Study Statement

1. Working Title

Painting and Ontological Uncertainty in the Age of Generative AI

2. Aims and Objectives

This piece of research considers some of the ways that contemporary painting might respond to the ontological challenges posed by generative AIs. The current proliferation of AI-generated images has unsettled ideas about authorship, originality, ownership, and the status of the image. Moreover, this slew of digital content raises questions about what sort of being an AI-generated image possesses and how this might differ from the pre-existing methods of image production (i.e. painting). Generative systems do not simply produce images; they reshape the conditions under which images come into existence.

Central to this enquiry is the concept of ontology. In philosophy, ontology concerns questions of being and the conditions through which entities emerge and acquire meaning. In AI engineering, an ontology refers to a formal system of categories and relations designed to structure knowledge for machine processing. This shared terminology conceals significant differences. Where philosophical ontology can embrace ambiguity, contingency, and debate, technical AI ontologies prioritise classification and operational clarity. This project considers how painting might test and complicate these tensions through material and embodied processes.

I have chosen to situate this research in painting for two interrelated reasons. I have examined my practice rigorously in the first months of the course and have recognised that painting is the central axis of my activities. Regardless of how my practice expands or shifts, I always return to painting, and this is not just because I enjoy it (I often do not!) but because I find it the most useful tool for answering my questions. This does not mean that this project will be limited to paint applied to a surface, but rather that the other activities that I undertake will be enacted within the context of painting as the primary methodological framework.

Secondly, painting is uniquely positioned to engage with generative AI as it carries a long history of negotiating seemingly existential challenge. Painting has 'died' many times in the past 200 years and yet it persists and thrives. From the birth of photography through to the reading of the post-modernist funeral rites, painting has always found a way to not just limp on, but to adapt and transform. In the context of generative AI, the slowness, materiality, and embodied labour of painting offer a grounded counterpoint from which to consider, test, and respond to ontological uncertainty.

Aims

1. Consider how painting might operate as a site for testing, negotiating, and responding to the ontological uncertainty introduced by generative AIs.

2. Explore the tensions and problems that emerge when philosophical notions of ontology intersect with technical AI ontologies and consider how painting might be employed to highlight these conflicts.

Objectives

1. Critically engage with key philosophical and technical uses of the term 'ontology', identifying and mapping points of overlap, slippage and conflict. This learning will inform both the conceptual framing of my project and studio experimentation.

2. Design studio experiments that consider some of the key elements and characteristics of AI systems (e.g. prompting, versioning, classification, dataset bias). Use painting to test how these characteristics behave when subjected to physical processes.

3. Use repetition, iteration, and variation within painting as a form of manual 'versioning' to explore the ways in which slow, embodied development contrasts with the optimisation of algorithmic image production.

4. Experiment with rules-based frameworks based on AI ontologies and use these to create paintings in series. How do these structures behave in the context of painting and where do they break down?

5. Gain some understanding of how other contemporary painters think about the challenges and opportunities afforded by generative AI. Is painting threatened, transformed, or unaffected? Should painting be engaging, ignoring, or resisting?

6. Critically assess my own engagement with AI and other digital tools. Explore the tensions inherent in a practice that is simultaneously critical of but entangled with the digital structures that I am considering.

3. Context

This research is situated within contemporary debates surrounding generative artificial intelligence and its impact on image-making. The rapid integration of AI systems into visual culture has prompted widespread discussion across contemporary art, media theory, and critical technology studies. Artists such as Trevor Paglen, Hito Steyerl, Refik Anadol, Memo Akten, and Anna Ridler make work that engages directly with machine learning. Their work variously interrogates data infrastructures, machine vision, and algorithmic bias, often with a view to making visible the political and epistemological assumptions embedded (and hidden) within AI systems. Parallel to this, theorists including Luciano Floridi, Yuk Hui, Bernard Stiegler, and Kate Crawford have examined the ontological, technical, and infrastructural dimensions of AI, asking how computational systems structure knowledge and reconfigure human and non-human agency.

AI is moving fast (or so many of the interested parties would like us to believe) and consequently these fields of engagement are expanding rapidly. Painting, however, seems slow to respond and currently feels quite marginal in these emerging conversations. That is not to suggest that there is no engagement. David Salle has received much publicity for his use of AI to help him rework a series of 'failed' paintings and it is quite easy to find YouTube videos of robots that have been trained to paint. What is harder to find is sustained investigation into how painting itself might function as a critical method for examining the ontological assumptions embedded in AI systems.

This project proposes a distinct contribution by positioning painting not as a rejection of AI nor as a medium to be augmented by it, but as a speculative site for testing ontological uncertainty. Rather than analysing AI ontologies purely through theory, the research uses painterly processes (slowness, repetition, error, materiality, and embodied decision-making) to probe the tensions between philosophical notions of ontology and the formalised ontologies used in AI engineering. By translating elements of AI systems into painterly constraints and observing where they hold or break down, the project seeks to generate knowledge through material experimentation.

In doing so, the research contributes to both contemporary painting discourse and critical technology studies. It expands discussions of AI beyond questions of authorship and automation toward a deeper consideration of how images come into being under different ontological conditions. At the same time, it asserts painting as a method capable of engaging technological transformation critically, without conceding conceptual ground to computational frameworks.

4. Methodology

1. Targeted Theoretical Research

   - Conduct focused reading on philosophical ontology (being, presence, contingency, technics).
   - Research technical AI ontologies (classification systems, knowledge graphs, prompting structures, optimisation logic).
   - Produce summary notes and concept maps identifying key tensions and contradictions.
   - Extract specific concepts to be tested through studio experiments.

2. Concept-to-Studio Translation

   - Translate selected theoretical ideas (e.g. categorisation, ambiguity, optimisation, versioning) into practical constraints or rules for painting.
   - Formulate short experimental briefs before beginning each studio phase.
   - Use theory as a prompt for experimentation rather than as a framework for explanation.

3. Iterative Studio Experiments

   - Produce paintings in series rather than isolated works.
   - Use repetition, revision, and variation as a form of manual "versioning."
   - Introduce rule-based systems inspired by AI ontologies and observe where they hold or fail.
   - Emphasise slowness, overpainting, error/ chance, and materiality.

4. Interviews and Peer Dialogue

   - Conduct interviews or questionnaires with other contemporary painters.
   - Record responses regarding AI's perceived impact on painting.
   - Integrate findings into both studio and written research.

5. Documentation and Record-Keeping

- Photograph all stages of studio work, including unfinished and failed works.
- Maintain a structured studio log recording:
    - dates,
    - materials used,
    - conceptual prompts,
    - observed outcomes,
    - emerging questions.
- Archive sketches, rule systems, and experimental frameworks.

6. Reflective Research Journal

- Write regular reflective entries linking studio activity to theoretical concerns.
- Identify patterns across experiments.
- Note where theoretical assumptions are reinforced or destabilised through practice.

7. Critical Review and Evaluation

- Present work in crits, the interim exhibition, any other public engagement opportunities.
- Record viewer responses and interpretative feedback.
- Evaluate whether ontological tensions are perceptible without explanation.

8. Synthesis and Written Integration

- Periodically consolidate findings from theory, studio work, interviews, and engagement.
- Refine research questions based on practical discoveries.
- Ensure written analysis emerges from experimentation rather than preceding it.

5. Outcomes

This section is necessarily speculative and whilst these outcomes seem to be likely, it is important that I do not over-attend to them and therefore unconsciously funnel toward them.

- A series of paintings that test and explore tensions between painterly processes and AI-derived structures. The methodology that I am proposing will likely produce a lot of work. Evaluation and editing will therefore need to be key studio disciplines.
- A conceptual framework that will likely inform my practice beyond the duration of this project.
- A better-informed articulation of my own relationship with AIs and other digital infrastructures.
- A contribution to the broader discourses in both contemporary painting and critical technology studies.

6. Work Plan

	W/C	COURSE	STUDIO	RESEARCH 1	RESEARCH 2	OTHER	LEITH
YEAR 1	29-Sep						
	06-Oct						
	13-Oct				Artistic engagement with/ theoretical analysis of AI		Extra teaching
	20-Oct						
	27-Oct			Operating machine learning systems			Extra teaching
	03-Nov		Exhibition prep				Extra teaching
	10-Nov						Extra teaching
	17-Nov					Animation workshop	Extra teaching
	24-Nov				Stop motion animation		
	01-Dec					Exhibition install	
	Break					Exhibition open	
	12-Jan						
	19-Jan	Interim show meeting					Extra teaching
	26-Jan						Extra teaching
	02-Feb			Focused reading on philisophical ontology			Extra teaching
	09-Feb	Study Statement					
	16-Feb		Test collage ideas for interim show	Concept mapping	AI ontologies		
	23-Feb	Unit 1 Assessment				Animation workshop	
	02-Mar	Interim show meeting		Generate initial studio briefs	Interviews - method & ethics		
	09-Mar	Low residency/ interim show					
	16-Mar						
	Break		Iterative studio experiments		Test interviews	Exhibition down	Extra teaching
	13-Apr						Interview callout
	20-Apr					Trip to Leeds	
	27-Apr						
	04-May						
	11-May		Iterative studio experiments	Evaluation point		Studio crit?	Teaching at w/end
	18-May						
	25-May				Interviews	Trip to London	
	01-Jun						
	08-Jun						
	15-Jun			Evaluation point			
	Break			Review/ revise briefs	Collate interviews	Studio crit?	1week teaching
YEAR 2	21-Sep						
	28-Sep						
	05-Oct						
	12-Oct						
	19-Oct						
	26-Oct		Iterative studio experiments			Studio crit?	
	02-Nov						
	09-Nov						
	16-Nov	Unit 2 assessment?					
	23-Nov						
	30-Nov					Studio Crit?	
	Break						
	11-Jan						
	18-Jan						
	25-Jan						
	01-Feb						
	08-Feb						
	15-Feb						
	22-Feb						
	01-Mar						
	08-Mar	Low residency?					
	15-Mar						
	Break						
	12-Apr						
	19-Apr			Degree show planning			
	26-Apr						
	03-May	Unit 3 assessment?					
	10-May						
	17-May						
	24-May		Degree show prep				
	31-May						
	07-Jun						
	14-Jun						

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