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Examining the Application Value of Graphic Software as a Painting Medium in the Artificial Intelligence Era

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ABSTRACT
In the realm of digital painting, the rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) has weakened several practical advantages previously associated with graphics software, particularly efficiency, flexible revision, and the production of visually complex images. This raises a focused question: what application value can graphics software still retain as a painting medium in the AI era? Responding to this question, this study proposes a medium-oriented strategy for digital painting grounded in the idea of pure art and supported by observation and semi-structured interviews with three selected artists. The cases of Mario Viele, Southeast-Northwest, and Sébastien Dessauvage show that graphics software remains valuable when it is not treated merely as a tool for accelerating production or reproducing established physical or digital styles. Its distinctive value lies in artists' critical exploration of software-specific imaging conditions, including cross-software manipulation, parameter experimentation, software malfunction, version difference, layering, and obsolete digital environments. The study argues that such practices allow graphics software to function as a medium for extending the expressive boundaries of painting. In the AI era, this value is twofold: it sustains non-standard digital painting languages that are difficult for data-driven models to reproduce smoothly, and it provides new visual material through which AI image-generation systems may later be trained and diversified.

Keywords: *Digital painting, Graphics software, Artificial intelligence, Application value, Pure art.*

1 INTRODUCTION

The unique application value of graphics software as a painting medium, from a practical perspective, is primarily manifested in its enhancement of painting efficiency. Including the ability to instantly undo any modifications to the screen content at any time; swiftly editing, copying, pasting, rotating, and scaling both specific sections and the entire screen with just a few keystrokes and mouse clicks; freely overlaying any material effects without needing to spend time considering or addressing compatibility issues between materials, and so forth (Yin, 2022; Sugiarto et al., 2021; Agyeman, 2015). From the visual perspective, this primarily manifests in support for ultra-high-definition image quality and diverse visual effects. This includes support for highly detailed rendering, a virtually infinite palette of colour choices, and an exceptionally wide array of painting brush effects and texture mapping (LeRue, 2024; Liu et al., 2020; Agyeman, 2015).

However, with the advent and maturation of artificial intelligence (AI), most of the graphic software's application value appears to be facing obsolescence. Artificial intelligence can, within seconds, redraw or modify either specific sections or the entire composition based on the artist's prompt, while simultaneously producing high-quality works rich in visual elements. As early as 2022, artist Jason Allen secured first place in an art competition with an AI-generated work, plunging most digital

painters who rely on graphics software into self-doubt (Oksanen et al., 2023; Roose, 2022). Graphics software may well have lost its application value as a medium for digital painting.

Against this backdrop, researchers have sought to identify a distinct group of artists whose strategies and attitudes towards graphic software applications may signal their unique value in the AI era. In the practice of such artists, the application of graphics software extends beyond merely enhancing drafting efficiency or enriching visual effects to accomplish a specific painting task. They tend to utilise graphics software to explore the distinct features and possibilities of digital imaging, thereby developing new visual languages or styles for painting that are currently uncommon or yet to emerge (Speidel, 2019; Alcaraz, 2016; Annum, 2014). For them, the true application value of graphics software lies not in its tool attributes as a medium—such as enhancing efficiency, refining visuals, or replicating established physical or digital painting styles—but rather in its artistic attributes. That is, they regard graphics software as a medium for continually pushing the boundaries of painting expression.

This practical approach corresponds to what this study, following Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, describes as a pure-art orientation: a critical attitude in which artists use the specific resources of a medium to test and extend the expressive boundaries of painting. In painting, such a strategy does not mean repeating the works of the old masters, nor does it mean simply transferring established pictorial styles into a new technical environment. It means asking what a medium can make visible that another medium cannot, and how that visibility may become a new pictorial language. This includes the use of oil paint, batik, ink and rice paper, and, in the present study, graphics software as a digital imaging medium (Duan et al., 2024; Suda, 2018; Wenyan, 2023). Particularly in the painting practices of the 1950s and 1960s, artists such as Willem de Kooning, Jean Fautrier and Hans Hofmann made the texture, colour and brushwork of oil paint central to the formation of new pictorial languages (Cançat, 2016; Hess, 2004; Rogala, 2016) (Figure 1). In these practices, oil paint was not used merely to imitate classical pictorial paradigms; it became a medium through which painting could continue to transform its expressive possibilities.

Figure 1 Screenshots of works by Willem de Kooning, Jean Fautrier, and Hans Hofmann (Source: https://artsandculture.google.com/)

That is to say, this study does not recommend that artists continue to confine the application of graphic software to producing already widespread painting styles or regard graphic software as a tool for enhancing painting efficiency or enriching visual content, because AI can perform these tasks faster and even better (Figure 2, digital artist Beibang's AI-generated paintings encompass a range of styles, including the common digital impasto style; digital surrealism style; Cubism style; and flat style, amongst others). Rather, the focus lies on exploring which unique digital imaging features can be unlocked by specific graphic software functionalities, thereby continually developing new painting languages. Under such a strategy, graphic software can maximise its application value as a painting medium and become an important medium for training AI models to output or develop new painting languages or styles.

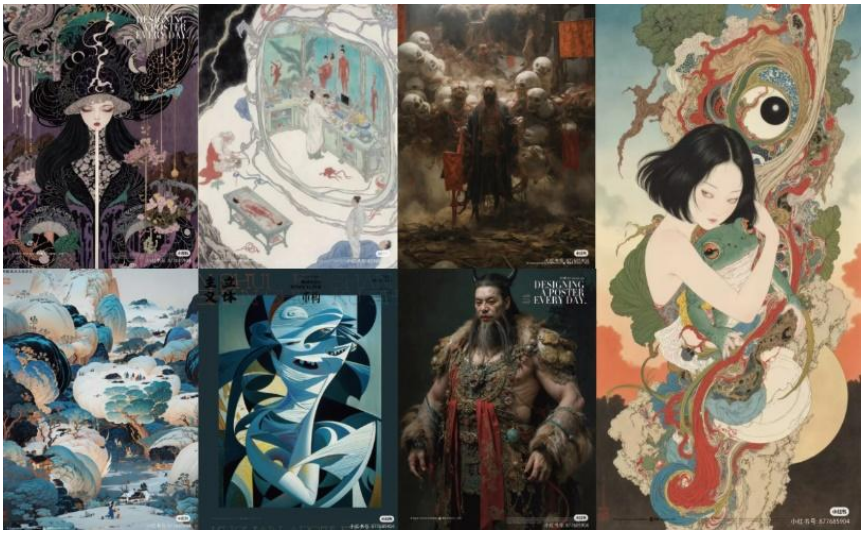

Figure 2 A partial screenshot of Bei Bang (北邦) 's Work
(Source: RedNote ID: 877685904)

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Pure Art

In this study, pure art does not refer to art without subject matter in an absolute sense. Rather, it refers to a critical orientation in which artists concentrate on expanding the expressive possibilities of an artistic medium. Greenberg's account of modernist painting is useful here because it describes modernism as a self-critical tendency through which each art examines what is specific to its own medium (Greenberg, 2018, pp. 5-6). For painting, this means that artistic value cannot be reduced to narrative function, imitation, decorative effect, or technical skill. It depends on whether a work can develop a pictorial language that meaningfully extends the possibilities of painting. This is why Greenberg's discussion of modernist painting is relevant to the present study: it provides a theoretical basis for treating graphics software not merely as a production tool but as a medium capable of generating new pictorial possibilities.

This point also clarifies why pure artistic creation is not a once-and-for-all achievement. A pictorial paradigm can become artistically significant when it opens a new field of expression; however, once it is merely repeated, it risks becoming craftsmanship or decoration rather than continuing artistic exploration. Fried develops a similar point in his discussion of modernist painting, arguing that modernism refuses to treat any particular formal solution as definitive and that only continual formal self-criticism can communicate more than trivial meaning (Fried, 1998, p. 236). He further notes that the syntax of modernist painting must be continually broken and altered if it is not to become mere decoration (Fried, 1998, p. 243). For this study, this theoretical position helps distinguish between two uses of graphics software: its use as an efficient tool for reproducing established styles, and its use as a medium for developing new visual languages.

2.2 The Application Value of Graphic Software as Painting Medium

As mentioned in the introduction, the current academic discourse on the tool attributes application value of graphic software as a painting medium has already been addressed; it shall not be repeated here. Here, researchers will draw upon existing literature to emphasise how artists utilise graphic software as a medium for transcending the boundaries of painting expression—that is, how they explore the application value of this medium within the realm of artistic attributes.

Typically, the built-in textures within three-dimensional software serve as materials for simulating certain physical surfaces. Artist Jan Ternald observed the emergence of low-quality textures in digital imaging around the year 2000, arising from the immaturity of the technology at the time (specifically the blurred and distorted textures resulting from low pixel density and bit depth). He subsequently developed a distinctive visual language and style for digital painting based on these specific features of digital imaging (Abouaf, 2000) (Figure 3). Digital painter Ursula Freer is keenly interested in layering images (Tavano, 2011, p. 39). Ursula explores multi-layered textural effects that are difficult or impossible to achieve with physical materials by combining the functions of various graphics software (such as layers, opacity, and blending modes) (Figure 4). Ursula's use of layering techniques extends beyond merely enriching visual effects; it encompasses a more profound exploration, namely an attempt to expand the boundaries of visual expression within the painting.

Figure 3 Digital circus trip
(Source: Abouaf, 2000)

Figure 4 Night flight
(Source: https://ursulafreer.com/index.php?piece=night_flight)

Scholar Annum (2014) suggests that artists should pay attention to and explore the various graphic editing tools and functions within Photoshop, such as the filters offering “pointillist effect, spattering effect, mosaic effect, sand collage effect.” These can yield a series of new painting languages possessing distinctive digital features (Figure 5), or indeed painting languages unattainable through physical mediums. Within the context of Annum, filters serve not merely to simulate physical textures or enhance visual effects, but also as a medium for expanding the boundaries of artistic expression in painting. Artist Yaman Kayihan further integrated aspects of animation software to explore a dynamic digital painting language, wherein visual elements perpetually circulate within a fluid state. Her aim lies in employing graphic software to achieve effects unattainable through physical painting mediums, thereby transcending the expressive limitations of traditional painting (Figure 6) (Alcaraz, 2016).

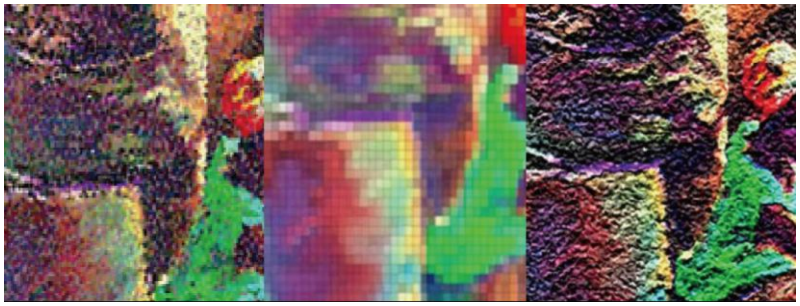

Figure 5 Partial visual effect display
(Source: Annum, 2014)

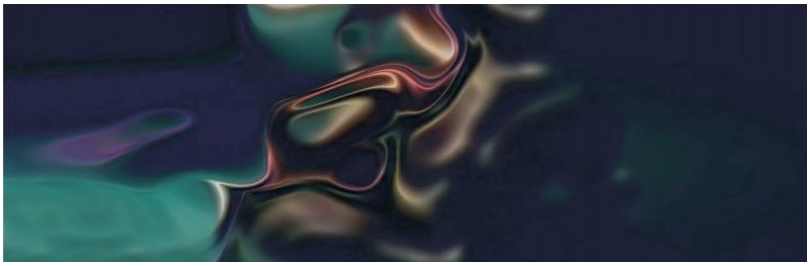

Figure 6 Kinetic picture 68: self formation
(Source: Alcaraz, 2016)

As evidenced by the case studies in the aforementioned literature, certain artists regard graphic software as a medium for expanding the boundaries of painting expression rather than merely a tool for image production. However, research on such artists remains limited (relevant literature also includes Speidel, 2018; Singh, 2012; Lin, 2002, etc., but overall, it is not extensive). Numerous publications have confined their discussions to digital works that replicate or continue the traditions of physical painting, or to the prevalent commercial styles of digital painting (Figure 7). This study argues that this is precisely one reason why the unique artistic attributes/value of graphic software as a medium for painting have not been sufficiently discussed. As such, works are essentially replicas of typical physical or digital painting styles from the past; graphic software is more often regarded as a tool for producing paintings rather than a medium possessing unique artistic value.

Figure 7 Digital paintings replicate the visual effects of physical painting and widespread visual styles
(Source: LeRue, 2024; Yin, 2022; Sugiarto, 2021; Greenway et al., 2009)

2.3 Artificial Intelligence Painting

The mechanism of AI-generated painting primarily relies upon deep learning and generative models. Its core lies in training models through vast image datasets to learn statistical relationships between visual elements and semantic meanings, thereby producing images (Ringle, 2019). In the field of image generation, AI model training initially relied heavily on generative adversarial networks (GANs). Through the adversarial training between generators and discriminators, the realism of images was enhanced. In recent years, diffusion models have gradually become mainstream, achieving high-quality image generation by simulating the inverse process of noise addition and denoising (Xiao, 2025; Chaudhary, 2025). At the application level, creators typically employ conversational interfaces to input textual prompts into artificial intelligence models. This triggers the models' inherent multimodal modelling and attention mechanisms, thereby achieving automatic alignment and matching between linguistic semantics and visual representations, ultimately generating corresponding image outputs (Chopra, 2025).

Although AI systems are technically capable of autonomously generating images, their generative capabilities remain dependent on training data provided and curated by humans. Relevant investigations and experiments indicate that the aesthetic inclinations, visual preferences, and stylistic characteristics exhibited by models during their generation process frequently reflect the human cultural values, artistic traditions, and visual norms implicit within the training data (Sun et al., 2022; Di Dio et al., 2025; Barskaya, 2024). Therefore, AI-generated art is not an entirely independent creation detached from the human aesthetic system. Rather, it statistically reorganises and reproduces human artistic experience through algorithmic mechanisms within existing visual traditions and cultural contexts. As scholar Cinzia Di Dio (2025) observes in a survey examining human interest in beauty and liking judgments concerning artificial intelligence and human painting, “the work of art created by artificial systems is basically an artistic phenomenon of synthesis of what AI has at its disposal from a still human heritage.” This is precisely why this study contends that graphic software can serve as a medium for training and upgrading AI painting models, as the new initial image data required for training still necessitates human exploration using specific mediums before it can be provided.

3 METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach combining online observation and semi-structured interviews to examine how artists use graphic software as a painting medium and how such practices may reveal its continuing application value in the AI era.

Observation refers to the method whereby researchers purposefully observe subjects' activities within natural or specific contexts, recording and analysing these observations to understand and interpret the subjects' behavioural patterns and significance (Ciesielska, 2017). Our online observation was first conducted within digital-art communities on Instagram and RedNote to identify potential participants. Participant selection was purposive and criterion-based, with the preliminary criteria derived from the practices discussed in Section 2.2. Potential participants were considered when: (1) graphic software played a substantial role in producing their works rather than serving merely for final correction or presentation; (2) their works displayed visual characteristics associated with digital imaging rather than simply reproducing established effects of physical painting; (3) their practices involved active experimentation with software-specific functions, parameters, workflows, combinations, limitations, or errors; (4) such experimentation was directed toward discovering uncommon or previously unexplored visual possibilities rather than merely improving efficiency or technical refinement; and (5) this exploratory use of software constituted a sustained aspect of their practice rather than an isolated effect. Publicly available artworks and descriptions of working processes were used for preliminary assessment. Artists whose practices appeared to meet these criteria were subsequently contacted via private message or email and invited to participate.

Semi-structured interviews were then conducted because this method allows a common scope of inquiry while retaining flexibility to pursue details specific to individual practices (Taherdoost, 2022). Interviews focused on three dimensions: the artists' creative aims, their methods of working with graphic software, and the strategies through which software operations were used to develop visual effects or painting languages. Follow-up questions were used where necessary to clarify the relationship between specific software operations and visual outcomes. The interview material was analysed qualitatively alongside the observed works. Responses were first organised according to creative aims, working methods, and software-use strategies, and were then compared across participants to identify recurring principles and differences. Attention was paid to whether the interview material provided sufficient evidence to reconstruct the relationship between software operation, artistic intention, and visual outcome.

From the valid responses, three information-rich and analytically contrasting cases—Mario Viele, Southeast-Northwest, and Sébastien Dessauvage—were selected for detailed analysis. All satisfied the common criteria but demonstrated different modes of software experimentation: cross-software transformation and recombination, parameter and system-level experimentation, and the deliberate use of obsolete software and its technical limitations. The cases were therefore selected for their analytical relevance rather than statistical representativeness.

4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Artist Case 1: Mario Viele

Mario Viele is a musician and visual artist from New York, United States. His digital paintings continue the tradition of glitch art (glitch art, a practice involving the deliberate induction of software or hardware errors to capture specific visual effects produced by digital imaging in a state of glitch, see for Betancourt, 2016), presenting a digital painting language characterised by pronounced digital imaging features. Mario employed over 15 distinct graphics software. Whilst he did not specifically list each software's name and function, he emphasised sharing strategies for painting using graphics software, thereby providing evidence for the validity of this study's viewpoint. Researchers received the formal interview email from respondent Mario Viele on 16 March 2025, after which multiple further communications took place via Instagram's direct messaging feature. Text within double quotation marks constitutes direct quotations from the interview. All opinions presented in this section are compiled from Mario Viele's responses.

The digital painting brushes employed by Mario Viele are not the software's built-in digital brushes with physical painting characteristics, but rather derive from photographs he captures daily. Mario employs graphic software to subject photographs to multiple processes of "twisting, distorting, re-editing, ripping, tearing, rebuilding, or recolouring," thereby exploring brush effects possessing specific digital imaging features (here, 'brush' may also be understood as the fundamental visual elements constituting the image). Through the combined use of multiple graphics software, Mario can generate over twenty distinct visual iterations from a single photograph. By randomly overlaying these variations using the software's layer functionality, he continues to explore novel brush effects (Figure 8). For Mario, graphic software is a medium capable of creating infinite visual possibilities. He remarked, "You can re-edit, rip and tear, rebuild, re-colour endlessly. To some, this could lead to a nightmarish endlessness."

Figure 8 Screenshots of some of Mario Viele's works
(Source: https://www.instagram.com/charity.cult/)

Mario's perspective highlights a core application advantage of graphics software: that painting work can be edited an infinite number of times. However, for Mario, this advantage is not merely about enhancing painting efficiency; more importantly, it enables highly liberated visual experimentation, effectively fostering the development of new painting languages or styles (Figure 9, Mario Viele presents new visual elements in each of his works to a varying degree). In practice, Mario actively explores the specific functions or combinations of functions within each software, or blends different software to process images, all to capture unexpected, groundbreaking visual effects. Mario believes that any software function or combination of functions can potentially yield novel visual effects by adjusting different parameters or altering the sequence of operations. “Then for weeks, there is a whole new little quirk to explore, which can even affect the final results greatly and usher in a new era of style or vibe.”

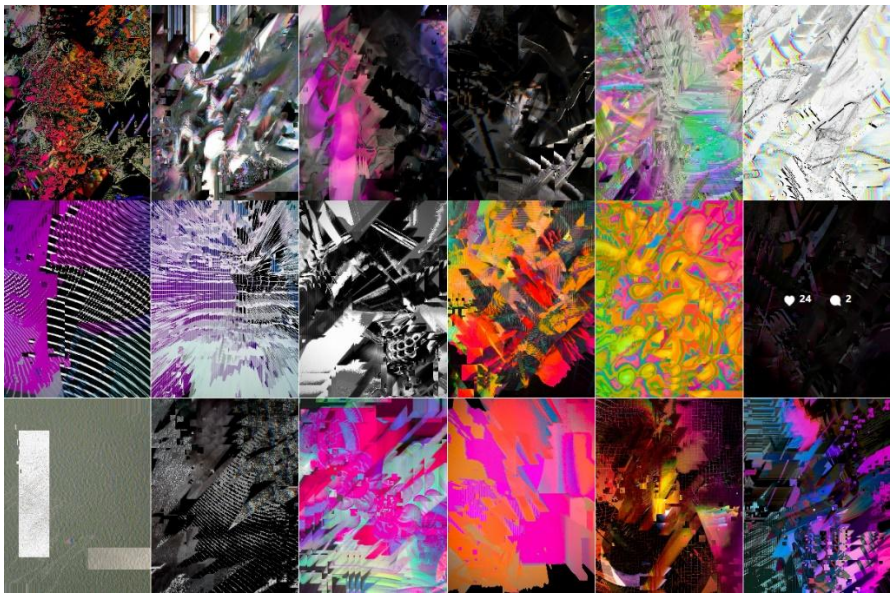

Figure 9 Screenshots of some of Mario Viele's works
(Source: https://www.instagram.com/charity.cult/)

Moreover, for Mario, the exploration of new digital painting languages is an endless pursuit, he remarked, “no doubt those exciting new approaches will themselves settle into routine and blend into the overall milieu with time, and the next exciting divergence will be waiting around an unknown bend.” Here, ‘new approaches’ refers to the combination of parameter values or functionalities that can achieve the visual effects of a specific painting language. For Mario, however, all strategies are temporary, as he remains perpetually engaged in exploring new painting languages and styles. Consequently, both the process and results of his use of graphic software are invariably fraught with uncertainty, making them difficult for other artists to replicate.

Mario's strategy demonstrates how graphics software can retain artistic value when it is used as an experimental medium rather than as a shortcut for producing familiar images. His repeated twisting, distorting, rebuilding, recolouring, and cross-software processing turn photographic fragments into digital brush materials that cannot be reduced to ordinary software presets. This practice is also relevant to the AI era. Since AI image generation reorganises existing visual data and human artistic heritage (Di Dio et al., 2025), a style that remains idiosyncratic, unstable, and insufficiently represented in online datasets is less likely to be reproduced smoothly by an AI model unless substantial training data are first produced and supplied (Leong, 2025). Mario's work therefore shows that graphics software can still operate as a source-medium for new visual data and new painting languages.

What is most significant in Mario's case is not only the visual appearance of the final works but also the attitude of continual divergence that structures his practice. He treats every newly discovered procedure as temporary, because any successful procedure may eventually become routine. This confirms the study's theoretical claim that the value of graphics software depends not only on its technical functions but also on a critical mode of use. As Mario remarked, “What's the difference between AI art and human art? The AI knows when the artwork is complete (but humans don't know).”

4.2 Artist Case 2: Southeast-Northwest

Southeast-Northwest (东南阿西北阿) is a digital painting brush developer/designer from China. Her focus lies not in the long-standing mainstream pursuit of rendering physical brush effects more realistically on screen. Instead, Southeast-Northwest specialises in creating brushes that are difficult to achieve with physical mediums or effects rarely encountered in commercially available brushes. Researchers received the formal interview email from respondent Southeast-Northwest on 26 February 2025. All content in this section is compiled from her responses, with text within quotation marks representing direct quotations from the interview material.

Southeast-Northwest primarily develops new digital brush effects by randomly layering two or more built-in brush effects within Procreate (a commonly used digital painting application), or by further adjusting specific functional parameters (such as Streamline, Scatter, or Wet Mix, etc.) to explore and capture unexpected visual effects. Southeast-Northwest illustrated this practice strategy using her bestselling exotic series brushes (**奇异笔刷**) (2025) as an example. She remarked, “This set of brushes was originally conceived for calligraphic writing, and the gestures produced by such brushes exhibit distinct continuity, fluidity, and overlapping characteristics—creating sensations of brushing, moisture, and mutual permeation.” However, whilst adjusting the brush settings, she “not only fine-tuned parameters for pressure sensitivity and wetness effects to achieve the brush's writing gestures”; “but also experimented with parameters for features such as outer glow, noise grain, and layer blending modes.” During this experimental production process, she frequently stumbled upon unexpected brush effects that were not commonly achieved (Figure 10).

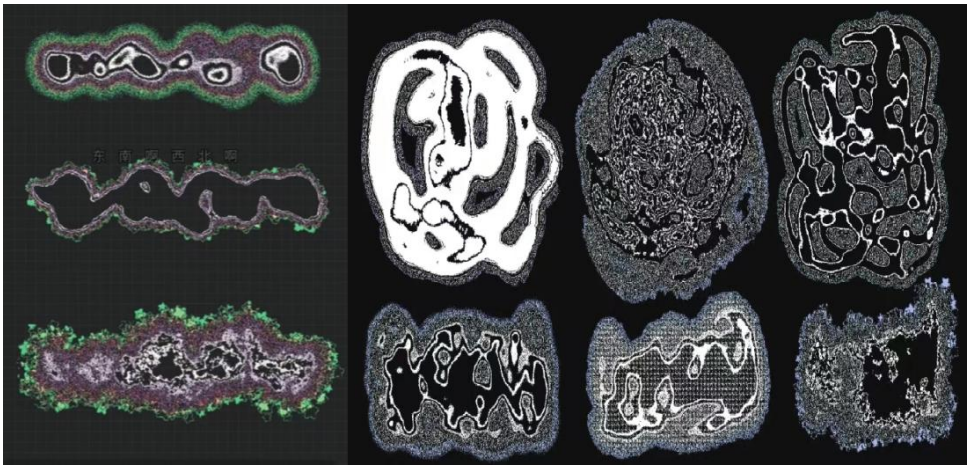

Figure 10 Exotic Series brushes
(Source: http://xhslink.com/o/4n09yEj4B0s)

Southeast-Northwest is specifically illustrated using the hollow particle effect brush (镂空颗粒效果笔刷) (2025) from the exotic series. She remarked that the brush's creation arose from accidentally discovering, whilst casually switching between layer blending modes, that the 'colour burn' mode produced a hollowed-out effect with the brush (Figure 11). However, after sales, some users reported that the cut-out effect had disappeared. Regarding this issue, Southeast-Northwest only learned through communication with Procreate's official support that it was precisely because she had repeatedly applied the colour burn (which intensifies the hollow effect) within the same brush that, inadvertently, triggered a "malfunction in the colour burn blending mode of Procreate's particle effects within iPadOS 17." This caused "an unintended hollow effect to manifest." Subsequently, when the iPad system was upgraded, and this malfunction was rectified, her brush became unusable. Southeast-Northwest considers this "a beautiful accident."

Figure 11 Hollow particle effect brush single stroke drawing effect
(Source: http://xhslink.com/o/1ZVjaSbnk5M)

Following this incident, Southeast-Northwest discovered a novel strategy for exploring brush effects: "Different iPad models + different iPad system versions + different Procreate versions = distinct brush effects." In other words, graphic software can function as a specific quantitative variable, inducing alterations in the operational logic at both the operating system and hardware levels, thereby generating new visual effects. This suggests that graphic software, as a medium for painting, harbours a broader potential for visual expression. Moreover, Southeast-Northwest also notes that "the same brush may exhibit variations across different brush numbers and canvas sizes, and even rotating the canvas can

affect brush effects." Or apply different filters to overlay the same brush effect a second time, thereby generating new visual effects for developing brushes. Moreover, the purpose of all these attempts lies in discovering new brush effects.

Southeast-Northwest's case also supports this study's argument. Her practice shows that graphics software can become a medium for discovering visual effects that are not intended by the software's normal design. The hollow-particle brush emerged from the interaction of Procreate's colour burn mode, particle effects, iPadOS 17, and specific brush settings. This means that the medium is not limited to the visible interface of the application; it also includes hidden relations among software versions, operating systems, hardware environments, and user experimentation. Such effects are difficult for current AI systems to generate autonomously because they depend on a locally discovered technical accident before they can become visible data for model training. In this respect, her brush design demonstrates how graphics software may continue to generate unfamiliar visual resources in the AI era.

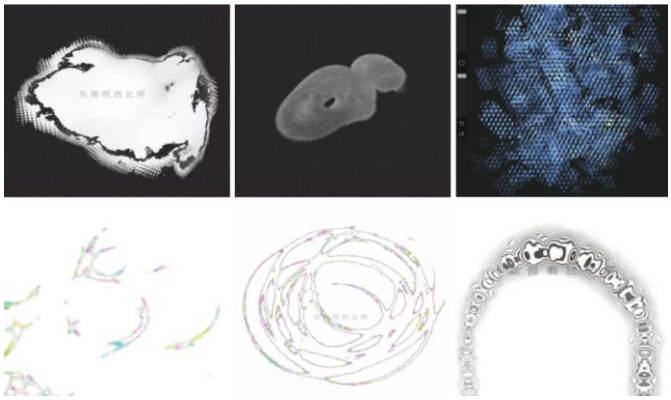

Figure 12 Screenshot from Southeast-Northwest's work
(Source: http://xhslink.com/o/e15CSEPbhc)

4.3 Artist Case 3: Sebastien Dessauvage

Sébastien Dessauvage is a visual artist and musician from Belgium. His digital paintings continue the Y2K aesthetic (in digital imagery, Y2K refers to the features of low pixel density and bit depth that emerged around the year 2000 when digital imaging technology was still developing, such as jagged edges on graphics or distorted surfaces on textures, see De, 2023). Researchers received the formal interview email from respondent Sebastien Dessauvage on 11 March 2025, followed by two further conversations via Instagram direct messages and email. Text within double quotation marks constitutes direct quotations from the interviewed material. All viewpoints presented in this section are compiled from Sebastien Dessauvage's responses.

Sébastien Dessauvage believes "there's tremendous value in our visual past, especially the parts that culture considers throwaway or not worth remembering." Thus, elements deemed visual detritus equally possess the potential to evolve into a distinctive visual artistic language. For instance, around the year 2000, visual characteristics arising from low pixel density and bit depth due to immature digital imaging technology included jagged edges, colour banding, or distorted material textures (Figure 13). Sébastien continued, "I generally work within Retro CGI (Computer-Generated Imagery), making digital images in defunct/outdated software that focus heavily on the aesthetics and render style of early 2000's computer imagery." Therefore, he selected the graphics software Bryce to develop his artistic language and style. Bryce is a graphics software specialising in 3D terrain and natural environment modelling and rendering. It was launched in 1994, with its final version released in 2010, and updates ceased in 2018. Sebastien admits that Bryce is not the most accomplished software in terms of modelling or rendering capabilities, and its image output even retains certain visual flaws features of early digital imaging. Yet for him, these so-called'flaws' are precisely the pathway through which he uncovers the distinctive features of digital imaging in specific eras, thereby developing new digital painting

languages and styles.

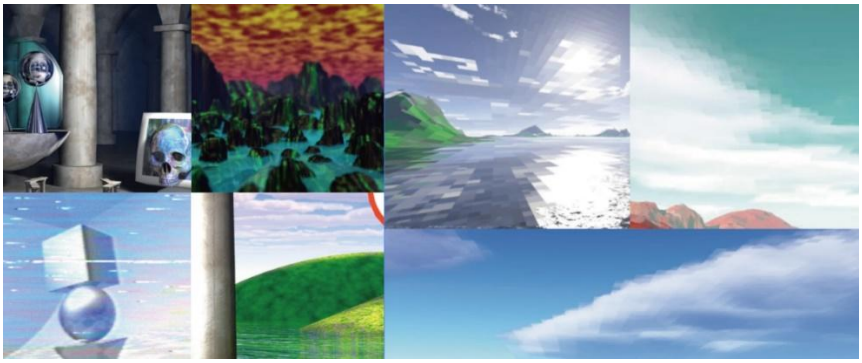

Figure 13 Screenshot from Sébastien Dessauvage's work
(Source: https://www.instagram.com/zer0rei_)

Sébastien said, “On a more base level there's just a very specific finish and texture to a piece done within old school software that is almost impossible to recreate with modern tools." And "I really try to lean into the technical limitations and inspirations that were present when this style of software was most popular, in the late 90ies and early 00's.” Here, Sébastien highlights a crucial point: graphic software from any era possesses unique imaging potential and can be regarded as a specific medium for painting, serving to develop the painting language. As a painting medium, there is no such thing as advanced or backward; the key lies in how thoroughly the artist explores its imaging possibilities.

Sébastien continued, “I try to do daily ‘sketches’ [...] These are often guided by the software, where I pick out a function that I haven't used much or have been wanting to experiment with and see where it guides me.” Meanwhile, Sebastien also endeavours to transcend Bryce's conventional visual outputs, pushing beyond the software's expressive limits to develop new painting languages and styles. Though, “It can certainly be quite adversarial, as it's software that can crash, lock up or corrupt if you're pushing it beyond its comfort zone.” It is evident that Sebastien shares the same creative approach as the two aforementioned artists, upholding a critical stance towards pure art. He employs graphic software to continually explore new painting languages, rather than replicating typical or commonplace physical or digital painting styles (Figure 14).

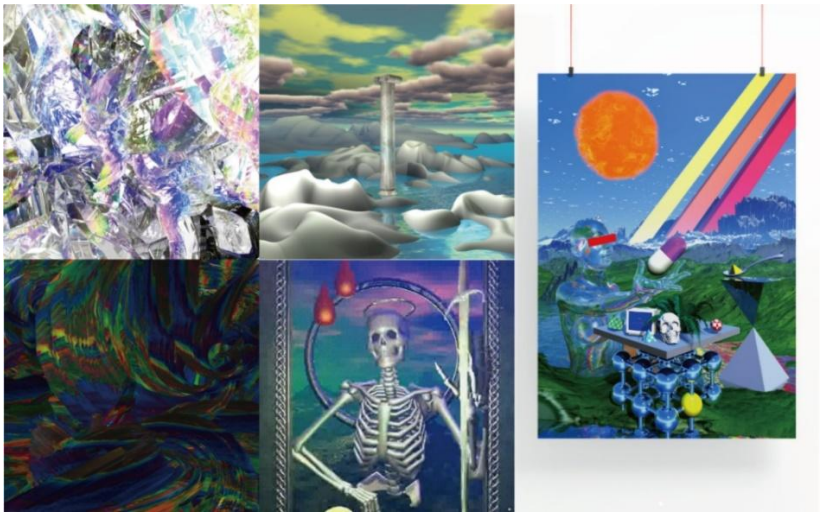

Figure 14 Screenshot from Sébastien Dessauvage's work
(Source: https://www.instagram.com/zer0rei_)

Sebastien also discussed AI painting during the interview, suggesting that AI is mainly threatening to generic styles and stock imagery because strong or marginal visual styles are harder for it to reproduce convincingly. His view further supports the central claim of this study. AI models generate most smoothly where sufficient visual data already exist; by contrast, styles developed through obsolete software, minor technical flaws, and non-standard workflows may remain difficult to model. Sebastien's practice therefore shows that graphics software can preserve and produce visual languages that have not yet been normalised as training data.

4.4 Transition Suggestions for Painting Using Graphic Software

The strategies employed by the three artists in their use of graphic software exemplify precisely the approach advocated by this study: treating graphic software as a medium capable of continually expanding the boundaries of visual expression in digital painting. Put more plainly, it involves treating graphic software as a medium for visual experimentation, pushing its specific functions or combinations of functions to their fullest potential to explore the diverse possibilities of imaging, thereby developing new painting languages and styles. This not only manifests the maximum application value of graphics software as a painting medium in the expression of visual arts but also highlights its role as a medium for extending and upgrading AI painting models, thereby maintaining its intrinsic worth in the AI era. Conversely, this study does not recommend that artists continue to employ graphic software to produce conventional physical or digital painting styles, nor to treat it as a tool for enhancing painting efficiency or fulfilling commercial commissions. This would diminish its unique value as a painting medium, and such tasks can be accomplished extremely rapidly by AI, producing work of equivalent quality.

This point connects the case studies directly to the theoretical framework of pure art. In Greenberg's account of modernist painting, artistic practice becomes self-critical when it uses the characteristic methods of a discipline to examine that discipline itself (Greenberg, 1960/2018). He also argues that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincides with what is unique to the nature of its medium, so that purity means self-definition (Greenberg, 1960/2018). However, it is important to note that this self-definition is continuous, a point repeatedly emphasized in Greenberg's later writings. That is, artists not only need to continue the high quality of previous art but also need to make a certain degree of constant renewal and innovation to bring about a new paradigm (Greenberg, 2003, p. 46). As Fried continued to mention that ambitious painting depends on "constant formal self-criticism" if it is to carry more than "trivial meaning" (Fried, 1998, p. 236). In his discussion of Kenneth Noland, he further writes that painting becomes like a language whose "rules of syntax" must be continually transformed by its users; otherwise, it risks becoming "mere decoration" (Fried, 1998, p. 243).

The three cases we mentioned demonstrate this logic in different ways. Mario Viele transforms photographs through processes of twisting, distorting, re-editing, ripping, tearing, rebuilding, or recolouring, and turns the instability of cross-software editing into A path to continuously generate new visual possibilities. Southeast-Northwest treats Procreate's brush engine, blending modes, iPad system versions, canvas settings, and even software malfunction as conditions for inventing uncommon brush effects. Her hollow particle brush shows that a software error can become a productive pictorial resource when it is discovered, tested, and developed as part of artistic practice. Sébastien Dessauvage reactivates Bryce and early-2000s CGI limitations as positive visual conditions, turning what might appear to be outdated digital defects into a distinctive painting language. In all three cases, graphic software is not used to reproduce an already established physical or digital painting style. It is used to discover what painting can become under specific digital conditions.

Finally, it should be noted that this study does not aim to suggest that AI must rely on human use of graphics software to expand the boundaries of painting. Nor is it intended to compare the merits of AI models versus graphics software as painting mediums, nor to resist the trend whereby AI models are gradually replacing graphics software to some extent. This study essentially constitutes a more serious critical inquiry into the irreplaceable application value of graphic software as a painting medium. Even before the advent of AI, discussions regarding the tool attributes of graphics software as a medium for

painting had already established its uniqueness (for instance, enhancing efficiency, facilitating modifications or enriching visuals, etc., see for LeRue, 2024; Agyeman, 2015; Yin, 2022). However, the advent of AI compels us to look beyond these considerations and pursue a more profound question: what irreplaceable contributions can graphic software truly make towards pushing the boundaries of painting expression.? This points to a serious critique of the purely artistic attributes of its applied value, a subject that still warrants extensive discussion.

The ongoing exploration of this issue will help to progressively clarify the specific application value of graphics software as a painting medium (Yuan, 2025; Laurie, 2020). In truth, from a pure artistic perspective, there is no question of one medium replacing another. Egg tempera and oil paints are fundamentally distinct painting mediums, each capable of imparting specific visual effects to painting's expression. Similarly, graphic software and AI models, even graphic software designed for different purposes or developed at different times, may be regarded as distinct painting mediums. Each can make a unique contribution to the visual expression of painting.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This study has examined the application value of graphics software as a painting medium in the AI era. It argues that the practical advantages of graphics software, such as efficiency, flexible modification, and visual enrichment, have been partly displaced by AI image-generation systems. However, this does not mean that graphics software has lost its artistic value. Drawing on the concept of pure art and on three qualitative case studies, the study shows that graphics software remains important when artists use it to explore software-specific imaging possibilities and to develop non-standard painting languages. Mario Viele demonstrates the value of cross-software manipulation and continuous re-editing; Southeast-Northwest demonstrates the value of brush-engine experimentation and software malfunction; and Sébastien Dessauvage demonstrates the value of obsolete digital environments and retro CGI limitations. Together, these cases show that graphics software should not be reduced to a tool for producing established physical or digital styles. Its continuing value lies in its capacity to support formal experimentation, expand pictorial expression, and generate visual resources that may also diversify future AI painting models.

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No conflict of interest declared for this paper.

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