement and responsibility remain human.

Section 8 - Refractism in Historical Context

Every artistic movement is best understood by considering the question that gave rise to it. Styles, techniques and materials undoubtedly differ, but they are consequences rather than causes. Behind each enduring movement lies a problem that artists sought to resolve.

The Renaissance addressed the convincing representation of three-dimensional space. Impressionism explored the transient effects of light and atmosphere. Luminism investigated the quiet emotional power of light itself. Expressionism privileged psychological truth over optical accuracy. Photography transformed visual culture by providing an apparently objective record of reality. Contemporary artificial intelligence has introduced computational methods capable of generating images that need never have existed.

Refractism does not attempt to replace any of these traditions. Instead, it draws upon several while remaining distinct from each. From photography it inherits fidelity to the existence of a real place; from painting, the freedom to interpret rather than merely describe; and from contemporary computational tools, an expanded visual vocabulary. Its distinctive contribution lies in the disciplined relationship between these elements.

The comparison below is not intended as a hierarchy of artistic achievement. It clarifies how different artistic traditions have answered different questions. Refractism contributes another question to that continuing conversation rather than claiming to supersede those that came before.

Refractism is therefore defined less by technology than by methodology. Its proposed originality lies in preserving the factual identity of a real place while allowing artistic

interpretation to communicate lived and remembered experience, filtered through present artistic response.

Movement	Historical Question	Starting Point	What is Preserved?	What is Transformed?	Artist's Role	Defining Characteristic	Relationship to Refractism
Renaissance	How can space be represented?	Observation	Physical form	Perspective	Constructs spatial illusion	Perspective	Foundation of representation
Impressionism	Can light become the subject?	Observation	Subject	Light and atmosphere	Interprets changing light	Optical immediacy	Shared concern with atmosphere
Luminism	Can tranquility be expressed?	Landscape	Landscape	Mood through light	Controls subtle tonal harmony	Quiet luminosity	Related atmospheric sensibility
Expressionism	Can emotion outweigh appearance?	Experience	Emotional intent	Form and colour	Expresses inner state	Psychological truth	Shares emotional ambition but retains identity
Photography	Can reality record itself?	Reality	Appearance	Moment in time	Frames and records	Objective witness	Provides the Anchor
AI-assisted art	Can images be synthesised?	Prompt	Concept	Entire image	Guides generation	Computational synthesis	Provides an instrument only
Refractism	Can remembered experience be expressed while preserving identity?	Anchor Photograph	Identity of place	Atmosphere, colour and experienced response	Observes, selects, interprets and curates	Identity before interpretation	Integrates reality, experience and interpretation

Section 9 - Looking Forward

Whether Refractism ultimately becomes recognised as a distinct artistic language is not a question that can be answered by its originator. History has consistently shown that artists

propose ideas, while critics, historians, collectors and the public determine their lasting significance.

The purpose of this Working Paper has therefore been deliberately modest. It has not sought to proclaim a new movement, nor to argue that earlier artistic traditions have become obsolete. Instead, it has attempted to describe a coherent methodology that has emerged through practice and reflection.

Several developments suggest that the ideas underlying Refractism merit further exploration. Viewers frequently recognise the original place while responding emotionally to its transformation. Discussions increasingly centre not upon software but upon memory, identity and authorship. These responses indicate that the questions posed by Refractism resonate beyond technical curiosity.

The next stage in its development should not be driven by the production of more images alone. Equal importance should be given to exhibitions, critical discussion, scholarly evaluation and comparison with established artistic practice. A developing artistic language matures not through repetition alone but through informed criticism.

Future work should therefore concentrate upon four objectives: refining the artistic discipline through continued application of the Anchor and Anchor Review; broadening the range of landscapes and subjects without abandoning the governing principle of identity; encouraging informed dialogue with artists, historians and educators; and presenting carefully curated collections that demonstrate both the visual appeal and the methodology of the work.

If Refractism possesses lasting value, it will arise from the images themselves and from the clarity of the ideas that sustain them.

Section 10 – Is Refractism Art?

Whether Refractism should ultimately be regarded as art is not a question that its originator can answer. Throughout history, artists have proposed new ways of seeing, but their acceptance has depended upon the judgement of others. Critics, historians, collectors and the public have determined whether a new artistic language merely reflected a passing fashion or represented a genuine contribution to cultural life.

The emergence of artificial intelligence has complicated this discussion. Some observers argue that imagery produced with computational assistance lacks authenticity because part of the creative process is delegated to software. Others see AI as simply another artistic instrument, no more disqualifying than the invention of photography or the camera obscura.

Refractism adopts neither extreme. It argues that the defining characteristic of art is not the tool employed but the presence of human intention, judgement and expression. The Anchor Photograph is selected by the artist. The artistic objective is defined by the artist. Transformations are directed, reviewed, rejected or accepted by the artist. The final work is titled, curated and presented by the artist. Computational methods extend the artist's vocabulary but do not replace artistic responsibility.

The more important question is therefore not whether artificial intelligence contributed to the making of an image, but whether the finished work communicates something that the artist intended to express.

If Refractism succeeds, it will not be because it employed artificial intelligence. It will be because contemporary technology has been used with discipline, restraint and artistic purpose to explore the relationship between reality, memory, present response and human experience.

Whether that achievement deserves recognition as art is a judgement that belongs to those who encounter the work. The purpose here is simply to make the principles sufficiently clear for that judgement to be made on the work itself.

Section 11 - Conclusion

The central question has been simple: can the experience of a real place - remembered, accumulated and encountered afresh - be expressed while preserving its recognisable identity?

The argument advanced throughout these sections is that it can, provided that interpretation remains disciplined by observation. Photography establishes reality. The Anchor secures identity. Artistic judgement determines what should be preserved, what may be transformed and where clarification serves experienced identity more faithfully than beautification. Memory is important, but it is not the sole determinant: accumulated familiarity and present response also shape interpretation. Artificial intelligence expands the available vocabulary, but authorship remains rooted in human observation, intention and discernment.

Refractism should therefore be understood neither as a branch of photography nor as a branch of painting, and definitely not as an autonomous product of artificial intelligence. It is a methodology that connects these traditions while remaining accountable to lived experience.

Whether this methodology ultimately comes to be regarded as a distinct artistic language will be decided by others. The responsibility of its originator is more limited: to describe its principles honestly, to apply them consistently, and to invite critical examination. The purpose is not to replace the photograph, but to invite the viewer to look again: first at what was there, and then at what experience has made of it. If the principles are clear, the continuing development of Refractism can proceed where it matters most: through the work itself, informed by practice, criticism and revision.

Further Information

Additional collections, essays and examples of Refractist work may be viewed at:

www.refractism.com

The website, scheduled for updating in October, documents the continuing development of Refractism and provides examples of the methodology described in this Working Paper.

About the Author

Dr V. Paul Gerskowitch is a retired clinical pathologist and pharmacologist. He served on the board of directors at several biopharmaceutical companies. Throughout a career spanning clinical medicine, biomedical research and therapeutic development, he was principally concerned with observation, evidence and interpretation.

Without formal training in art, he developed Refractism following his retirement (aged 80) as an exploration of the relationship between photography, human experience and artistic interpretation. His work seeks to demonstrate that contemporary computational tools can extend artistic practice without diminishing human authorship or judgement.

He lives and works in North Norfolk.

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August 2026

