Future Earth
A Student Journal on Sustainability and Environment

ISSN: XXXX-XXXX

SPECIAL ISSUE 2025

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YOU SEE

This special issue of Future Earth Journal: Explorations in Art and Generative AI showcases the work of visual art students from the Fall 2024 Selected Topics visual art course *Explorations in Art and AI*. Each featured artist engaged with generative artificial intelligence (Gen AI) to create original artworks that respond to and reflect on current conversations in art and technology. Through their unique practices, these students explored Gen AI as a tool, a collaborator, and/or a conceptual influence.

The artworks featured here—and in the exhibition held at the TRU Art Gallery from March 17–29, 2025—highlight the cultural, ethical, environmental, and creative dimensions of using Gen AI in artistic production.

Janet McChesney is one of the participating artists whose work exemplifies this exploration.

AI Tool: DALL-E

ARTIST STATEMENT

This soft sculpture of the brain, with its intricate neural pathways, emerged from a desire to craft a large-scale piece independently, free from the constraints of heavy machinery or a woodshop.

I love abstract sculpture, and the brain's complexity provides an incredible subject for interpretation in soft, textured materials that are

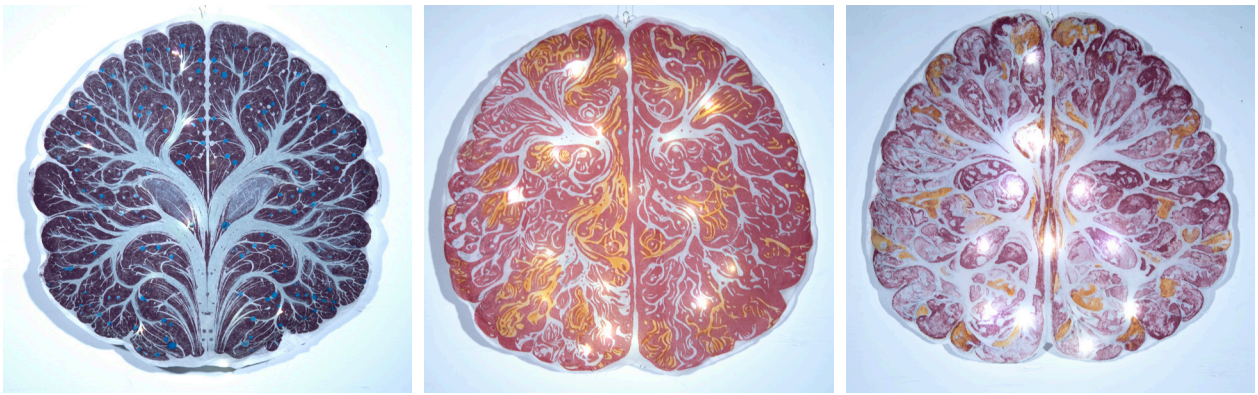

Figure 1. You See (2024), by Janet McChesney [close up images of each sculpture].
Soft sculpture, screen printed fabric with mylar and lights, 17" x 19" (each). (Image credit: Nicole Favron)

accessible and adaptable. The neural pathways and synapses that allow us to see are generally taken for granted. As visual artists we endeavour to make

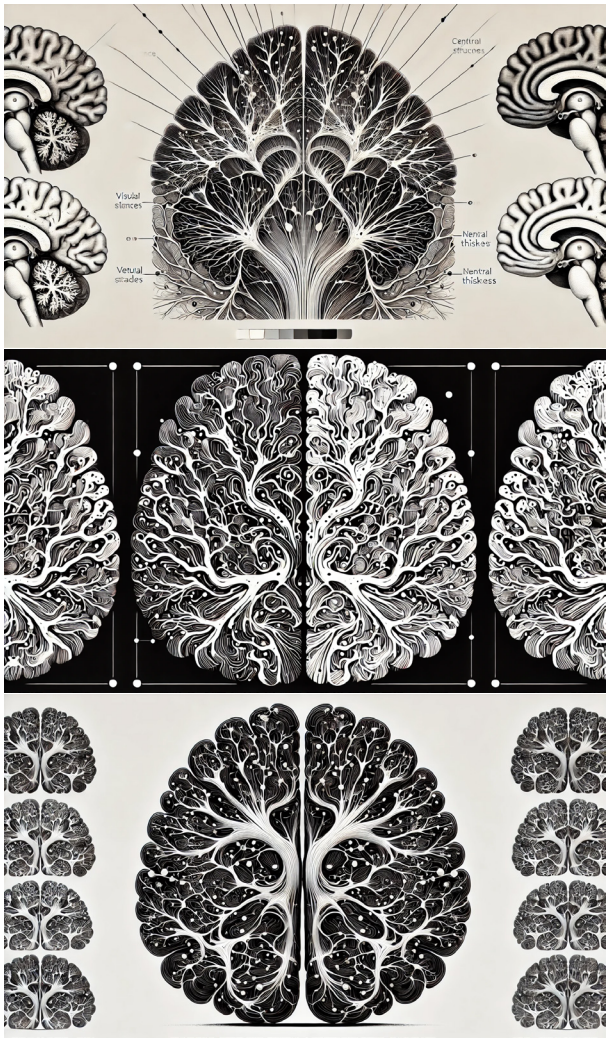

Figure 2. DALL-E generated images of the top, middle and bottom slices of the brain.

our vision come alive in our work so that others can see what they see, Viewers vision, choices and stories may be different but we are all impacted by seeing. Reflecting on this amazing ability is the story I wanted to share.

Artistic Process

The brain itself is a soft, intricate structure, so I used fabric and screen printing to echo this natural softness.

I printed three cross-sections of the visual neural pathways, top, middle and bottom, using AI-generated images for anatomical accuracy. I layered these via screen printing onto a variety of fabrics giving me the options for embellishing the works.

The choice of soft materials allowed me to mirror the brain's structure in an approachable form while connecting the viewer to the fundamental sensory experience of seeing. Creating this piece brought many challenges, from shaping the neural links to making them comprehensible and visually engaging. I tried out a variety of materials each with different issues from to soft, too slippery, too opaque, too delicate etc. before settling on an approach. I integrated embroidery, acrylic and metallic paint, and battery-operated lights to illuminate pathways hoping to intrigue viewers with the intricacies of the brain's networks. I considered shaping them and arranging them horizontally and vertically.

Like most of my experiments and experiences with creating abstract art, you learn while doing and end with ideas for how you might redo it differently next time.

Concept and Meaning

Emphasizing the role of sight—a critical element in both art and human experience, these neural pathways guide viewers to look closely and consider the structure of their own brains and the marvelous complexity that give us the ability to see. At one level seeing is an organic process, one often taken for granted, but it is also the start of making meaning. Humans have been called 'meaning making machines" and a lot of making meaning begins with seeing.

Personal Reflection

AI has been a tool, a guide and an idea generator as well as a camera to show me pictorial images of my ideas. It is not always accurate, but it is always interesting. I see it as a vast library of information that has been valuable in project planning, generating ideas and problem solving for stumbling blocks

along the way.

After multiple attempts to generate good images of geographical convolutions and intersections, when I wanted to display the hills and mountains and geography around Kamloops I gave up. I found no good depictions of the layered landscapes that are so prominent here and the various ways to make a scaled sculpture relied more on the expertise of geographers than any compelling picture AI could give me. I wanted to create the landscapes using AI and it was a no go. So I turned my attention to other things in nature that are convoluted. That's where the brain came in. That was an idea I chose to pursue.

Then I needed assistance in focusing on which part of the brain I wanted to depict in my work and how to get anatomically accurate pictures of the neural pathways for vision. When I was trying to figure out how to make the 'slices' of the Brain- top, middle and bottom- AI provided anatomically correct pictures that I needed to enlarge, print and transfer to screen printing screens. When I wanted the visual areas to stand out, I used AI to get ideas. Embroidery and lighting were offered along with other ideas. At lightening speed, AI gave me a mini manual of ideas from which I could pick. I see it as a repository of information and ideas, a super fast search engine, an advisor. It advises, I make the decisions. And for some things like project planning and management it is a good advisor. For other things like ideas to improve things it's pretty good. Just don't expect it to reproduce what you are thinking about in your mind, it isn't you, but it's an idea aid.

Audience Engagement

This work issues an invitation to step closer, explore from multiple angles, and experience a blend of scientific accuracy and artistic interpretation. The hanging structure allows viewers to move around it, creating a sense of wonder at the hidden intricacies of our bodies and the extraordinary complexity of perception. I had to give up on it being see through but depending on how it is hung you can move through it as well and see it from both sides. It is sturdy enough to be touched.

Context and Inspiration

Part of my broader artistic practice, which often depicts forms found in nature, this sculpture is a continuation of my fascination with the world and our connections to it. A theme running through my work is using nature as a jumping off spot to draw attention to something and tell a story. From Humpback whale flukes and swarming Killer Bees, Zebra Mussels and large abstract metal forms that began with the inspiration of a protractor and geometry set, something in the 'here and now' catches my

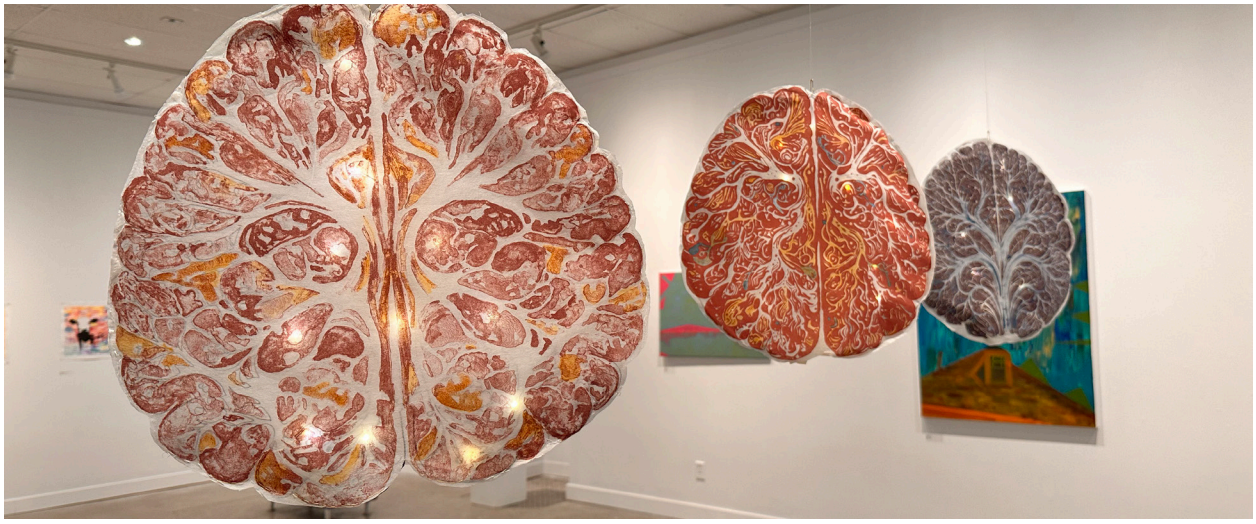

Figure 3. You See (exhibit installation, 2024), by Janet McChesney.
Soft sculpture, screen printed fabric with mylar and lights,
17" x 19" (x 3). (Photo credit: Twyla Exner)

interest and off I go.

For this work, I began thinking about the geography of the hills around Kamloops with their peaks and curves and interconnection, the unique layers of sediment, rock, clay that forms the landscape. This idea was a non starter for using AI, totally frustrating but it did lead to the curves and interconnection in the brain and how to tell that story.

Through the brain's complex pathways, I hope to offer viewers not only a visual experience but also a moment of reflection on the awe-inspiring and nearly unfathomable processes that govern what we see, how we see and how that influences our thoughts and perceptions.

Process

Janet used DALL-E to generate images of the human brain to create maps of the neural pathways to the visual cortex. She wanted to show the areas of the brain that light up when we see images. DALL-E generated multiple maps of the brain, visually representing it in slices and indicating areas where it would light up in response to visual stimulation. Janet used the generated images to create screen prints, which are printed on fabric. The fabric contains a mylar template which holds LED's in place and represents the lighting up of visual cortex in the brain.

Exhibit Installation of You See by Janet McChesney (Image credit: Twyla Exner)