# BARBARA LATTANZI
## The Storm in the Painting

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curated by

Tammy McGovern, John Massier

November 14 to December 19, 2025

*El pelele, after Goya,* 2024
algorithmic and generative AI-assisted animation, rt 3:47

# In That Kind of Storm

*"It's something like this where you have energy, light, and unidentified waves... It is in that kind of storm
that a society builds or loses itself. It would be of utmost importance that these craftsmen
of Sight could discover a gimmick akin to perspective to catch the Seven Dimensions."*

— Roberto Matta discusses his paintings in the documentary "Matta 85" by Chris Marker, 1985

*"If I seem to be verging on superstition please recall that the images we make are part of our minds;
they are living organisms, that carry on our mental lives for us, darkly, whether we pay them any mind or not."*

— Hollis Frampton, essay "The Withering Away of the State of the Art," 1974

## Preface

*This essay does not explain anything in the exhibition. My animations
can be experienced without reading anything here. The essay, for the
curious, does contain descriptions of the processes used in the creation
of the artworks. Also for the curious, the essay discusses some ideas
lurking in the penumbra of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI),
ideas that animate me — for I am their puppet.*

— Barbara Lattanzi

## Masquerade

The exhibition, *The Storm in the Painting,* presents a group of
AI-assisted animations masquerading as paintings. Within the
gallery space, each animation presents itself *on* a wall or *as* a wall.
Each looping animation plays continuously without opening title or
closing credits and, more notably, without any soundtrack. With the
animations stripped of their audio, wallspace replaces sound-space.
The unique spatiality of the gallery at Hallwalls, with its moveable
non-parallel walls presents the positive opportunity for quasi-
cinematic wipes and "slow reveals" where one's movement through
the exhibition space adapts to walking past free-standing walls that
provide fleeting occlusions. For gallery visitors, the rigid surfaces
of flat screens and projections change state into a fluid space of
discernment.

## Process relics

The animations in this exhibition were all made during 2024 and
2025. The animations present the video relics of invisible *anima-
ted* events — computational objects coordinating in complex ways
in real time, out of sight. For each AI session in the composing of
animated clips, the final technical step is to render images for visible
display and for preservation in the amber of digital files. If things go
well, that rendering step will result in productive surprises. That is
because the process *prior* to rendering is nonlinear - a small change
of any element can have a larger-than-expected effect. For example,
when using a text prompt for the AI, the simple order of two or more
phrases can have a out-sized effect, which is evident when switching

them around and comparing the visual results. The fuzziness of
control is a positive thing.

Although obviously not the result of painterly mark-making, these
animations emerged as material artifacts of invisible processes with
as much concrete reality as the eye-hand coordination of the paint-
er, and every bit as deliberate and signifying as the intentional signs
taking shape gradually by means of brushstrokes accumulating across
a painted canvas.

## Figure — Ground

Most of the animations in the exhibition are "AI-assisted". This means
that my animations used Artificial Intelligence for generating *raw
material* based on my prompts (both image and text-based). I created
the animations by selecting among the AI results, modifying them (i.e.,
processing the raw material, depending on the project), and then edit-
ing the final composition, often adding an original soundtrack. Gener-
ative AI models and tools are accessible through online platforms such
as Midjourney and Runway, whose AI models assisted in creating the
works in this exhibition.

In thinking about what "AI" means as a tool, sometimes it is more
helpful to use a term that is different than AI and thus less burdened
by pop culture associations that are not relevant here. Artificial Neural
Networks (ANN, or simply NN) is a term that refers to the same thing
as Artificial Intelligence. In this essay, I will use the two terms inter-
changeably: AI and NN. The multiple layers of hardware and software
that support NNs can be imagined as an integrated, dynamic field
of invisible activity. During a long training process, an NN learns by
example to correctly connect an input at the start of the process to the
intended output that concludes the process. Put another way, during
training the NN gradually, through repetition, acquires the know-how
to map input patterns to the learned output patterns. Once the training
is complete, the NN is able to independently generate correct output
patterns (visual, textual, sonic, etc) that refer back to a prompt's
intentional signs (text, image, or other forms of input).

A helpful analogy for one's own learning relationship to the activity
within neural networks may be the historical example of analog video
feedback. The spontaneous twisting patterns and spectacular visual

display of a camera image being fed back to itself was seen as a magical window into the normally invisible dynamics of a self-organizing, nonlinear system. Without metaphor, those witnessing the objective phenomenon of video feedback could experience an *artificial system* that was alive and sensitive to its own internal states.

Artificial NN technology has its own history, purposes and design, separate from analog video and feedback, but shares that revelatory aspect. Emergent self-organizing systems are all around us, as well as composing us, at every scale of complexity. NNs participate in that aliveness.

Through training, *Generative* NNs develop know-how with respect to graphical representations. For example, NNs now exhibit the astonishing capacity to generate stable fictional characters that persist in time and across different scenes, of accurately depicting one scene from multiple points of view, and of maintaining clear and stable separation of figure from ground.

## Composing animations

*"...if separate populations of neurons oscillate in synch it is likely that they represent the contour of a single surface..."*

— Manuel DeLanda, describing a small detail
of just one activity among cognitive agents of various
complexity that synthesize the visual field in human perception
(*Materialist Phenomenology,* pg.125 )

*Pilgrimage to the Commissure* is the only animation of the exhibition that does not include generative AI (aka NN) images. The animation is based on algorithmic *analysis* rather than AI synthesis. The coded algorithms of *Pilgrimage* integrate a dataset, circa 2005, of measured mental activity (electrical activity of a person's brain during a seizure). This brain activity dataset was mapped onto a short sequence of film images taken from the silent movie, *"The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari"* (1920). Sequential values from the dataset were used to define constantly changing locations of a set of points on the outer perimeter of the film frame. This produced a strong destabilizing effect on the images; the data-driven visible behavior caused constant and spasmodic collapsing of the film frame. In other words, the images were aggressively twisted, bent and stretched according to the varying intensities of brain activity measurements. Those movements were further intensified in real time using a MIDI device (affecting scale, general positioning and other visible properties). While using the MIDI device, I simultaneously recorded everything to a digital video file. Video editing gave *Pilgrimage to the Commissure* its final form.

All of the exhibited animations — both AI-synthesized and the algorithmic *Pilgrimage* — are realized in large part through automated processes. Yet, for all the many technical aspects of those processes, each of the animations reflects my curiosity about and commitment to exploring remarkable figures, behaviors, and environments generated as components for my animated compositions. Examples of these include *The Graveyard Shift* (workers in a factory), *Laundry Expressionists* (creatures in a laundry room), *Levitate* (people mimicking a strange puppet), etc.

The capacity of Generative AI to interpret formal abstractions is explored in *Shipwreck Island*. For this animation I presented the AI model with a group of my own algorithmic graphics, made using complex two-dimensional arrangements of triangles (based on a specific fractal known by various names including my favorite, the "Sierpinsky gasket"). Using those complex triangle graphics as prompts, the AI model generated scenes of lush vegetation that nonetheless retained shapes of the original abstractions.

The capacity of Generative AI to simulate specific painters and period styles (genres) presents a special challenge that is fascinating and banal at the same time. *Banal* because "Why bother copying a style?" *Fascinating* because the style simulation reflects on the prior training history of AI models. In effect, AI models open a window into their training, a process that uses digital reproductions of paintings as well as myriad other artifacts of visual cultures, albeit within the scope of what has been predominantly — some would say hegemonically — available so far. For example, I was initially surprised by the realism of factory workers' body language generated for *The Graveyard Shift*. The specificity of the worker behaviors suggests that the AI model was itself trained using many videos recorded for the purpose of human worker training.

Human-invented styles and genres are thus objectively accessible there in the trained AI. The system retains the stored tokens necessary to recognize and match the prompt to statisticallylikely patterns formed within the latent space of the AI (with its weighted-connections, reentry points, feedforward steps, etc.). Such statistical regularities of a known style of painting will not render literal copies of specific artworks. Just the opposite. An image that is deliberately in the style of a specific artist will be built *from scratch* using pattern regularities of the style plus variation. More than one style can be mixed by the AI to generate even more variety.

Further, since these are patterns that the AI (aka NN) learns to analyze, tokenize, and then generate as a statistically-likely scenario for a prompted final image, these are not rigid "top down" instructions. So, it would be impossible to step backwards into the generative process and trace each step in reverse order. The arrow of generativity only points forward. Think of trying to unravel in consecutive order all of the gestures that went into a Jackson Pollack painting, but infinitely harder.

To be clear, none of the animations in this exhibition depict actual paintings by either Francisco Goya or Roberto Matta. Instead there are *simulations* of Goya and Matta *styles*.

An example in this exhibition of simulating a specific style is *"El pelele, after Goya"*. This work collages a large collection of images generated by the Midjourney AI model. These images were all generated from a text prompt plus a single visual prompt: a digital reproduction of *"El pelele"* which is an actual painting by Francisco Goya (circa 1791, in the collection of Museo del Prado, Madrid). In the AI style-simulation session, I focused on just that one specific painting. The AI results were wildly different variations within several constraints including: the formal composition of the specific painting, Goya's stylistic tendencies, the significant limitation of my beginner experience with AI prompts, and the specific AI model's level of training in 2024.

*Levitate*, 2025
generative AI-assisted animation, rt 4:00

Another painting style, that of the Surrealist painter Roberto Matta, is simulated in several animations: *"Roberto Matta's Infinite Painting, a slideshow", "Restless at the Painting Factory", "The Graveyard Shift"*. These explore spatial ambiguities that are generated by the AI's unpredictable difficulty in resolving the surreal spaces of Matta-style paintings with the decrepit industrial spaces in which those paintings are hanging. One additional animation is also part of this Matta style series (and shares the same title as the exhibition itself), *"The Storm in the Painting"*. This is a hybrid work in which I selected one single AI-generated image in the Matta style. I then expanded that image algorithmically to a duration of several minutes, flooding the Matta style simulation with fluid movement.

## The Grotesque as a style of expression and a method of discernment

*"The grotesque produces the beautiful."*
— Nathaniel Mary Quinn discussing his paintings
(Brooklyn Rail, September, 2025).

*"I am deeply astonished that society does not lay eggs,*
*since it is beautiful to brood upon them."*
— le Sieur de Bumkis, a character from *Gargantua and Pantagruel*
(François Rabelais, ca.1532).

All the works in the exhibition aspire, one way or another, to the status of the Grotesque. Perhaps an updated version of the Rabelaisian character, le Sieur de Bumkis, would be dismayed to learn that generative AI images are entities neither touched by human hands nor created by feathered bipeds. But after learning this, perhaps Bumkis would do a quick about-face and proceed to explain grandly that finally at last, socially-produced generative AI has arrived so that society can lay the most beautiful eggs imaginable to brood upon. Accordingly, among the many eggs to be found in this exhibition hatchery, I will point to my most recent grotesque works: *"Shipwreck Island," "Levitate,"* and *"Laundry Expressionists".*

The Grotesque does not refer to something monstrous. Instead, the Grotesque, in its various historical manifestations, has had qualities that include: generativity, ornamentality, hybridity, and a focus on what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "human appetites" and "the lower bodily stratum." In other words, an AI may be generative in a technical sense, but the Grotesque is both generative and *life-engendering*. This is even the case when a grotesque expression is mocking, scatological, or travestying. Grotesque expression is a method of discernment, crumbling what are reified generalities or socially rigid norms in order to crack open other spaces of possibility.

## The Bumkis Test

In order to avoid a subjective assessment of generative AI models, I propose that we need an updated Turing Test for a study of grotesque expression. Rather than evaluating visually whether an AI model exhibits intelligent behavior equivalent to that of a human, we need a new test, a *Bumkis Test,* to determine whether or not the style of an AI's generated images has achieved a level of grotesque presence that is comparable to the expressive capacity of any living organism.

Simply, are the AI-generated images grotesque? How so?

According to the Bumkis Test, a group of people - the test subjects - are presented with an image or a video produced by a generative AI model. If a statistically-significant number of those test subjects can be grossed out, bored, perturbed, bewildered, or horrified, but only in such a way that their reaction includes a recognition of that specific AI imagery as *the visible, intentional sign of a living organism capable of taking up residence in their heads,* then the imagery passes the Bumkis Test. Alternatively, maybe the test subjects becomes so affected by the AI imagery that they all collectively enter a *delirium state of the Seventh Dimension.*

Either way. If one of those events happens — *recognition or delirium* — then the generative AI model has passed the Bumkis Test and positively achieved the Grotesque style of expression.

— Barbara Lattanzi
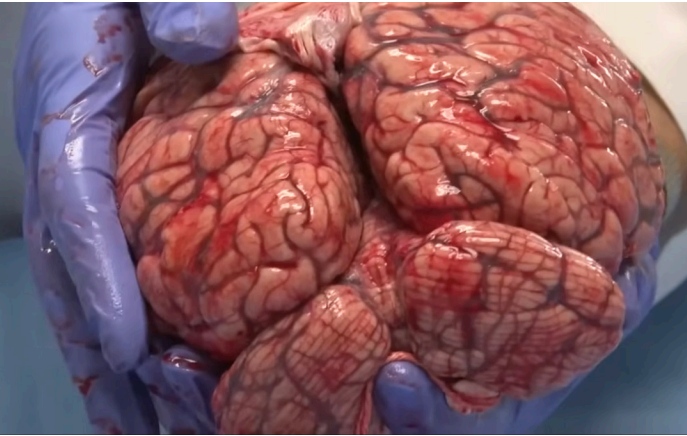


A spongy and fragile brain, once buoyant and protected by the cerebrospinal fluid in which it floated within a living person's skull. (YouTube video still: "The Unfixed Brain," described by Neurobiologist, Dr. Suzanne Stensaas, Univ. of Utah, 2013)

## References

Manuel DeLanda, *Materialist Phenomenology: A Philosophy of Perception* (Bloomsbury: 2022)

Manuel DeLanda, *Philosophy and Simulation: The Emergence of Synthetic Reason* (Continuum Books: 2011) [The title of the exhibition, "The Storm in the Painting" is an intentional play on words that derives from the book's first chapter title, "The Storm in the Computer".]

François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (ca.1532. Translation by M. A. Screech, Penguin Books: 2006)

Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (1965. Translation by Helene Iswolsky, Indiana Univ Press: 1984)

Hollis Frampton, essay "The Withering Away of the State of the Art", 1974 (republished in Frampton, *Circles of Confusion*, Visual Studies Workshop:1983)

Nathaniel Mary Quinn, with Eana Kim: "In Conversation", *Brooklyn Rail*, September, 2025.

Chris Marker, video director, Matta '85, featuring Roberto Matta discussing his paintings, 1985 (distributor: Electronic Arts Intermix)

Barbara Lattanzi, https://www.vimeo.com/idiomorphics/

*Restless at the Painting Factory,* 2025
generative AI-assisted animation, rt 1:06

# Interview with Barbara Lattanzi

TAMMY McGOVERN:  Your earlier work often dealt with found foot-age and cinematic histories. Do you see this new AI-assisted work as a continuation of those engagements with existing cultural archives, or as a rupture from them?

BARBARA LATTANZI:  Well, it may seem like a rupture from what came before. My earlier work involved creating original software for closely examining and interacting with selected fragments from early cinema (as well as other media archives). Yet, I see my earlier work in a continuum with my present work.

One way my approach to AI has been shaped by my earlier work is in thinking about the generative AI models that I use (Midjourney and Runway) as cultural archives — specifically, as archives of visual and cinematic styles.  Generative AI synthesis allows for culturally-shared, recognizable styles to be applied to the depictions of any figures, objects, behaviors and events.

However, in this exhibition the styles are just a pretext, not the goal. No one would mistake the paintings depicted in my animations as anything close to accurate renderings of the styles of Roberto Matta or Francisco Goya. Instead the styles, synthesized from an archive of AI "know-how," set the stage for the emergence of behaviors and events that are specific to each animation.

JOHN MASSIER:  You recently used the phrase "the sorceries of coding," which suggests an almost magical, alchemical process. Can you elaborate on this sorcery?

BL:  I came up with that characterization because of a short essay written a century ago by Antonin Artaud, "Sorcery and Cinema". As a playwright and theater actor he was thinking about what made the experience of cinema seem so different.  One of the things he focused on was how something specific and strange happens with movies where even the most insignificant small thing or detail appearing on the screen seems to have a mysterious power.  It is as if there is something imperceptible but real that emerges alongside the representations themselves.  If one also looks at the etymology of the word "sorcery," we can connect Artaud's idea of cinema's mysterious power to sorcery's capacity to influence fate.

Using a programming language, or even a generative AI model — as an occult part of an art practice — presents the opportunity for a material engagement with normally inaccessible layers of computation. Coding is an addictive activity in its own way. That addictiveness — that persistent need to see what event or interesting behavior will manifest next on the screen —  derives less from compulsiveness and more from a realism and curiosity about what is actually taking place by means of coding. That is, there are coherent entities (technically, bundles of functions and properties) that are real but imperceptibly interacting within the computer processor. By directing those activities with code, a programmer influenc-es what can visibly appear on the screen, either in a linear way — making some predictable, "fated" change like the click of a user-interface button — or in a nonlinear way that veers from predictability to yield surprising and remarkable outcomes that are only approximately defined, using rules that can only constrain behaviors and not dictate them. So, there emerges a hidden order, a hidden artificial life that can be manipulated and then

manifested as a visual image, a sound, an actuator's control of robotic movements, or some other output.

JM:  Is there an unknowable or discoverable element to coding that cannot be anticipated or calculated?

BL:  One of my favorite illustrations, because of its simplicity, for coding unknowability is the "hill-climbing" algorithm. It is an algorithm that is used for a variety of purposes and that has been around for decades. Visu-ally, it creates a swarming behavior that is similar to, but simpler than, the algorithm used to simulate the flocking behavior of birds. Conceptually, it is related to the amazing "Game of Life" algorithm devised by the mathe-matician John Conway around 1970. Game of Life is a hugely influential simulation that models the evolution of complex behaviors using simple rules. And that is exactly the point: complex behaviors from simple rules result in some variable degree of control that is never total.

The name "hill-climbing" algorithm is wonderful because it describes a behavior, without any reference to who or what is doing the action. To your question then, inherent in the very concept of a behavior is the understanding that there are aspects of its expression that cannot be fully anticipated or calculated. Those are the behavior's "degrees of freedom." With hill-climbing, there are only two degrees of freedom. At any one moment, you can either go up the hill or you can go down the hill. If you stand in place, that just means for that moment you are not exercising the capacity to move one way or another.

Once set in motion, the behavior is automatic. So, when will the hill-climber reach the "top of the hill?" That can be guessed at, probabi-listically, based on its properties: the length of each "step," the frequency of each step, the distance from the goal and, crucially, the randomized direction of each step. I am not interested in the probabilities but only in the emergent behavior which I find mesmerizing to watch, especially when you have a whole population of these mindless agents swarming towards the same goal located at random distances from each of them. The agents all appear willfully determined. They are automata. They are all obeying the same behavior rules. The visual patterns that they create are emergent and unpredictable, but not accidental.

JM:  Over the past few decades, it's obvious that if some new technology emerges, artists are among the first to pursue it, grapple with it, experi-ment with it, and utilize it for their artistic ends. Is there any impulse like this in your own recent implementation of generative AI in your videos?

BL:  Although eventually we all catch up, some artists are faster than other artist, or other communities in latching onto new tools. One exam-ple of that phenomenon is Nam June Paik. He started out as a musician. As he learned about electronic technologies for sound and image, he quickly recognized the affinity of live video with sonic experience. His use of video was not about the novelty of technological tools in them-selves, but about expanding that technology as an exploratory system to synthesize and orchestrate visual electronic flows. In this way, he could follow his intuition that live video — as energy flow — might have a viscerally shared effect on an audience, an effect that has always been part of musical experience.
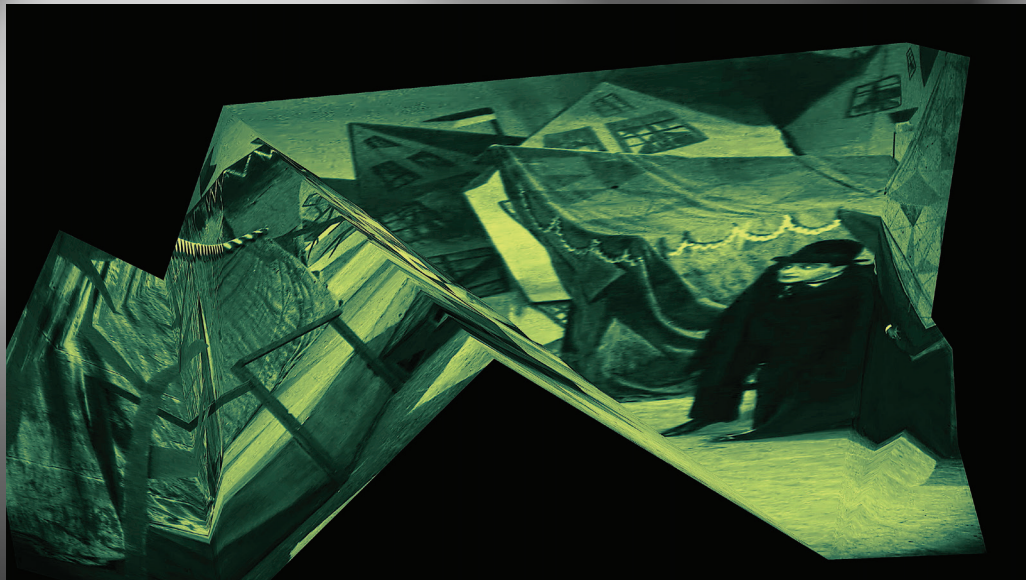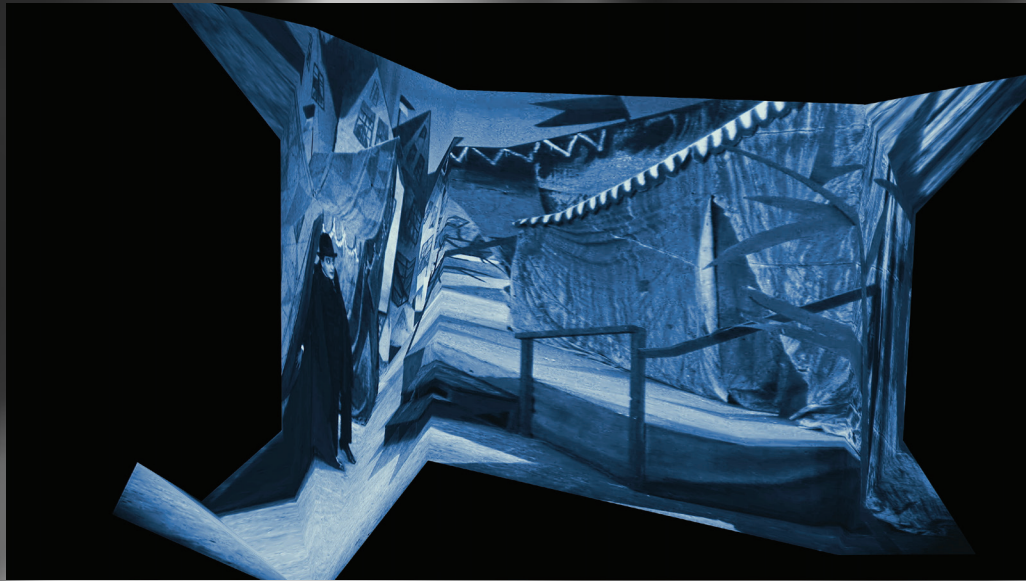
So, I think that your question becomes the issue of what prior experiences make an artist's affinity with a new technology possible, an affinity which will expand the possibilities of that new technology. Regardless of whether artists are early or late adopters, they will tend to develop custom modifications or work-arounds to allow for their open-ended experimentation. That would include me, a late adopter of AI technology. My use of it is conditioned by my older art practice involving code-writing for time-based art.

JM: Can you get a little granular about your use of AI? How finely-tuned is your implementation?

BL: My beginning generative AI experiments used style simulations to probe the constraints of the particular generative AI model to which I had access. Specifically, *Roberto Matta's Infinite Painting, a slideshow* is a work where a viewer can tune into the particular AI model's subtle difficulties. For developing this work, I simply prompted repetitively for a Matta-style painting that was draped from wires within a decrepit factory environment. The results bear witness to the delicate problems that the AI had resolving the biomorphic, surreal space of each painting with an external, hyper-realistic factory environment. This was a problem of one type of spatial representation colliding head-on with a categorically different spatial representation. The AI struggles are not dramatic, but almost poignant to view. They are preserved on video as expressive errors. Some examples of those expressive errors include the following: thin one-dimensional wires that hang randomly from a ceiling get appropriated by the pictorial space of the painting as abstract lines; rags piled on the floor extend into the pictorial space while confusingly also get entangled with, or painted onto, the material folds of the canvas's bottom edge on the factory floor; a work table close to the painting has its front half physically located in the space of the factory and its back half trapped inside the painting composition; the outlines of concrete blocks on the factory floor recede into the painted composition and define the painting's deep perspectival space.

As an AI amateur and someone who enjoys watching other AI amateur videos, I have developed an enthusiasm for any AI simulation that includes a range of causal events. Causality is a representational problem for current generative AI models. For that reason, any attempts to generate representations of causal events can be used as an informal indicator of improvements that are made from one version of the AI model to the next version. It is surprising how many AI animations exist that are highly visual but lack any behaviors beyond figures adjusting their pose while their hair blows in the wind. Yes, the wind causes the hair to blow, but is that all the causality to expect from these trained AI models? The answer is, of course, no.

Activity in a generative animation can involve a web of causal events that gives the animation presence. For example, the workers in my animation *The Graveyard Shift* all interact with their environment. They use their hands to smooth out the loose pliable surfaces of painted canvases, handle brushes to touch up the painted surface, push at a stiff painting to crack it open, lift and gather the folds of a canvas to adjust its location, etc.

JM: Have you developed a work process with AI that enables your control of it and somewhat predicates outcomes? Or is it all a blind roll of the dice?

BL: Getting a consistent workflow established is one big part of the process, because the AI generates so many images so quickly that it is easy to

get lost or overwhelmed. For example, finding a systematic sorting strategy to separate the ordinary stuff from the promising stuff is a challenge. Ordinary stuff includes some recognizable clichés to avoid, even though the particular results may still offer good lessons so you want to keep them around. The sorting effort will always be relative to one's learning curve and whether there is an ultimate goal brought to the work session.

The goal can begin as simply an exploratory AI session, but eventually things settle into a pattern where something remarkable comes into focus — some magic combination of your expectations and the AI's version of your expectations. So, you decide to commit to that thing. And that is the point where you attempt a closer control over the results by editing more specific prompts. But you also want to remain flexible, because the behavior of the AI system may result in something unexpected that shocks you. For example, during the process of making *The Graveyard Shift,* there was a startling moment when the AI model generated a clip of a worker who emerged from out of the draped folds of the Matta-style painting. She began gesturing and talking to the camera directly. I had not prompted the AI to do any such thing. So, generative AI is a unique tool with the behavioral capacity to hybridize its response to your prompt in meaningful and unanticipated ways, no matter how precisely you wrote that prompt. So, pay attention!

TM: Do you see AI becoming just another medium among many for artists, or do you think it fundamentally shifts what art can be?

BL: This issue of fundamental shifts about what art can be in the future is too big for me to say much about. However, one can definitely make the opposite case, that art and crafts have fundamentally shifted what AI can be! After all, think of what images are used to train generative AIs. One place to look for an answer is in the inventory of styles that AI platforms such as Midjourney make available to artists and designers. I don't know the statistics, but it is a fair guess that historical and contemporary works by artists and artisans must comprise a significant proportion of generative AI training.

So, artists are not diminished by AI's becoming anything, whether special ("fundamental shift") or ordinary ("just another medium"). AI's compelling generativity both comes from us and reflects us back to ourselves, teaching us in the process.

Instead of being just another medium, maybe I prefer to think of a particular AI model (whichever one it is) as a tool to "mess with my head". Perhaps the AI has that in common with poetry written by humans that also mess with my head. I hope that there are artists willing to push that further. Others will be drawn to some more prosaic but equally effective uses of an AI model. That is fine.

JM: Does AI provide a means for a video work to share a pictorial space with painting? Is it more fulsome than painting due to its animation?

BL: I think that AI shares, but does not exceed, painting's capacity to combine the schematic sign, the gestural sign, and the representational sign.

An example is my AI-assisted animation *Shipwreck Island.* The AI-generated imagery is based on a fractal known as a Sierpinsky Gasket, among other names for it. The fractal is basically a complex, recursive triangle structure, triangles within triangles. Before dealing with the AI, I hand-stamped the recursively-repeating fractal to prepare graphics for the AI.
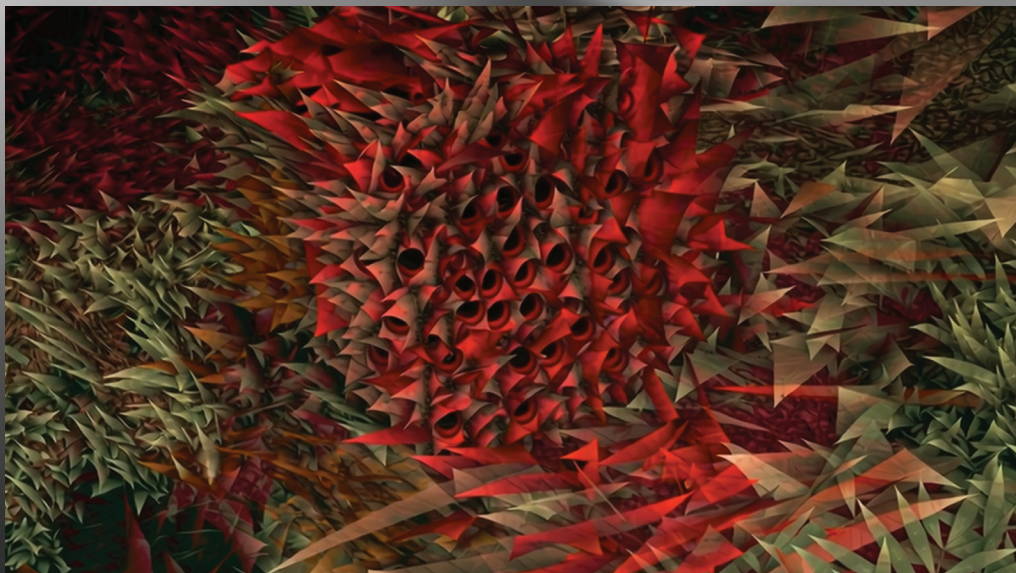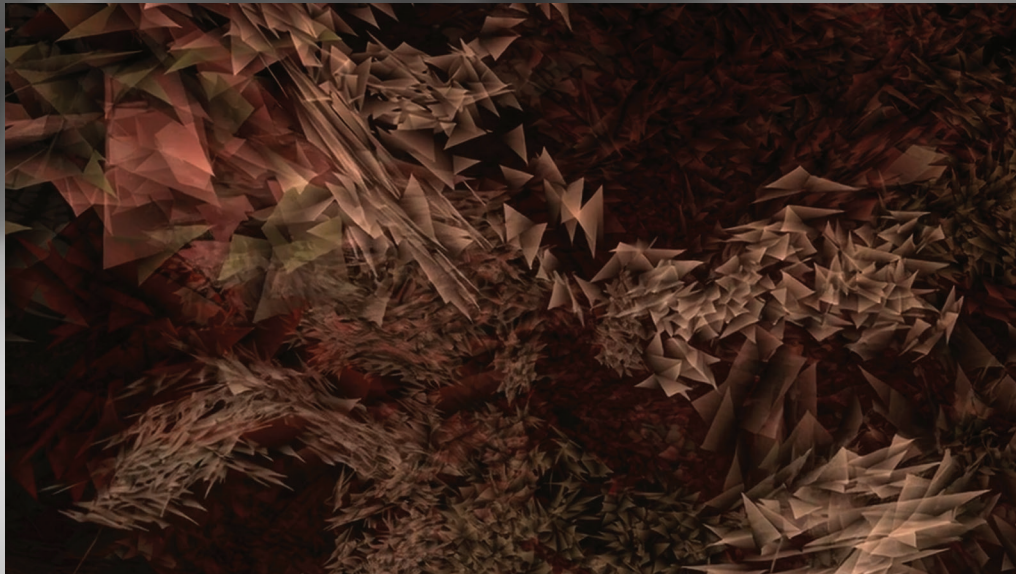
That process is like handling an animated paintbrush that is continually morphing itself. Eventually I generated a whole collection of these fractal graphics. When I gave them to the AI, it generated complex foliage in "natural" settings with behaviors that mimic plants and some camouflaged creatures, all of them apparently wet or underwater.

My point is that these organic environments with their watery and creaturely behaviors nonetheless retain the obvious abstract shapes of triangles in various clusters shaping larger forms. You can see all of the triangles while you simultaneously watch the organic simulations. So, I think that "Shipwreck Island" is very resonant with the way a painting includes the traces of brushstrokes, the diagrammatic gestures that delineate forms and spaces, and the representational imagery that emerges from the complex interaction of such details to express the painting as a whole.

Another example of this painterly premise is captured in "Laundry Expressionists." I prompted the generative AI to imagine human-sized creatures, based on the AI's conception of microscopic prokaryotes, and to place them in a messy laundry facility. The result was heaps of tangled clothes that function as three-dimensional expressionist brushstrokes in counterpoint with the geometrically-clean, modernist forms of laundry machines, all within a space inhabited by grotesque creatures.

So, to be clear, I don't think that the AI-assisted animations have more to offer than painting. After all, these animations are made self-consciously to share in the lineage of painting. However, as much as the animations reflect my own intentions vis à vis painting, it is also possible that these have even more to do with the training regime of the generative AI model, insofar as the training depends upon and reflects a visual culture that includes the histories of painting.

TM: You've said that these videos "masquerade as paintings". How do you see projection scale, looping form, and the absence of sound altering how viewers experience your animations?

BL: I have had only one previous opportunity to view this work in a gallery context, and that was only for two animations, *The Graveyard Shift* and *El pelele, after Goya*. Both were screened on large monitors without sound. My questions were similar to your questions. I found that the large scale of the work makes a big difference, where the strange figures depicted have a size that approaches the scale of the gallery visitors. This alone lends the animations a weight and a presence that is a good trade-off for the lack of sound (even though I really like the soundtracks for the animations too). The Hallwalls exhibition is an experiment. I hope that the ambiences, behaviors, and episodic events within each work all create enough accumulated complexity to reward extended viewing - just as one might be affected by encountering a painting, where you forget about time ticking away and get lost in the painting's eternal present.

TM: What questions are you still wrestling with in AI?

BL: I remain curious about novel ways of representing spaces "between" dimensions, as happens in *Shipwreck Island*. I am also curious about depicting different types of behaviors and causal events, about representing one behavior from multiple points-of-view. And I am curious about lip-sync'd speech in AI, which I have begun to experiment with in recent animations, such as *Vegetal Innocents* (not included in this exhibition). Many other artists are working in these areas too, and that is interesting in itself. Why? Because the search spaces of AI are potentially infinite.

JM: In creating an "infinite painting," was there a reason you chose the art of Roberto Matta as a prompt?

BL: It was a hurried decision. I wanted to see something similar to my algorithmic coded projects that I was working on at that time: graceful curving surfaces floating around in 3D space. Those curved surfaces were texture-mapped with still images taken from old silent movies. So, I was interested in this combination of rhythmic, graceful, organic-abstract surfaces coexisting with the photographic representations mapped onto them. Roberto Matta was not an exact pick, but close enough because of his mixtures of biomorphic and geometric forms depicted within expansive spatial compositions.

So, I prompted the generative AI for Matta-style biomorphic paintings. The AI obliged. But then I wanted the painting not to fill the frame of the image but, rather, to be itself a shapely graceful surface, suspended on wires within a generic 3D space. Achieving that, I realized two things. One, the space that held the painting should be a hyper-realistic space in sharp contrast to the ambiguous organic abstractions of the Matta style. That pointed me to the idea of using a decrepit factory environment. Two, the series was becoming a set of infinite possibilities. The spaces and the Matta-style paintings at a certain point just went on and on. Every time I prompted the AI, I was given four variations and they all looked great! I picked the best of the four and received four more. And they all looked great too. Even the subtle errors were resonant and became increasingly significant to me. I was getting exponential growth of my original idea. I could never finish this project. So, even without attempting some impossible math determining all the visual variables that the AI was manipulating internally, it became clear that the AI would never repeat a Matta painting simulation. The set of possible Matta-style paintings is an infinite set.

TM: In works like *The Graveyard Shift* and *Laundry Expressionists,* you suggest that AI's training data might encode cultural residues (like worker training videos). How do you think about these embedded histories and biases when selecting or editing results?

BL: The issues of racial and gender biases, labor exploitation for AI training, the obliteration of historical contexts except for simulations of styles and genres - these and other issues all remain unresolved. There have been insightful writings. Hito Steyerl's 2023 essay "Mean Images" comes immediately to mind. Yet, I know of no writings about generative AI that probe what it is to experience the medium on its own terms, nor any writings willing to analyze generative AI as an expressive method. To dig a little deeper, generative AI is not itself an expression of subjectivity but seems to have an affinity for it, i.e., an orientation towards subjectivity as a social and biological hybrid that is ever-differentiating, that embodies populations of agents at multiple levels of complexity, and that is enmeshed in a potent exteriorizing process by technological systems (both now and historically). In my opinion, the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Manuel DeLanda are the most useful and come closest to describing this externalizing of the self. Subjectivity is part of a process of becoming that, in this case, simply resonates with generative AI. No more. No less.

So, now I can respond to the negative externalities of generative AI that you allude to in your question with some questions of my own:
What if the use of generative AI was ritualized, analogous to peyote ceremonies? What if there were only certain ceremonial days of the year to use it, such as winter and summer solstices? What if the generative AI system was strictly regional (including its sustainable use of energy),
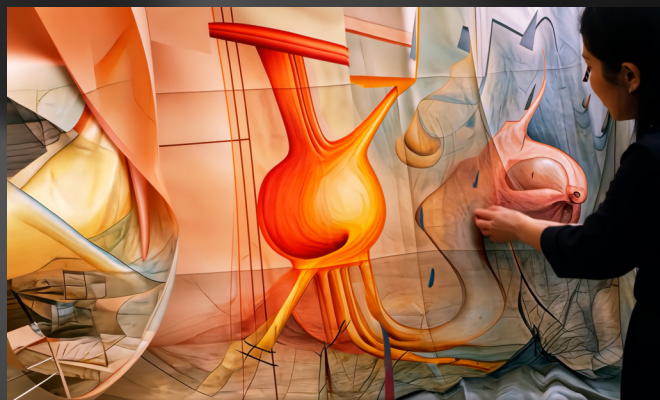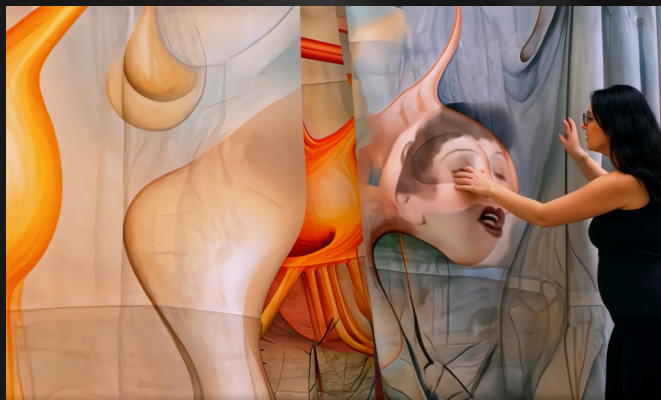
only trained with documents of regional cultures including travestying (grotesque) versions and including documents of the region's geo-pale-ontological histories? What if there were these and other social practices, including secred sects, established for a range of public and private expressive activities? What if there were carnivals at one-century intervals to sacrificially destroy the regionally-trained generative AI and start all over again?

JM: What specific elements does AI-generative imagery provide that cannot be found elsewhere? What has surprised you the most?

BL: Okay. My response is going to be almost completely anecdotal. I am discovering that sometimes the AI generated images I work with can spontaneously become embodied as visual and kinesthetic components of my own behavior.

I have been surprised to find myself spontaneously adopting specific gestures of AI-generated characters that appear in my animations. Is this a thing? Maybe something analogous to visual afterimages? I don't know. Is this a potential of the human mind that novelists already know about and encounter all the time as a real world extension of the life of their characters? Obviously, one can dream about imagined characters, but this phenomenon happens while awake.

One concrete example of this reverse-mapping of generative AI onto one's own behavior has come from a single character in the animation titled *Levitate.* One day, I found myself using a particular gesture of hers. But it took me many days to figure out the source of what I knew was a mimic of something that I had seen before. I continue to use the gesture because it is playful as an embodied comic reaction to whatever benign mishap of the day occurs. This means that I can apply these characters as "conceptual personae" (a term that I did not make up myself) to other things in my experience, however trivial.

Another type of reverse-mapping is actually a state of empathy, and has happened during the video editing process. During my editing of *Laundry Expressionists,* I occasionally cropped and emphasized the facial expressions of the creatures. Such edits function as cinematic closeups. And through these closeups I discovered a whole new affective connection to the creatures in the laundry room. That surprised me.

The odd and comically-empathetic pangs of connection to those nonexistent video characters have advanced my thinking about an historical mode of expression that seems in my opinion to have a particular affinity with generative AI; that is the mode of the Grotesque. This mode is culturally continuous with centuries-old connections to the ridiculous. In this case, I am referring to the historical Grotesque style as a method of externalizing energies of comic empathy, understood as a critical, embodied, and life-engendering force even when it is mocking or travestying. This Grotesque style of generative AI is not about cliché monstrosities and it is not about cliché weirdness. But it is definitely in sync with other Grotesque modes of critical expression that gave the world storytellers such as Cervantes and Rabelais, as well as comedic-mythic figures across world cultures. By the way, the person who helped get me started with generative AI is the artist and philosopher, Manuel DeLanda. In my opinion, DeLanda is a progenitor of what I refer to as the Grotesque mode of AI expression. He probably disagrees with that. I really don't know. But you can see for yourself by checking out his AI-assisted animations, available on his Youtube channel, and I highly recommend them.

TM: In reference to the characters in your animations, you've used the word "creature", which seems to suggest something both alive and possibly unsettling. How do these AI-generated creatures embody or challenge your ideas about the grotesque as a life-engendering force? Or do you see them more as companions, collaborators, or something else?
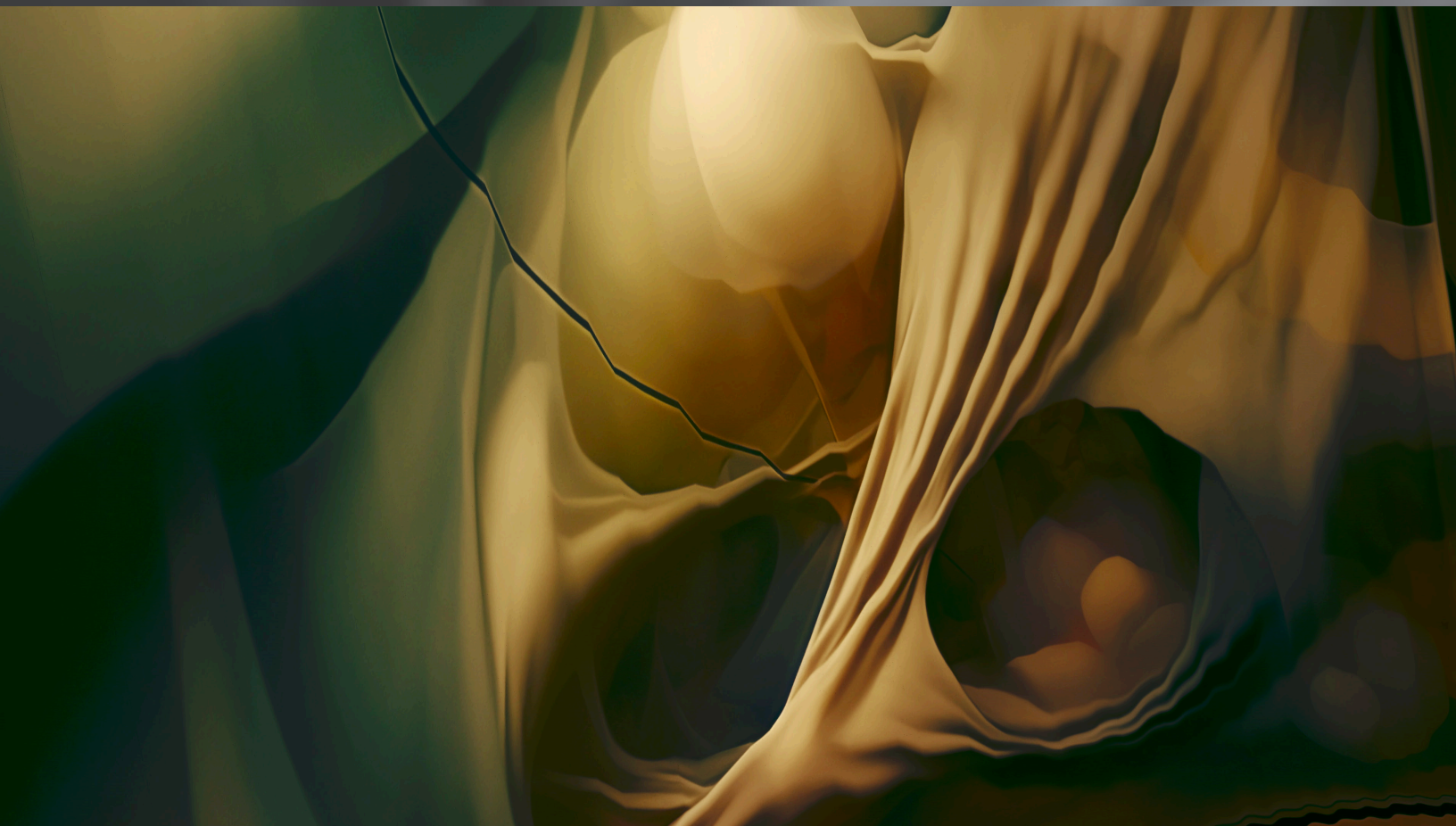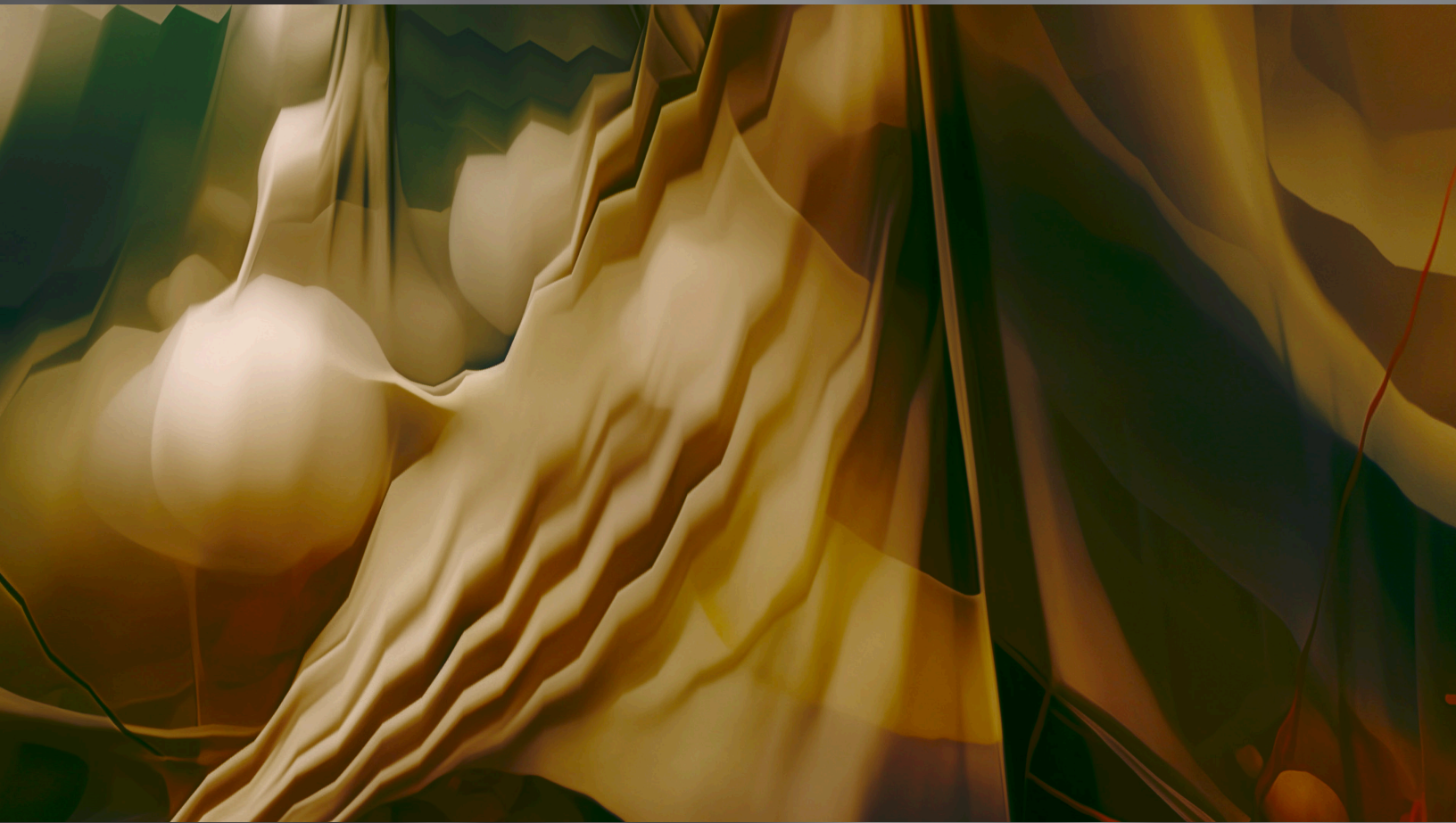
BL: I like using the word "creature" to evoke the idea of individual agency that is fully external, without interiority. Creatures are not passive, but enact the desire to affect their worlds in whatever ways that ultimately define them. Artificial creatures have always been with us, in myths and folk tales, and maybe also in our biology insofar as viruses seem to express a zombie life. But we also co-exist with the microbial life constituting the gut biome, and the mindless agents of perception emergent in the simpler neural processes of the brain, to name just a couple of examples.

The agency of artificial creatures in my animations compels a kind of ambivalence. These creatures are grotesque and as such they elicit our ambivalence and perhaps revulsion. Since they emerge from actual processes in a system of artificial neural networks (the AI model), such creatures are external from us but "resemble" the patterns of our visual imagination in ways both banal and uncanny. Like a stance towards fetishes, we might encircle them as taboo. Why? Because, like any fetish, the generativity of AI is part of us and not part of us at the same time. Any activity of AI will express itself before a humanly visible result can actually get rendered to the screen, recorded, and shared as a video animation. So, the visual depiction of any event becomes the result of some other agency involving some AI pattern formation that is equally animated but invisible.

JM: Now that you have used AI in fairly generous ways, are you left with any feelings about it?

BL: The use of generative AI is a collective search process. And I am tempted to call the collective use of any specific generative AI model "a social space." The actual use of the AI model, of course, is not the most material of social spaces - which is either the battlefield (as someone has written) or else (as I would add) is anywhere a person is being assisted as she is giving birth to another person. Yet, let's be modest and say that social spaces for interacting with AI do exist. These spaces are mainly where people gather online, at specialized, monetized platforms where their AI-assisted work can be made and shared with others. The monetization is a problem for now, since the shared wealth of everyone's cultural histories has been shoveled into the AI, like coal into a hulking, polluting steam engine. Let's emphasize that a generative Artificial Intelligence has a multi-dimensionality (i.e., its millions of variables that represent "degrees of freedom" for synthesizing sensory experience) that is vast enough that no one person,aesthetic, genre, or style has a lock on it. So, use it. Search it. Share your innovations derived from it. Discover things about your multitudinous selves from it. Bring those new understandings back into your everyday life which now will be newly crowded with images that reside as living beings in your head and that sometimes kinesthetically map themselves onto your everyday behaviors too. Welcome them.

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*The Storm in the Painting,* 2024
algorithmic and generative AI-assisted animation, rt 4:35

Grid study for *El pelele, after Goya*

## Biography

Barbara Lattanzi's art-making roots are in Chicago, where she attended the School of the Art Institute, studying with Imagist painter Ray Yoshida and attending cinema lectures of Stan Brakhage. Several years later, she moved to Buffalo to study with Hollis Frampton and Tony Conrad at Center for Media Study at SUNY Buffalo. During subsequent years in Buffalo, 1980s to mid 90s, she participated in a creative and critical milieu supported by Hallwalls, CEPA, Squeaky Wheel and many other art collectives and community initiatives. More recently, Barbara Lattanzi taught electronic media art (2006—2020) as a tenured professor at New York State College of Ceramics, Alfred University. Her films, videos, internet art, and generative software have been screened and exhibited at such venues as Buffalo International Film Festival, Microscope Gallery (NYC), Rhizome, Whitney Museum of American Art, XCENTRIC 2020 (Barcelona), among many others.

## Acknowledgements

With appreciation and respect, I thank the entire Hallwalls staff, especially John Massier and Tammy McGovern, for their efforts to make the exhibition happen. Additionally, I thank Tammy for the initial invitation to screen my videos at Hallwalls, an earlier event that opened a dialogue about the trajectory of this new work. And I thank John for his initiative and curiosity about seeing my videos operate in an expanded spatial context, inspiring my own curiosity about that new context as an experimental search space. Tammy and John together present an impressive combination of skill and vision for advancing ideas, for which I am grateful. Finally, the videos in the exhibition would not exist without contacts beyond my little village of Alfred. So, names that would normally appear as an end-title with 'special thanks' (that is, if the animations were not looping, title-free, in a gallery context) are listed here as a shout-out to the following individuals: Brian Springer, Chris Hill, Jean Sousa, Keith Sanborn, and Manuel DeLanda. — BL