

The continuous proto-workshop or the den of post-sketches

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About the exhibition RONAN BARROT, POST ESQUISSES, January 30 - February 25, 2024 at Avant Galerie Vossen.

In the workshops of the great Renaissance masters, the sketch, or "schizzo" in Italian, was a jealously guarded secret. These preliminary sketches were considered the purest expressions of the artist's creativity and genius. They guided the work of assistants, apprentices and engravers on the final work. For art historians, sketches offer a glimpse into the creative processes of Renaissance artists. In our contemporary imagination, these sketches and their mysterious aspect still mark our romantic vision of artistic genius and its need for isolation to find the subtle idea that will lead to the perfect line.

Since 2019, in the proto-atelier formed by painter Ronan Barrot and Robbie Barrat with the intervention of Albertine Meunier, new sketches are produced and follow rules that are far from being as linear and hierarchical as those of Renaissance workshops: from a supposedly pure gesture through to industrial transformation. Here, the creative process functions much like the movement of information in a software stack: it begins in Ronan's studio, passes through the networks of equations constructed by Robbie, falls back onto a plexiglass plate, undergoes several reworkings, falls back into Robbie's collections of digital images and so on. In this studio, the sketch is never finished, always ongoing, ready to mutate. Work here is organized around a continuous exploration of what might be called post-sketches. A process far removed from the romantic idea of solitude in creation, we're more in the midst of constellations of human and non-human agents. As Balzac wisely pointed out, to create: "It's not enough to be a man, you have to be a system".

In the Barrat-Barrot system, there was no Renaissance-style hierarchy between assistant, engraver and copyist. The engraver, for example, was responsible for transforming the prestigious finished work into a reproducible object. In this way, the story came full circle, from sketch to masterpiece to reproductions distributed throughout Western Europe. It could be argued that Barrat's artificial intelligence also played the role of engraver for Barrot's sketches, composing skulls ad infinitum. But Barrat's intervention is not at Barrot's industrial service. It certainly produces infinite skulls, but to bring about other states, it explores the computer's fertilities, it tends towards new sketches rather than completing them. Artificial intelligence then functions as a tracing device.

It's interesting to note that the continuous relationship established between Barrot and Barrat is similar to the technical logic of neural networks. Therein lies the

subtlety of the post-sketches, in this truly continuous relationship, in the creation of contiguous worlds between the mechanisms of artificial intelligence and painting. In his notebooks of reflections on painting, Camille Corot wrote of the beginning of the process of creating a painting: "The first two things to study are the form and then the values". Here, Ronan studies form and Robbie studies the values he enters into his equations. Both try to play out this dialogue to make progress on their post-sketches. In the exhibition at l'Avant Galerie, visitors are shown freeze-frames of the exchange between Ronan and Robbie, one with his ping pong racket and the other with his tennis racket. In this correspondence between Robbie and Ronan, it's like a game of listening and bouncing that takes place without ever stabilizing. In this process, you're always watching. You might think of it as a confrontation, but these are contiguous worlds. Neither Barrot nor Barrat seeks to create imitations or pastiches. No one here makes fakes. To create, no one must fail.

Neural networks, like those used throughout Robbie Barrat's interventions, operate using processes that transform an image into a form of noise and then reverse this process to generate new images. Artificial intelligence starts with real images, in this case, skulls, and gradually degrades them. This process can be seen as a kind of image scrambling. As the image is degraded, it is transformed into a noise model that no longer resembles the original image. To generate a new landscape image, the AI starts with the noise resulting from the degradation of the skulls. From this noise, the AI begins the image reconstruction process. The image is gradually refined from an abstract noise model to a clear, detailed image. The neural network continually adjusts the image according to what it has learned during training, adding detail and adjusting colors and shapes until a coherent image emerges. For these new series, skulls tend towards landscape and vice versa. The skulls are mixed, degraded, stirred in the Barrat-Barrot sceptic pit, only to reappear to visitors as sceptics.

But once the paintings are finished, and visitors are inside the exhibition, Ronan's paintings must not be confused with the AI images. Ronan Barrot is very careful to make this distinction: "Don't confuse the painting with the murder weapon. Don't confuse the painting with the image of the painting. Nor the coffin. Nor the murder hole. Nor the three-poster bed. Nor the peephole. Nor the loophole. Nor the shroud. He recalls the anecdote when his gallery owner showed him a painting by Rembrandt and led him to believe that a lost copy had been found, when in fact it had been generated by AI technology. At first glance, he sensed that the drawing was fake, that it didn't have that master stroke. No, he was certain, in this image of a painting, there were no post-sketches, just an attempt at deception. But who knows, maybe Rembrandt would have liked to play the post-sketch game?

In 2024, just because we're surrounded by AI-automated image production networks doesn't mean that everything will stop, that birds will stop whistling, that painters will

put down their brushes. We've just come through a year marked by the threat of AIs replacing artists a million times over. This exhibition reminds us that other paths are possible, and that we can continue to sketch out new ones. For several years, and long before this media boom, Ronan Barrot made the choice to intertwine himself and his painting with AI processes, as Chatonsky suggested: "There is not AI and the human being, there is an intertwining from which one cannot distinguish oneself". From their first exhibition, Infinite Skulls, to Post-Esquises, Ronan Barrot and Robbie Barrot have been exploring these interweavings in the company of Albertine Meunier and Caroline Vossen. Since then, these interweavings have mutated and explored continuously between Ronan's sketches, Robbie's interventions, Barrot's retouching and Barrat's modifications. So long live the post-sketches, these interweavings, these continuous mixtures of as yet unfinished solutions, this new constellation of the studio of the future, where human painters and computational agents interchange and correspond.

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