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EXPLORATIONS IN ART AND AI: REIMAGINING SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH STUDENT VISION

When I first entered the TRU Art Gallery to view *Explorations in Art and AI*, I was captivated by the novelty, originality, vision, and significance of the displays co-created by talented students with the aid of general artificial intelligence tools. The students approached generative artificial intelligence with bold curiosity, challenging assumptions, pushing boundaries, and reflecting deeply on its ethical, environmental, and cultural implications. Within minutes, I knew this exhibition deserved to live beyond its temporary home at the TRU Art Gallery. It needed to be shared more widely and made permanently accessible to the world. That realization inspired this special issue of *Future Earth*.

This issue features the work of ten students enrolled in Twyla Exner's Winter 2025 selected topics course entitled *Experiments in AI Art*. Twyla's mentorship enabled these artists to utilize AI not as a shortcut to their creation, but to challenge themselves and to use AI tools to explore new frontiers. Their work most likely demanded significantly more time and effort than conventional approaches. Their creativity conveys a powerful message to Future Earth's mission: to provide students with the ability to disrupt the status quo through new ways of inquiry and inventiveness. Each artist brings a unique perspective and vision to the special issue:

Aidan McPhee

In *An Experimental Trio*, Aidan McPhee questions the growing dependence on AI in art. By using AI to generate unfamiliar colour palettes, even ones he didn't like, he challenged his usual artistic choices and stayed in full control of the creative process. His work explores an important question: "If the AI is the one creating 'your' vision, is it really yours?" McPhee's project reflects *Future Earth's* mission to push boundaries, ask hard questions, and think critically about how new technologies are shaping our world.

Avery Stainton

In *Bane of the Prodigious*, paints a unicorn in captivity as a metaphor for the ethical problems of AI power. Her oil work, inspired by AI-generated prompts, examines the tension between wonder and restraint in our engagement with the extraordinary. The work echoes Future Earth's emphasis on ethical reflection and the societal impacts of innovation. As she notes, "The act of collaborating with AI can mirror the act of trapping a unicorn for its power—an endeavor fraught with ethical dilemmas and the potential for exploitation."



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Bryanna Dyer (aka Gouda Mourning)

In *AM*, a 24-page comic adaptation of Harlan Ellison's *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*, Bryanna Dyer explores the AI not as a killer robot, but as an internet-empowered force of psychological control. In Ellison's original story, AM, initially short for Allied Mastercomputer, evolves into a self-aware entity that defines itself by the phrase "I think, therefore I AM," embodying both technological power and total loneliness. Dyer's version explores how generative AI can erode identity and perception under late-stage capitalism. As Dyer writes, "*My version of AM doesn't wield nuclear weapons but instead possesses full access to the internet, a tool that wields its own kind of psychological destruction, eroding individuality and controlling perception.*" Their work reflects Future Earth's commitment to ethical awareness, critical storytelling, and the human consequences of AI power.

Dre Levant

In *Egesta*, Dre Levant mixes poetry, collage, and AI-generated images to explore what it means to create art in a world where machines can mimic creativity. Using Microsoft Copilot, Levant asked the AI to respond to their own poems and artwork, then cut up and reassembled the results by hand to make something completely new. The finished artwork is strange, funny, a little disturbing, and deeply personal. Levant's work asks: can something made by AI really be called art? And what happens when artists take that material and reshape it with their own creativity? In the spirit of Future Earth, Levant made a donation to plant five trees in British Columbia to help offset the environmental footprint of using AI. *Egesta* reflects Future Earth's mission of sustainability, creative expression, and the ethical use of technology in artistic practice.

Elizabeth Sigale

In *Pink Cows and AI*, uses playful printmaking to reflect on rural–urban divides, intergenerational perspectives, and our cultural blind spots that affect how we view climate, agriculture, and technology.

Her AI-assisted screen prints use a pink cow to draw attention to perspectives we often overlook, especially in the face of environmental and social disruptions. Her work speaks directly to Future Earth's goals of fostering dialogue on climate adaptation and social sustainability across communities. As she puts it, "*I want viewers to see the cow not only as a rural emblem but as a symbol of perspectives they might not fully understand.*"

Janet McChesney

In *You See*, creates a soft sculpture using screen-printed fabric and embedded LEDs to explore how the brain helps us see. She originally planned to depict the hills around Kamloops, but when AI tools couldn't capture the landscape in a meaningful way, she shifted her focus to the brain, another natural structure full of neural networks and complexity. Using DALL-E to generate reference images, she printed cross-sections of the brain's visual pathways onto fabric and added lights to highlight the parts that activate when we see. Her impressive work blends art, science, and technology in a way that reflects Future Earth's commitment to creative exploration. As McChesney writes, "*seeing is the start of making meaning.*"

Kaitlyn Bartlett

In *A Crochet Kaleidoscope*, merges crochet and painting to explore her childhood memories and the joy of handmade art. Using AI tools only for inspiration, she translated abstract ideas into tangible textures, creating soft, colourful shapes that reflect her love for play, pattern, and craft. Her bright artwork celebrates the value of traditional techniques in a digital age, reminding us that sustainability includes not just the environment, but also the cultural practices we pass between generations. Her piece reflects Future Earth's focus on cultural sustainability and the thoughtful integration of technology into human expression. As she writes, "*I want my artwork to give the viewer a playful and child-like feeling.*"

Raluchukwu Ojah

In *Lanaya Meets AI*, explores identity and fashion through a portrait collage that combines Nigerian Dutch wax fabrics, Canadian patterns, magazine clippings, and AI-generated designs. As a Nigerian artist living in Canada, he works with AI to tell a story about blending cultures and showing pride from where he comes from. His artwork highlights how tradition and technology can come together to shape how we see ourselves and others. It reflects Future Earth's commitment to equity, diversity, inclusiveness and creative ways of sharing culture in a changing world. As he writes, *"Ultimately, my journey with AI is both a personal exploration and a way to show pride in the beauty of my cultural heritage in a world of technological possibilities."*

Sierra Klassen-Johnson

In *Untitled*, shares a design of a sustainable mountaintop home, created using architectural software like Revit and Enscape (non-AI programs). Influenced by Midjourney prompts, natural elements, and eco-conscious thinking, her design brings together sunlight, stone, plants, and organic shapes to create harmony between architecture and nature. Her work reflects Future Earth's vision of environmentally responsible design, creative innovation, and the power of architecture to inspire more sustainable ways of living. As she writes, *"I hope to contribute to the evolution of architecture, promoting a style that harmonizes with the environment."*

Susan Miller

In *Fragile Connections*, presents a hanging globe made of hand-painted strips of paper. The piece symbolizes the delicate threads that tie us to place, to the planet, and to one another. While AI tools helped with design planning and logistics, Miller ultimately reaffirms the irreplaceable value of human craftsmanship. Her project reflects Future Earth's focus on ethical reflection, environmental awareness, and the importance of artistic integrity in a time of rapid technological change. As Miller puts it, *"My goal was to reflect on the fragility of the*

Earth and the vital importance of personal and collective responsibility in caring for it."

This special issue represents more than an art showcase. It is a celebration of student imagination, critical inquiry, and learning to incorporate new technological tools. It reflects what makes Future Earth distinct: a commitment to amplifying student voices in sustainability discourse, embracing diverse avenues, and nurturing creative risk-taking. As we face accelerating challenges, from intensifying climate change to geopolitical instability to digital disruption, the student works remind us that sustainability is not just a technical problem, but a cultural and imaginative one. Art has the power to frame questions that science alone cannot answer. Through this issue, we hope to spark dialogue, reflection, and inspiration for readers at TRU and beyond.

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