

STILL LIFE

Anna Soper

Artist Biography

Anna Soper is a visual artist and librarian from Kingston. Soper has a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from OCAD University, where she was awarded the OCAD University Medal and the Canon Canada Prize in 2011. In 2016, Soper graduated from Western University with a Master of Library and Information Science degree.

Soper's work is inspired by environmental history, alternative and historical photographic processes, and the intersections of science and art. Find her online at www.annasoper.ca.

Artist Statement

In recent years, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a useful—though controversial—tool for artists and illustrators alike. Using written prompts (such as “a cat painted in the style of Monet”), AI is capable of designing images across a range of styles, from hyper-realistic to abstract.

In August 2022, an American video game designer won first prize at the Colorado State Fair Fine Arts Competition, for a work generated by AI. Predictably, his win went viral. “AI won an art contest, and artists are furious,” wrote CNN, on September 3. In an editorial published on September 4, a *New York Magazine* photo editor asked, “Will DALL-E the AI artist take my job?”

When I began to explore these systems, including Craiyon, DALL-E 2, and Midjourney, I avoided the tropes I'd seen online—the amusing stunt prompts shared on Twitter (“SpongeBob's house after the apocalypse”; “Wizard of Oz passport photo”; “Lady Gaga in a Pingu

episode”)—and the elaborate images of maidens and dystopias, like something ripped from the cover of an old pulp novel.

Instead, I wrote prompts designed to create images like those made by Anna Atkins (1799-1871) and William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877). I peppered my prompts with words like *calotype* (Talbot's process), *cyanotype* (the medium Atkins made her own), *photogram* and *lumen print* (camera-less techniques that date back to the dawn of photography). The resulting images challenge the canon of early photography (a medium which is now nearly 200 years old), while disrupting the concept of generation and reproduction—both in the art world and in evolution itself.

DALL-E 2 can not only create a series of images, it can generate new variations of its own designs, and edit preexisting images into new forms. Which raises the question: if AI can create a variety of plant forms, could another AI system classify them?

Exhibition Description

Still Life explores a collection of botanical images generated by Artificial Intelligence (AI). Using prompts written by Anna Soper, the AI creates a series of plant forms. Some resemble tulips or poppies, while others emerge as indecipherable wisps. Soper feeds these images into a plant identification app, seeking to classify their fanciful designs as real plant species.

Through a series of “found images”, Soper has created a complex feedback loop between two separate AI systems. In a playful body of work, each system is in dialogue with the other, mediated by the artist.

After generating botanical imagery with DALL-E 2 and Craiyon, I uploaded the images to iNaturalist, a plant identification app which uses an algorithm to identify wild species. Predictably, iNaturalist didn't know what to make of these fanciful designs. “We're not confident enough to make a recommendation,” it said, but offered a few suggestions for each. iNaturalist interpreted a wisp of foliage as a species of willow. A leafy stem: Culver's root. A burst of petals: *Gymnosiphon*, a genus of flowering plants in the yam family.

I've run all of *Still Life's* “found images” through iNaturalist's computer vision model, and have labelled each as a real plant species; choosing the classification that best fits the image. Some of *Still Life's* images are even displayed in the style of an old herbarium, in a collection playfully called, “*Flora DALL-Eensis*” (as in *Flora Canadensis*; a flora of Canada, for example). In this sense, *Still Life* represents a complex feedback loop between two systems of Artificial Intelligence, mediated by the artist.