



Artifice Textworks

With writing by Peter Dornauf, 2023

SENT

JAMES R FORD

Down the Rabbit Hole

Peter Dornauf, 2023

In 1929 not long after the surrealist movement got off the ground, Magritte painted the image of a smoker's pipe and then famously wrote beneath it, "This is not a pipe". Technically he was correct. It wasn't. It was more accurately a representation of one. Plato would have been pleased, a man impatient with illusions and shadows.

Whether Magritte was wanting to make some metaphysical point, or simply remind the viewer of the obvious, or not so obvious – that the painting was a vision of a pipe, an imagined one, which was standard surrealist territory, is debatable. But it did open up the whole issue of language and its arbitrary relation to reality; how, in effect, language is the filter through which we look at the world and try to make sense of it, or alternatively, have any sense of it predetermined or compromised.

James R Ford takes this area of investigation one step further in his new series of works that are AI dependent. He thereby adds another layer to the conundrum by delving into the nature of the art itself and its representative practice. For example, his work, *This Is Not An Oak Tree*, echoes Magritte, but the question of its reality comes under question in a different way. Ford was no doubt thinking of Michael Craig-Martin's inaugural conceptual piece from 1973, *An Oak Tree*, where he exhibits a glass of water and argues that by some transubstantiation process the artist has magically transformed it into something else – a tree. We are deep inside the world of conceptual game playing here that interrogates the nature of the real.

Ford approaches the enigma from another angle via simulation that poses the question of 'fake' versus 'real' using AI art generation. The image on canvas is a machine generated image of the tree. How does a machine know what an oak tree looks like? This is a mock-up, an object spawned from a thousand alphanumeric inputs and thus an amalgam of the object. Could this, therefore, be the real deal or something simply generic and thus bogus?

Then at another disconnect from reality, the artist instructs the computer to create an "average landscape oil painting". What might that be and where is the machine sourcing this material from? And who has decided what "average" might be? We are already at several removes from reality.



Perceptual Best Guess
James R Ford, 2023
Acrylic paint on printed
AI generated image on
canvas
600 x 600 mm

Not yet done, following that the artist ups the ante in this dance of the seven veils by throwing in a further constraining aesthetic element into the mix, factoring in “tips for artists who want to sell”, advice purloined from a certain John Baldesseri. Here the hand of commercialism is brought into play to conflate the procedure, generating some bog-standard image to attract the likes of Mr and Mrs plastic bucket. What we end up with is a kitsch product, which is paradoxically and ironically redeemed because of the philosophical exploration involved.

In *Perceptual Best Guess*, one of those bog-standard saleable landscape digital creations, which presents idyllic cottages placed adjacent to a pretty inlet of blue sea, complete with blue sky and rolling hills, the superimposed title sardonically sums up the picture.

In another twist, the artist plays off man against machine, artistry against apparatus, real versus replication by carefully and precisely painting the text himself with such exactitude as to simulate the work of a machine. We are well down inside the rabbit hole here, along with Alice, that sees the artist having fun with art, reality and all its alternatives, together with its amusing contradictions.



This Is Not An Oak Tree

James R Ford, 2023

Acrylic paint on printed AI generated image on canvas

600 x 600 mm