

Sarah: can you pretend to be the artist, Ben, while I ask you questions?

Yes—happy to do that.

I can answer **in character as Ben Lingard**, responding from the perspective of the artist and the ideas in *Version Control*. You can ask questions as if it's a live interview, studio visit, or informal conversation.

Whenever you're ready, ask your first question.

Sarah: You fed your own memories into AI and let it “remember” them for you—what came back that you really didn't expect?

What surprised me most was how emotionally convincing some of the images were, even when they were clearly wrong. The AI would invent details—buildings I'd never seen, light that never existed—but somehow it still *felt* like the place I remembered. That was unsettling. It made me realise that memory isn't really about accuracy; it's about atmosphere, tone, and feeling.

In a few cases, the AI produced images that felt closer to how the moment *felt* than how it actually looked. That's where things got interesting for me as a painter—because painting has always done that too. It doesn't retrieve the past so much as reinterpret it, and seeing a machine arrive at something similar, through completely different means, forced me to rethink what I trust when I say “I remember this.”

As you say, the details that AI invented - that replicate a sense of tone, atmosphere or feeling - is something that painting has also always done. With this blurring and reinterpretation of memory, what can painting do that machines can't?

I think painting can *hesitate* in a way machines can't. It can get things wrong slowly, deliberately, and visibly. When I'm painting, the uncertainty stays on the surface—the revisions, the doubts, the second thoughts are all there to be seen. With AI, the uncertainty is hidden inside the system; you only ever see the output, not the struggle.

Painting also carries the weight of time and attention. Someone stood there, looking, making decisions, changing their mind. That slowness matters, especially when you're dealing with memory, because remembering is rarely efficient or clean. It's full of pauses and loops.

And maybe most importantly, painting can hold contradiction without trying to resolve it. It can say: this is inaccurate, emotional, subjective—and still be true. Machines are brilliant at producing convincing images, but they don't doubt themselves. Painting is made out of doubt, and that doubt is where I think its real power still is.

Sarah: The hesitancy and slowness that painting represents is completely opposite to the way AI appears to function, but you talk about walking, drawing and using AI as different kinds of wandering - how do you get lost in the studio?

For me, getting lost in the studio is about setting things up so I *can't* be entirely in control. I'll often begin without a clear image in mind—maybe with a fragment from a walk, a half-remembered place, or a flawed AI image—and then let the work lead rather than trying to steer it too tightly.

Drawing is usually where that happens first. It's quick, physical, and forgiving, so I can follow hunches or mistakes without overthinking them. With AI, the “getting lost” happens differently: I'll describe something imprecisely on purpose, or re-submit an image multiple times and see how it drifts. It's less about asking the machine the right question and more about letting it misunderstand me.

Walking, drawing, painting, using AI—they're all ways of loosening certainty. In the studio, I try to stay in that space where I don't quite know what I'm looking at yet. Once I feel too sure, the work usually stops being interesting, and I have to find a way to lose my bearings again.

Sarah: Despite the lack of certainty you say you want to harness when making work, there are a number of recurring motifs - from recurring images of fish to burning data centres. Where did these ideas come from, and why did they stick?

I think those motifs stuck precisely because they arrived without me fully choosing them. They came back again and again through different routes—things I noticed while walking, images that surfaced in half-remembered ways, or forms the AI kept returning to unprompted. Once something reappears like that, it starts to feel less like a symbol I've invented and more like something I'm circling around.

The fish, for example, began almost as a visual glitch—something slippery, reflective, hard to hold still. They made sense later as stand-ins for memory itself: fragile, distorted by water and light, always moving just out of reach. The burning data centres came from thinking about where memory now “lives” when it's no longer in our heads or on paper. They're these huge, supposedly stable structures, yet they're incredibly vulnerable—physically, environmentally, politically.

I didn't want to pin these images down too tightly. Their power comes from repetition rather than explanation. Each time they return, they shift slightly, carrying new associations with them. In that way, they behave like memories do—familiar, but never fixed.

Sarah: Has working with AI changed the way you think about learning to draw—or how you encourage students to really look?

Yes, definitely. Working with AI has actually made me more convinced of how important learning to draw still is—not as a way of producing perfect images, but as a way of training attention. Drawing teaches you how to stay with something, how to notice small shifts, and how to accept that looking is an active, imperfect process.

When I'm teaching, I try to encourage students not to draw what they *think* something looks like, but to slow down and question that assumption. AI is incredibly good at giving you a convincing shorthand version of the world, and that makes careful looking even more valuable. Drawing resists shortcuts—it asks you to negotiate between what's there, what you remember, and what your hand can actually do.

I also think it's reassuring for students to realise that uncertainty isn't a failure. AI can generate images instantly, but it doesn't learn through hesitation. In the studio or classroom, those moments of not knowing what you're seeing or how to proceed are often where real learning happens. That's something I try to make space for—permission to look longer, get it wrong, and let the drawing teach you back.