

# Is AI the future of art?

To many they are art's next big thing—digital images of jellyfish pulsing and blurring in a dark pink sea, or dozens of butterflies fusing together into a single organism. The Argentine artist Sofia Crespo, who created the works with the help of artificial intelligence, is part of the “generative art” movement, where humans create rules for computers which then use algorithms to generate new forms, ideas and patterns.

The field has begun to attract huge interest among art collectors and even bigger price tags at auction. US artist and programmer Robbie Barrat—a prodigy still only 22 years old—sold a work called “Nude Portrait#7Frame#64” at Sotheby's in March for £630,000 (\$821,000). That came almost four years after French collective Obvious sold a work at Christie's titled “Edmond de Belamy”—largely based on Barrat's code—for \$432,500.

## A ballet with machines

Collector Jason Bailey told AFP that generative art was “like a ballet between humans and machines”. But the nascent scene could already be on the verge of a major shake-up, as tech companies begin to release AI tools that can whip up photo-realistic images in seconds. Artists in Germany and the United States blazed a trail in computer-generated art during the 1960s.

The V&A museum in London keeps a collection going back more than half a century, one of the key works being a 1968 piece by German artist Georg Nees



Argentinean artist Sofia Crespo holds one of her works as she poses for a photo at the Estrela garden in Lisbon. — AFP photos

called “Plastik 1”. Nees used a random number generator to create a geometric design for his sculpture.

## 'Babysitting' computers

Nowadays, digital artists work with supercomputers and systems known as Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs) to create images far more complex than anything Nees could have dreamed of. GANs are sets of competing AIs—one generates an image from the instructions it is given, the other acts as a gatekeeper, judging whether the

output is accurate.

If it finds fault, it sends the image back to work for a second try to beat the game-keeper. But artists like Crespo and Barrat insist that the artist is still central to the process, even if their working methods are not traditional.

“When I'm working this way, I'm not creating an image, I'm creating a system that can create images,” Barrat told AFP. Crespo said she thought her AI machine would be a true “collaborator”, but in reality it is incredibly tough to get even a sin-

gle line of code to generate satisfactory results. She said it was more like “babysitting” the machine. Tech companies are now hoping to bring a slice of this rarefied action to regular consumers. Google and Open AI are both touting the merits of new tools they say bring photo-realism and creativity without the need for coding skills.

## Enter the 'transformers'

They have replaced GANs with more user-friendly AI models called “transformers” that are adept at converting everyday speech into images. Google Imagen's webpage is filled with absurdist images generated by instructions such as: “A small cactus wearing a straw hat and neon sunglasses in the Sahara desert.” Open AI boasts that its Dalle-2 tool can offer any scenario in any artistic style from the Flemish masters to Andy Warhol.

Although the arrival of AI has led to fears of humans being replaced by machines in fields from customer care to journalism, artists see the developments more as an opportunity than a threat. Crespo has tried out Dalle-2 and said it was a “new level in terms of image generation in general”—though she prefers her GANs.

“I very often don't need a model that is very accurate to generate my work, as I like very much when things look indeterminate and not easily recognizable,” she said. Camille Lenglois of Paris's Pompidou Centre-Europe's largest col-



Argentinean artist Sofia Crespo holds one of her works as she poses for a photo at her home in Lisbon.

lection of contemporary art—also played down any idea that artists were about to be replaced by machines. She told AFP that machines did not yet have the “critical and innovative capacity”, adding: “The ability to generate realistic images does not make one an artist.” — AFP



The Costa Venezia cruising ship is moored in Istanbul. — AFP photos

## TURKEY BETS ON MODERN CRUISE HUB TO BOOST TOURISM

A state-of-the-art port in Istanbul with an underground terminal, a celebrity chef's restaurant and a shopping centre, welcomes yet another 5,000-passenger cruise ship, bringing more cash to Turkey's struggling tourism industry. Hit hard by Covid, Turkey's tourism sector could get a shot in the arm from the revenue generated at Galataport, which opened in 2021 — a year later than planned due to the pandemic.

The port could also provide a boost to an economy that has been weighed down by double-digit inflation and a currency in free fall, though the project has drawn criticism over the destruction of historical monuments and the potential environmental impact. Figen Ayan, chief port officer at Galataport, said “ships began to arrive one after the other” after the facility opened in October.

“Galataport has become the face of tourism,” she told AFP. The 20-story Costa Venezia vessel from Italy was taking passengers from an 11-day voyage to the Aegean Sea when it docked in Galataport, its gangway connecting directly to the futuristic underground customs terminal.

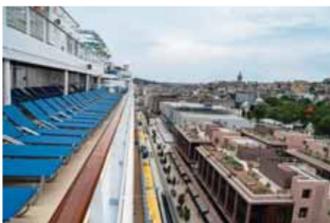
The port is home to a shopping centre, a hotel, cultural venues and a restaurant owned by Turkish butcher Nusret Gokce, better known as Salt Bae, the social media star who sprinkles salt on steaks in front of celebrity customers. “Galataport Istanbul is much more than a cruise port,” Ayan said.

## High-spending passengers

Around 30 cruise ships have so far anchored at Galataport and 200 more are expected by the end of the year, which amounts to 450,000 passengers. The pandemic caused havoc in the glob-

al cruise ship industry as vessels were hit by outbreaks and vessels were banned in several countries.

“Now we can say that we have left the pandemic behind and that the cruise sector, which is an important segment of tourism, has revived and is on the move,” Ayan said. The target is 1.5 million cruise passengers and 25 million visitors annually. “If a regular tourist spends \$62 daily, a cruise passenger



Galataport is pictured from The Costa Venezia cruising ship moored in Istanbul.

spends \$400. He spends up to eight times more in one day,” she said.

## Environmental cost

The project also opened up a 1.2-kilometre (three-quarter-mile) coastline that had been closed to public use for 200 years. But critics, including some urban planners and architects, say the gentrification of the area destroyed old neighborhoods, with the shopping centre replacing a historical post office building, and also posed a risk to the environment. Cruises threaten marine life, discharging large quantities of sewage and other waste, said Muharrem Balci, associate professor of biology at Istanbul University. “The

environmental cost of cruises is seven times higher than the financial return they provide,” Balci told AFP.

“The consumption level of each traveler is higher than in the host cities, therefore, cruise tourism has the potential to create stress (for the environment) for the regions they visit.” Large ships were banned from Venice last year after years of warnings that the giant floating hotels risked causing irreparable dam-



The Costa Venezia cruising ship is moored in Istanbul.



Bystanders feed seagulls and watch a Costa Venezia cruise ship in Galataport, Istanbul.

age to the lagoon city.

Burak Caliskan, country manager for MSC Cruises, said no such danger awaited Istanbul. “We don't think Istanbul will face a similar situation. We don't have a city structure like Venice,” he told AFP. Caliskan also said newly built ships addressed environmental concerns. “To give a few examples, the exhaust gases from the ships are filtered. The paints used on the ships have been completely changed. Paints that will not harm the sea are used,” he said. “We even have efforts to reduce the sound of the ships' engine so that while our ships are navigating in the open seas, they do not cause any disturbance to the living things, especially the whales.” — AFP



The Costa Venezia cruising ship is moored in Istanbul.

## Far from home, new chance in Mexico for Frida the rescued 'pet' tiger

As a tiny cub four years ago, Frida the Bengal tiger was found chained up in a restaurant parking lot in Mexico City, dirty, emaciated and unable to walk. Rescued and rehabilitated, she is now a popular attraction at the Reino Animal (Animal Kingdom) park along with hundreds of other exotic creatures taken from misguided Mexican “pet” owners—including showy drug traffickers. Far from the Asian forests where she belongs, Frida has made a full recovery and “no longer suffers,” said park employee Agustin Bastida as the tigress gave a big yawn.

Lying on a grassy patch she looked disinterestedly at the humans ogling her from the other side of a fence. Frida is one of six big cats among 1,100 animals — 40 percent of them rescued exotic creatures—at the park in Otumba, north-east of the Mexican capital. Fellow residents include zebras, giraffes, wolves and a variety of birds. According to authorities, some 150 to 200 exotic animals are seized in Mexico City every year, often after reports from neighbors.

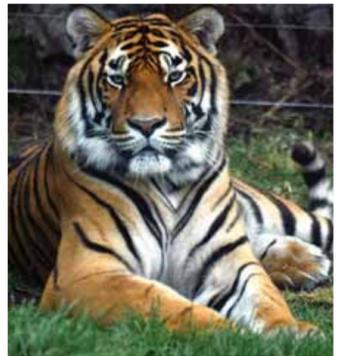
Some of the worst culprits are drug lords such as Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman, who had a pet monkey called “Boots.” In one major rescue in 2007, officials busting a “narco-mansion” found two jaguars, two tigers, two lions and a macaque, according to Lucio Garcia Gil, head of the PROFEPA environmental crimes office for Mexico City. “There are many exotic birds, such as macaws or parrots, reptiles, many primates and big cats; it is what we have most detected that people have,” he told AFP. Two big cats were rescued in the megacity in 2021 and four—including a lion cub—so far this year.

## \$5,000 for a lion

According to Gil, a tiger or lion sells for between \$1,000 and \$5,000 on the Mexican black market. Mexican law allows people to legally purchase exotic animals from registered dealers “as long as they keep them safe and provide the appropriate protection,” he told AFP. “Unfortunately... hardly anybody complies with the conditions,” he said. Illegal possession is punishable by up to nine years in prison or a fine of up to \$15,000, though Gil said he could not remember

anyone ever going to jail.

Keeping a big cat is expensive—they can eat as much as 30 kilograms (66 pounds) of meat per day, and many private owners abandon the animals in the end. Like lions or jaguars, Bengals—which grow to stand over a meter tall and can weigh as much as 260 kilograms (570 pounds) — are not easy housemates and many have their fangs and claws removed so that they do not destroy their surroundings, or owners.



A male bengal tiger (Panthera tigris tigris) called Moba is seen at the “Reino Animal” shelter for wild animals at the Municipality of Otumba.

## ‘They are not pets’

According to the UN Environment Program, global wildlife trafficking generates as much as \$23 billion per year. It is the seventh-most lucrative illicit business, according to the Washington-based Global Financial Integrity. In Mexico City, the lucky trafficked animals that do get rescued are taken to zoos and parks such as the 53-hectare (130-acre) Animal Kingdom northeast of the capital.

In Frida's case, she was brought in with a broken hip, which has since completely healed. “She could not walk, it was very sad, very sad,” said Bastida. “People buy these animals to keep them as pets, but they are not pets,” he added. “They have to be in the wild or in open spaces where the conditions are adequate for a good quality of life.” — AFP



A female bengal tiger (Panthera tigris tigris) called Monalisa and a male jaguar (Panthera onca) are seen at the “Reino Animal” shelter for wild animals at the Municipality of Otumba, State of Mexico.