Interview with *Longxiang Hu*

Interview with *Renaud C. Haslan*

On Saturday, February 25th, I invited the very talented artist Longxiang Hu to remix his artwork with Midjourney AI and discussed his views on this new technology and its relation to creative exploitation.

The results of this collaboration include a few designs for art vibrators, sculptures inspired by Japan's Takayama festival floats (shown on the left), and a Q&A session.

Q1: What is your opinion on contemporary art productions that involve a team of skilled workers, but the artist receives sole recognition while the team's contribution is intentionally obscured?

Contemporary art productions and enterprises are fundamentally similar. The only difference, in my view, is that artists have the freedom to choose whether or not to reveal their creative process. This is comparable to how intellectual property/trade secrets are managed in business. How an artist discusses their artwork's production is a creative decision. Personally, I believe it is appropriate to credit everyone involved in my work, if any. However, I totally respect other artists' decisions not to do so.

Compensation is another factor to consider. If artists participating in Jeff Koon's large exhibitions are well-compensated and agree to remain low-key about their involvement, then it is acceptable. As both an artist and an employer in this scenario, it is important to ensure that you provide either money or credit to the people who work on your project. Failing to do so would be exploitative.

Q2: Are you suggesting that most exploitation is monetary?

It is also about power. Art making is a means of voicing one's views, and artists who seek to solidify their power in order to be seen, heard, and appreciated can be exploitative.

Q3: What are your thoughts on using AI's work to prevent the exploitation of real people?

Personally, I find it fun. At the end of the day, it is still artists' decisions on how to leverage the output generated by AI. The intricacies involved in deciding how to implement, curate, promote, and explain the final artwork far outweigh the image produced by AI. Even if the ultimate decision is to use the AI-generated image as-is and pass it off as their own, it still involves a creative decision that an unconscious computing operation cannot make.

Q4: How can you differentiate between a collaborative artwork and a work created by an artist who employs other creatives?

I believe it ultimately depends on whose style stands out the most, or if all parties bring their own recognisable elements to the new project. Personally, I can usually make an educated guess based on the artist's style outside of the collaboration, but ultimately it's up to the audience to judge.
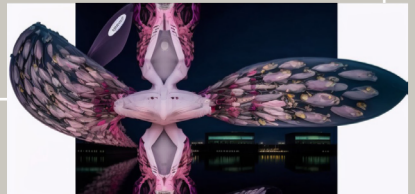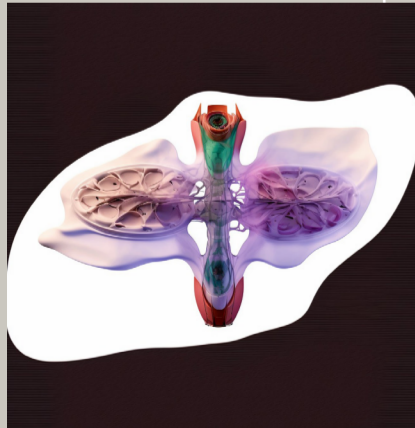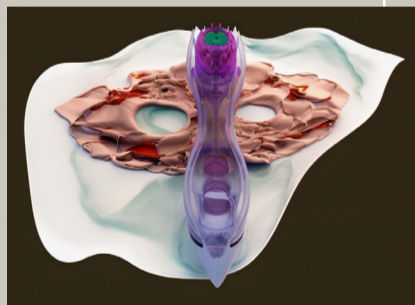
Saucer Biological: Zetton
Longxiang Hu
Glue Collage
126 cm x 67 cm
2022
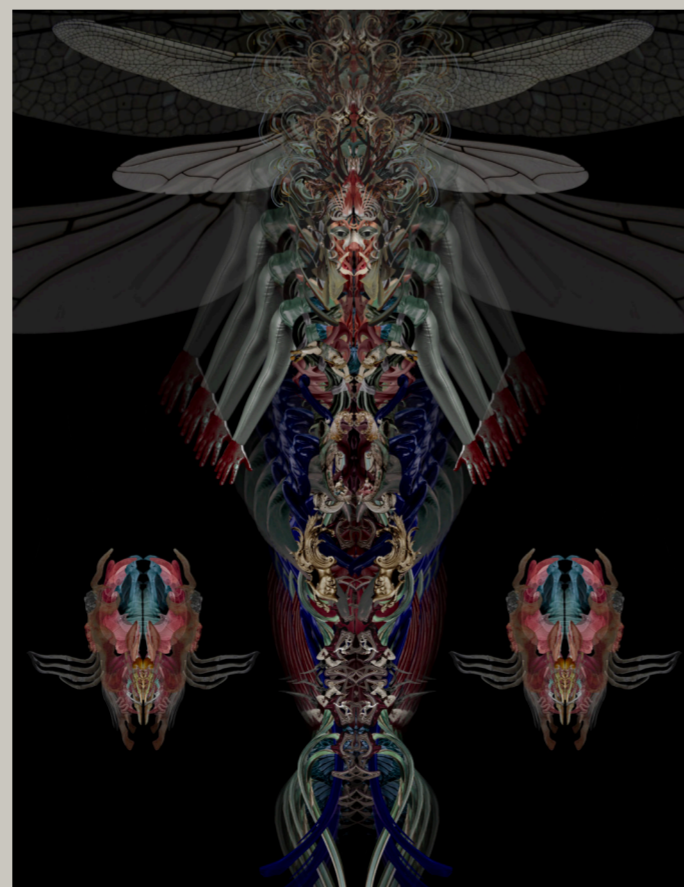
Saucer Biological NO. 07
Longxiang Hu
Digital Collage
Size variable
2020

Q1. How has the experience been for you in creating digitally?

To me, the advent of home-computers was a big benefit because, try as I may, and as much as I admire certain techniques involving paint or more traditional ways of drawing or illustrating, I was ok with it when younger but never became that proficient. The digital phase allowed me to achieve almost the same results (albeit with a more personal touch) through first using (digital) photography then processing it through other digital devices. I also have a distaste for getting my hands dirty so using computers is much cleaner and, as a bonus, it means I don't need to have a studio: I can create freely, on the go, wherever I am and at any moment in time.

Q2. As the interview today is focused on exploitation, have you ever been exploited in your past experience?

I don't see any exploitation in terms of a computer helping me to create. On the contrary, it's me as an artist who exploits the technology. At the same time, my relation with digital tools is the same as a painter's relation with a brush or a knife, or a photographer's relation with a camera. They are just tools and it's my brain and my eyes that dictate the creation. Of course, you could say that a computer has functions that are pre-programmed but without me triggering them, there is nothing being done. Further along the line, if we go into what is now generally addressed to as Ai where there is a so-called decision made by the 'machine', at first glance it is scary but digging a little more into it, it can only go as far as what data has been put into it. And even though through algorithms, it may seem that the machine has ideas of its own, it is still fed through a line of data. I don't think I'm clever enough to even understands how far it could go but I'm confident that where artistic creation is concerned, artists shouldn't feel threatened for now. By and large the public and to a certain extent the art world have yet to take a firm position regarding computer-assisted / digital art, let alone Ai "independently" made artworks. Some people in certain corners of the artworld as well as members of the public still don't recognise photography as an art form... it will take time.

Q3. What do you feel about replacing people with digital tools to help you create artwork?

At the level of the creative process, do not let the machines run the show, but at the level of replacing people, well, isn't it what industrialisation was all about? This is exactly the same. Maybe some people will lose their role/place but you still need people to operate those machines, we just have to adapt. I often compare this to music, when in the late 70s/early 80s, with the appearance of synthesisers and drum machines, musicians 'unions started campaigning against such tools because a synthesiser could replace almost any kind of traditional instruments and people who are virtuoso at those instruments would soon have no use or lose their job in the orchestra or the band... well, as we can see today, this is not the case so there is no reason for art assistants etc to completely lose their jobs, they will just have to adapt to whatever comes next. We are humans, we will always humanise or re-humanise the situation by learning to adapt. Adaptation comes at the price of dealing with the bad side of things and positivise.

Q4. After the shift in creative method, has there been any experience with AI that has particularly made you happy or annoyed you?

Satisfaction comes with the relative ease to use digital devices and how quick you get a result, although, as humans, we always learn to complicate things so, while there is a time gain, you have to think how to present the work once finished. You will have to present it outside the confines of the computer screen and that's where things start getting complicated. Do I print the work, do I show it digitally via video screen, a lightbox maybe? If it is only on a screen again, how can I sell it?... Or do I just create an event around the artwork, project the work against a surface... Beyond that, on the technical side of it, the advantage of working on a screen is that it is somehow virtual and ever-changing and at best you can always go back and undo what you're making without having to wait - in the case of a painter - for the paint to dry or paint over. I always have the possibility of going back to the previous version and keep the different layers of the work. I can also keep repeating the same patterns and use different elements in other works which is not possible with a physical discipline.

Q5. Do you believe in having a physical touch in every artwork produced? How to you value physically made work vs digitally made work?

That's the constant struggle. I have a bit of a 'punk' attitude towards technology in that I like to tackle the device in a DIY way rather than learning to use it by the book. By punk, I mean the punk movement which happened in music long before I started being conscious creatively and which influenced me greatly in terms of having a self-made man's approach to anything. So inevitably, I'm going to meddle with the technology and have a physical approach to the creative process before it goes digital. For example, I sometimes make my own textures that I will photograph later, before treating them through the computer. By making my own texture, it invariably means that I dabble with paint but also flour, paper... I even bake the paper and the flour which I then photograph or scan or photocopy. So, I believe a lot of what I do starts with a physical touch. I value both physically made and digitally made work. At the end of the day it is the result that counts, not the means involved to get there. I think the value of the work shouldn't be judged by the technique it went through. Personally, I aspire to beauty which only means it has to be aesthetically pleasing, not according to standards, but judged by my own eyes and mind.

Q6. What do you think of the statement of "exploiting digital/artificial intelligence tools to art"? Does your process relate to this?

My process completely adheres to it. I do exploit Ai tools for the sake of my art. It is the result of whatever process I go through and why I call my pieces DIGITAL PAINTINGS or sometimes "painterly digital collages or montages". For the moment I tend to print the result on paper which has definitely an effect on the environment as inks are chemicals and not very friendly to this planet, same as paints if we are moving the conversation in that direction but I have a project of using LED back-lit boxes and projections in the future.