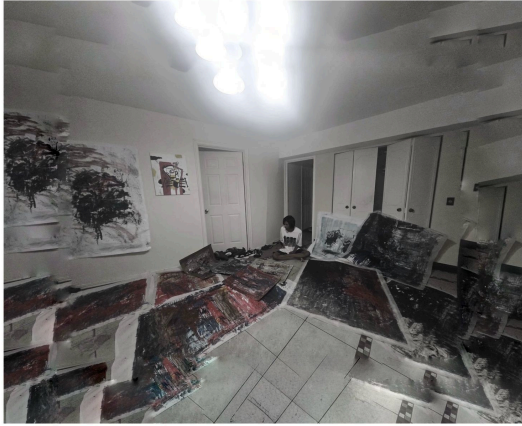


# Material

*Painting in the Post-AI Era*

PRITHWEE



*Art is something I always had trouble learning in school, as I could never draw those perfect lines, yet I kept drawing as a wonderless child. Art is something that brought trouble into my home, yet I kept drawing through my adolescence. Art is something I don't easily understand, but I find myself staring at a soulful ceramic sculpture in the hands of a village potter, trying to understand his spirit or feel the vision embedded in a piece of mud. Art is something that messes with me, and I keep messing with it too.*

## Prologue

# A Studio in Toledo, 2026

*The reality of sunset is hard sometimes,  
when it empties life to nothing.  
Each time something is wiped away to nothing,  
my heart breaks down.*

*And the sun, if it wished,  
some vast cosmic power of its own,  
like last night's,  
could put out life entirely; or could bring on darkness,  
could wake despair, resentment, hatred!*

*from Whenever I See You, Khowai, translated from the Bengali*

**T**his is my third bedroom in the last two years, like I sometimes keep changing visions in life to touch something I never could figure out myself. There is not much to visualize it.

These paintings I am sharing in this book were made under a specific condition in twenty one days. When life behaves like a roller coaster that makes you run in the speed of wind but tied, the only thing we are tied off, is the fear and the risk.

In those days, surprisingly a room not so cinematic like this can give you the last hope to breathe.

The book that follows my attempt to think about what painting is for, in a world that has, in the past four years, learned how to produce images at a rate and at a fidelity that the institution of painting has never had to negotiate with before. At the very beginning, I want to thank a small number of writers who have helped me think. John Berger most of all. Walter Benjamin. Susan Sontag. David Sylvester. Adrian Stokes. T. J. Clark. Roland Barthes, Kate Crawford and Safiya Noble and Ruha Benjamin and Hito Steyerl.

The argument the book wants to make is small enough to state here as we start. Painting is a material practice. The materiality is not decoration. It is the argument at a moment in which images can be produced without a body. The painter's existence, and what they leave on the surface, becomes the argument that the image is from somewhere and someone with a cost. And the practice of painting now, when chosen very freely by a person who could have used the machine and did not, is itself a position. In this book, I will try to state my reading of what the algorithm is for and what it is not for and what is being given up when it is used.

I would like the book to be useful for any painter who is reading it, maybe for any researcher in machine systems who has wondered whether painters know anything that researchers do not and for anyone who has stood in a room with a painting and felt the thrill of sensation that happens in front of paintings.

In traditional sense, a painter is not allowed to write a book like this in their first decade of practice. I am writing it anyway, for two reasons. The first is that the conditions under which the paintings were made is not allowing me to wait. The second is that the moment in which

paintings are being asked to think about their position in relation to machine image production is not the moment that will wait either.

I hope it teaches me something also.



*The studio. Toledo, 2026.*

## Material

A painter pulls a brush across a surface and the surface pulls back, and what is on the surface afterward is a record of the negotiation between the painter's hand and what it was working against. Material is the thing under the hand that kept resisting among hundreds of years of art history.

Almost everything else in the book follows from it.

I have read hundreds of writings on paintings. Most of them begin with the image. With what is already depicted, or implied, or refused. This is a mistake. Painting begins with the surface and the surface is a real thing. It is paper, or canvas, or wood, or wall or a string. It has weight. It has tooth, which is the word painters have been using for texture that makes pigment adhere. A painting has reflectance. It has a smell when it is freshly primed. The pigment is also a real thing. Acrylic emulsion is plastic suspended in water. Charcoal is the burned remains of willow. Oil is linseed pressed cold from the seed. All of these are organic or mineral matter that someone, somewhere, prepared into the form in which the painter buys them. The brush is hair, or synthetic, a stick. A painter's hand is a body part with bones and tendons in it and a name attached to the body that owns it.

I am writing in this way because it is the only way I could find to argue what I want to argue in this book. The material conditions of a

painting are not what the painting is about. The material conditions are what painting originally is.

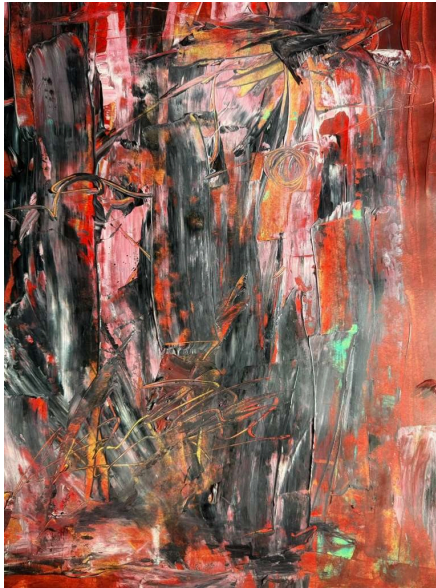
This is a hard thing to claim. Painters do not usually claim it. From our childhood, we are trained in school to talk about painting in terms of meaning. The girl in the painting represents loneliness. The red field stands for rage. This makes me remember we had a medium sized reproduction or cheap print of Leonardo's Mona Lisa in my house. My father bought that, hung it on the wall, and the thing that is relevant today is that he already knew this painting has something mysterious about it, and what exactly was mysterious about it. The composition suggests crucifixion. We are foundationally trained to read the image, to find the metaphor. This is not wrong, but it is downstream of the thing that actually makes the painting a painting.

Consider what happens when a painter chooses charcoal over graphite. The two materials look similar at a distance. They both make black marks on paper. They both can be scratched, smudged, layered, erased. But charcoal is friable and cannot be sharpened to a precise point. It will rub off if you breathe on it too hard. It demands to be fixed, with a spray, if it is to survive. Graphite, by contrast, is a soft metal compressed into a binder. It is precise and can be sharpened. It does not crumble. The choice between charcoal and graphite is not an aesthetic preference. It is a decision about what kind of permanence the mark wants to have. About what the painter wants the mark to be made of. About the painter's environment and condition of affording choices.

Painters across history have painted with what they could afford. Jean-Michel Basquiat painted with oilstick partly because oilstick is faster than oil paint and a stick of it fits in a jacket pocket. Mark Bradford built a practice on the endpaper from his mother's hair salon. El Anatsui in Ghana built his on bottle caps and copper wire. The

work was made of what was around them, and what was around them became, in time, the signature of the practice. The poverty of the material here became the position.

As a painter myself, when I scratch a charcoal mark into a wet acrylic ground, I am making a continuous decision about what the materials can do in each other's presence. The charcoal will not behave the way it would on dry paper. The acrylic is going to absorb some of it and reject some of it. There will be a margin of dispersion that I cannot control. The result will be a specific mark that exists because of the combination of these particular materials at this particular moment. It is not a marking that could exist in any other way and it is the negotiation, that gets recorded.



*Detail. Charcoal scratched through a wet acrylic ground.*

Painting is the recording of a negotiation between specific materials, at a specific moment, by a specific body. The image that arrives on the surface is a byproduct of that negotiation, not its purpose. If the image were the purpose, painting would have been ended by photography in 1840.

Painting was, instead, transformed. Painters of 1840 had been spending much of their time and labor trying to record the appearance of the world with as much fidelity as a painted surface could allow. The photograph could now do this without a painter. What was left for the painter? The answer that the next two generations of painters arrived at, and that we now call Impressionism, was that painting could record the negotiation that a painter's eye and hand and the surface had been performing all along, which the photograph could not perform. Monet was painting the appearance of his negotiation with light in front of haystacks. The negotiation was the thing and this is the lesson the book wants to remember today just like the era of 1840 when artists were confused to fight machine. We are in another moment in which a machine can now produce images without a painter. And this time the machine is not bound to the appearance of a real scene. It can generate any image that can be described in language. It can produce a portrait of a person who does not exist, in any style of any historical period, in any composition the user can specify. The output is faster and cheaper than any painting has ever been or will ever be.

The question for the painter of 2026 I ask, as it was for the painter of 1840, is: what is left? What is the negotiation that the algorithm cannot perform?

The approach of this book is that the negotiation that the algorithm cannot perform is the negotiation between specific materials and a specific body at a specific moment. The painter who paints now, in the knowledge that the algorithm exists and that it can produce

images, is making a specific argument about the value of that negotiation. The painter may say: the surface I am painting is something that no system without a body, without time and without my specific materials can paint. The mark I am making could not be made any other way. And the act of looking at this mark requires the viewer to stand in front of it and acknowledge that someone made it.



There is a longer version of this same argument. John Berger published *Ways of Seeing* in 1972 which was made alongside a BBC television series. The argument he made across both versions of the work, is about reproduction. What happens to a painting when it is photographed and reproduced and distributed in books and on television. Berger says, the original painting, once it has been photographed, becomes one image among many. To explain it briefly, a surface that can be reproduced is a surface that has been removed from its body. Once removed, it can be made to mean almost anything. It can be put next to advertisements for cars or it can be shrunk to the size of a postage stamp. And the original painting itself, hanging in the museum, becomes a referent for the reproduction rather than the thing the reproduction refers to. This is what Berger meant when he said that the reproductions of paintings change the actual meaning of paintings, even when the original paintings are unchanged.

Berger was not condescending about painting. He was not protective of it. He was specific, political. He looked at the surface and asked, what is happening here, and on whose behalf. Berger said paintings do not speak. People do, in the presence of paintings,

depending on who they are and what conditions they are looking from. The looking is the negotiation.

I am drawing on Berger now because the negotiation he was describing has a new chapter. The reproductive image technology that Berger was writing about was the photograph and its descendants in print and television. He could not have anticipated the algorithmic image. The algorithmic image is different from the photograph in a specific way, and that specific way is probably what the rest of this book is going to be about.

In a photograph, the scene had to exist. A body had to stand there with a camera. The image is bounded by the world that was photographed.

An algorithmic image is generated by a statistical model that has been trained on a very large number of images and that produces, in response to a prompt, an image that is statistically likely given the prompt. The scene did not have to exist. No body had to stand anywhere and the image is bounded only by the training data and the prompt.

Berger said about the reproduction of painting that reproduction changes meaning because it removes the painting from the body of its original site. The algorithmic image is reproduction without an original. The body has been removed not from a specific painting but from the entire economy of image production. The image, in this regime, is no longer the trace of a negotiation and has become a sampling from a distribution.

This is the moment at which the painter has to decide what painting is now for. The answer surely cannot be to produce more reproducible images, because the machine can do that without the painter. The answer can only be to produce surfaces that remember that they came from somewhere, from someone, with a cost. And this

is what I mean when I say the material is the argument. Because the material remembers and the algorithm does not.

The next chapter is about who has historically been allowed to look, and who has historically been required to be looked at, and how that arrangement is being inherited by the machine.



## A River of Gaze: Old and New

*Men act and women appear. Men look at women.*

*Women watch themselves being looked at.*

*Ways of Seeing*

**T**his sentence does a tremendous amount of work in three clauses. It says that the convention of the female nude, which is the largest single body of subject matter in the European oil-painting tradition across centuries, was built around the imagined presence of a male spectator. The actual woman whose body the painter was rendering, was a function of the male viewer. She was depicted in poses that arranged her for his looking. She was depicted as a thing to be enjoyed in his absence and as a possession in his presence. This convention was so consistent across so many painters in so many centuries that the convention itself, became the lens through which Western viewers were trained to see women, in painting and outside it.

The same question did show up in our South Asian art tradition in a different way though. The European convention, female body as ornament for the male viewer in the form of the nude, does not appear in the same form in Bengali painting. The body is rarely undressed there due to religious and cultural suppression. What the South Asian tradition absorbed instead was the female figure as ornament for the

male viewer in the form of mother, bride, folk worker and nationalist allegories.



*Bharat Mata. Abanindranath Tagore, 1905. Public domain.*

Abanindranath Tagore, one of the most influential painters of Bengal, painted Bharat Mata where woman is the country herself, this is idealization of a female body that no real woman could occupy. Jamini Roy painted folk women in flat, decorative compositions in which the woman is a pattern more than a person. Other famous artists like

Zainul Abedin and Sultan painted female peasants and famine sufferers, sometimes even muscular and dignified, but almost never as individuals whose interior the painter was trying to reach. In such cases the female figure is arranged for the male spectator. And the arrangement just uses the vocabulary of virtue rather than availability. The Bengali painting tradition refuses the European nude only to install, in its place, a more thorough form of supervision. The woman became the symbol of the good, the modest, the maternal and the national.

In recent decades, it will be a regret not to mention contemporary Bangladeshi artist Tayeba Begum Lipi, who has spent twenty years working specifically against this inheritance, using razor blades and bridal accessories to ask what the cost of being good has actually been for the women who absorbed it. I have only seen her works in online images but her work is one of the closest South Asian visual answers to Berger's question, and it appears predictably, only after the convention has been working for a hundred years without interruption.

Some of my earlier collages are called Freedom Under. They are about where I grew up. They are about in particular, the specific way in which women in South Asian countries lived under what Berger would call a regime of appearance. The conventions they lived under were not Western oil painting conventions. They were colonial conventions that had been transmuted through nationalism, religion and the household. But the underlying form was quite the same. All of these women watched themselves being looked at. They organized their body around the imagined presence of the watchers.

I was painting that body of work as a man, and from a diasporic distance, and both of those set their limits on what I was able to see. The question under it is older than me, how a person makes a life

inside a regime of appearance, and painting has been circling that question for a very long time.

The point of me writing this chapter is not to revisit Freedom Under. It is to bring Berger's sentence forward, into this present time, and to ask what the sentence means when the watching is being done not by men and nor colonial inheritances, but by a statistical model that has been trained on, among many other things, four hundred years of European oil painting.

So, here is the direct proposition. A generative model that produces images on request is not free of the convention of appearance. It cannot be free of it. The model was trained on a corpus of images. The corpus of images includes, prominently, the entire reproducible history of Western oil painting and of mass advertising. Both of these reproducible bodies of work organize bodies around the imagined presence of a male spectator. And for that, when the model is asked to produce an image of a woman, the model produces an image that is the statistical center of mass of all the images of women on which it was trained. The image, accordingly, here inherits the convention.

This is one of the structural findings of one of my works which I am going to share further in next chapters. Such models produce images of women that are, by every available statistical measure, organized around the conventions of appearance that have been imposed on women by the watchers across the centuries. The watching is no longer being done by individual men in cities of Europe instead is being done by a function that has been trained to predict the next pixel, given a description.

It is maybe the latest stage of a long inheritance. The convention of the gaze is this time built into a system that produces images at a rate the old conventions could not approach.

I have written about this elsewhere with numbers and figures and confidence intervals. But those numbers and figures are not valuable here. What I want to explore is what it means to be a painter who lives inside this inheritance and who has decided to make work that argues with it.

In such case, the argument has to be made on the surface of the work. I am going to write the next chapter about what photography could not do, and what the algorithm cannot do, because the structure of the question is the same. The question is: what is the painter for now.



## What Photography Could Not Do, What the Algorithm Cannot Do

**I**n 1839 a man in Paris named Louis Daguerre showed the world a way to fix the image of the real onto a silver plate. He had worked with Niépce, who died before it was finished. The picture it made was sharp, sharper than a painter could make in days, and it needed only minutes of light.

The painters of that time received this with panic. Some of them said painting is dead now. There is a line, maybe true maybe not, that the painter Paul Delaroche said, from today painting is dead. Whether he said it or not, the fear was real. The painters of 1839 were earning their bread by making faces, places, things, accurate. Now a machine could make a face more accurate in minutes. The ground under the profession fell in within one generation.

What they did next is the part I keep returning to, because we are living the sequel of it.

The painters who survived did not try to beat the photograph at being a photograph. They could not, and they knew it. Slowly, across many cities and many wrong turns, they found the things the

photograph could not do, and they made painting about only those things.

The photograph could not follow the eye moving across a scene. The painting could. The photograph could not hold a single passing moment of light, the exposure was too slow and the light changed faster. The painting could. The photograph could not show which parts of the world the painter chose to care about and which to leave. The painting could. The photograph could not carry the gesture of the hand, because the hand was on the shutter, not on the surface. The painting could.

We call the result Impressionism now and we make it sound like a style. It was not first a style. It was a survival. Monet in front of his haystacks was not painting haystacks, he was painting his own negotiation with the light, and that was the one thing the machine in front of him could not take from him.

Now the machine is different and the question is exactly the same. The machine of today is trained on billions of images and it will give you, from a sentence, a face of any age, any feeling, any light, any country, in the style of any dead master, in seconds, for free. It is faster than the daguerreotype ever was and it is not even tied to a real scene. The daguerreotype at least needed the world to be there. This one needs nothing to be there.



*Boulevard du Temple. Louis Daguerre, 1838. Among the earliest photographs to include a human being. Public domain.*

So I ask the same question the painter of 1840 had to ask. What is left for me. What can my hand do that this cannot.

I have already said it in the first chapter and I will say it again here. The machine cannot record the negotiation between one hand and one surface in one moment. It cannot record the half second gesture that will never come back. It cannot record the drip that fell where I did not want it and that I decided to keep. It cannot record the charcoal scratched through wet acrylic and the margin of spreading I did not control. It cannot record that a body was in the room. Everything else it can do. It can make a face that is the perfect average of a hundred thousand other faces, and because it is the average, the eye reads it instantly. It can do this for nothing.

What it cannot do is have a body.

That is the whole inheritance. It is the same thing that was left to the painter in 1840, only the stakes are bigger now, because this machine is not bound to the world at all. The photograph could not lie about a scene that was never there. This one has no scene to be loyal to. It refers to nothing outside itself.

So the painter becomes the one who makes surfaces that still refer to something outside the machine. To the body that made them. To the moment. To the conditions that body was living in when it made them. The painting becomes a witness. That is not a small word. It is, I think, the job now.

Walter Benjamin had a word for what a thing loses when it is reproduced, the aura, the here and now of the object, its being in one place at one time. The machine image never had an aura to lose. It was born already reproduced, with no original sitting anywhere behind it. A painting is the opposite case. It is all original. It is the one place the thing exists.

I am not saying painting is morally above the machine. That is the wrong way to argue it. I am saying they do different things, and the things painting does have worth exactly because the machine cannot do them. The market is already moving this way, the price for human made work is widening, the fairs are writing no-AI rules. Not from sentiment. Because they have understood there is a value in a surface that came from somewhere.

This value will not save bad painting. Bad painting did not survive the photograph either. It will only save painting that knows what it is doing, that knows what it cannot do and what it can, and that the two are not the same.

The next chapter is about one move I have made again and again, the face under cloth.



## The Face Under Cloth

A face in a painting was never the whole face. The painter always had to choose, this feature I commit, this one I only suggest, this one I leave out. This was true long before the photograph, long before any of this fight. It is just what painting is.

The covered face is the far end of that truth. There the painter has decided not to show. To hide, to cover, to refuse. And the viewer is made to stand in front of the hiding and do something with it.

This is old. Francis Bacon spent forty years on faces that look half destroyed. Marlene Dumas paints faces remembering something we are not allowed to know. Cinga Samson blacks out the eyes so the look cannot come back to you. Adrian Ghenie drags the face into the paint until it is ruined but still known. My own *Expressions Under Suffer* sits in this line. The face is half covered, or fully covered, or refused.

The covered face is older than all of them. The death mask was a covered face, a cast taken with the eyes already closed, a face fixed in an expression chosen for it, a face that could not look back. That is the oldest version of the move, a face made present and shut at the same time.



*From Expressions Under Suffer.*

I want to say why this has stayed useful to painters for so long. The covered face breaks the contract of looking. Normally looking is a trade. I look at the face, the face looks back, and I am caught in it, I am part of the looking because the face can see me too. Take the eyes away, cover them, and the trade collapses. Now I am looking at something that cannot look back at me. I am in a different place. The place of being unable to be seen by the thing I am studying.

The painter who covers the face is refusing the normal contract on purpose. The painter is saying, this face will not be available to you on the terms you are used to, and still you have to look. You have to look at what is hidden and what is not, and decide what you will do with the difference.

I use cloth for this more than anything else, and cloth has its own long story. In Western painting cloth was drapery, it covered the body, it framed what could be seen and what could not, it kept the figure inside decorum. The cloth in my work is doing something near to that but not the same. It is not framing the body. It is coming down over the face from above. It is what has been put between the face and the viewer. The face is the thing being covered.

As a child in Bangladesh I watched the women of my family wear cloth, on the body and on the hair, and it was protection and obligation at once, a shelter and a rule. But the cloth I paint is not the veil of one religion, I am not painting a specific veil. It is a plain material doing a specific work. It comes down. It covers. It lets the face exist without being fully handed over.

Barthes, looking at photographs, named the detail that wounds you and holds the eye the punctum. The covered face works against that. It takes the punctum away on purpose, it removes the thing the eye goes hunting for, and it makes you stay with the removal.

For me, painting the face under cloth is a way of remembering that the question of who is allowed to see a face, and on what terms, is older than the algorithm and will live past it. The machine has inherited that question. It did not invent it. The painter who covers a face is in a very old conversation about being seen and refusing to be seen, and the machine has only just walked into that room.

And none of this has to be a lecture. The covered face is not a painting about the algorithm. It is a painting about a face that was asked to show itself and decided not to. A viewer can take it as being about the institution, or the model, or the state watching us, or about my own family in Dhaka, or about their own life of having to present a face for inspection. The painting will hold all of these. It holds them

because the surface is doing the work, and the surface is older than any of the readings.

That is the thing I want painting to keep. To be older than its readings. To be a thing made of material, in a moment, by a body, and so to not belong to any single explanation of it. The machine makes the most likely image for the sentence you typed. It collapses the surface into the prompt. The painter does the opposite. The painter opens the surface to readings no prompt has been written for yet.

That is the small stubborn thing this chapter wanted to keep.



## The Painter as Researcher

I will go slow here, because this is the place I am most easily misread. There is an old wall between art and research. Art is supposed to be about meaning, research about truth. I want to argue the wall is thin, and that right now it matters that it is thin.

The studio and the laboratory get treated as opposite rooms. They are not. Both are places where a person takes one question, builds the conditions to test it, and reads what comes back. A painting and an audit of an image model are two tools pointed at the same question, how does a system of looking decide what is visible, on whose terms, and what gets left out when it decides.

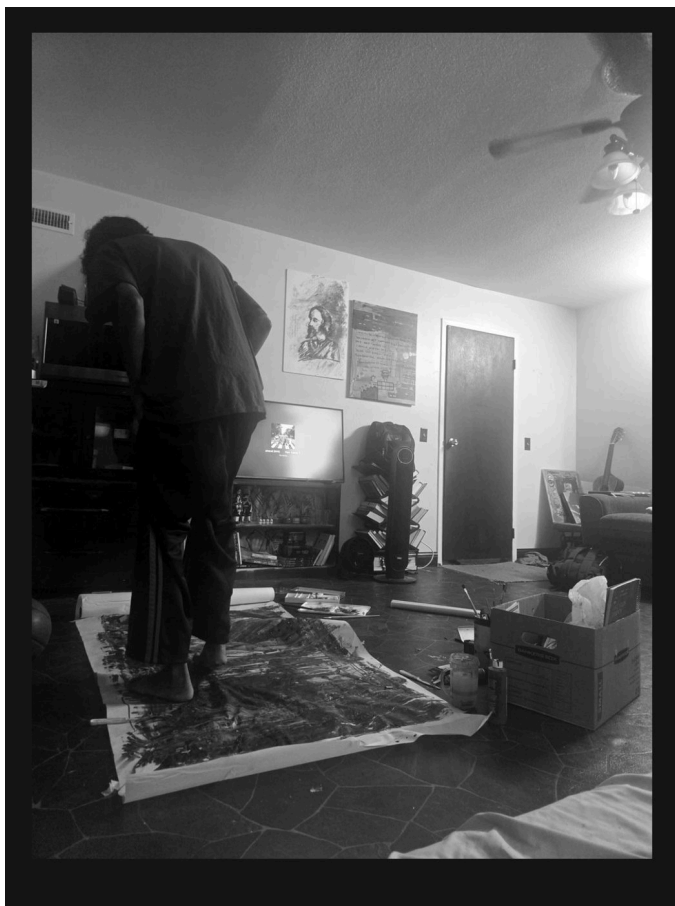
When I audit a generative image model and find that for occupational words it gives back faces clustered at the center of one narrow cultural canon, I am doing the same work I do when I paint a face that refuses to give up its features for inspection. One gives me a number. One gives me a surface. Both are arguments about the same thing.

This is not a metaphor. I mean it structurally.

We are told art is about meaning and research is about truth. That line is more decoration than wall. Art is busy with truth all the time. The truth of how a body actually felt in front of a situation. The truth of what a surface really does at a certain scale with certain materials.

The truth of what a face does when it will not be seen. These are truths. Not the same as a p-value, but not different in kind. Different in instrument.

So the painter is a kind of researcher. The studio is the lab. The painting is the result of an experiment, one question, these materials, this body, these conditions. Another painter could take the same question and get a different result, which is its own kind of reproducible. The result is data, in the real sense.



*The studio as laboratory.*

I am not inventing this. Others have argued it before me, that the artwork is the research and not only the illustration of it, that the studio is where the inquiry happens. I want to add one thing for this moment we are in. Right now the painter as researcher matters in a particular way, because there is a kind of knowing about these machines that the machines' own tests can never produce.

Let me say it plain. A machine image system is judged by other machine systems. By accuracy, by fidelity, by how close the output sits to a reference. It is judged, in other words, by the same logic that built it. That judging cannot surface anything the logic would not already surface. The judge and the judged share one frame.

A painter brings a different frame. A painter has a body. A painter has years of looking, and years of making surfaces by hand, and knows in the hand what a made surface feels like and what an unmade one feels like. A painter can look at the machine output and see, on the surface, what no metric will report, that there is no hand in it, no body, no margin of spreading that came from the world. The painter sees this because the painter has spent years making the thing that has all of that.

So the painter, right now, is a rare kind of expert on what the machine image is and is not. Not journalistic, not theoretical. It comes from the hand.

I am writing this to give the painter reading it permission to take their own knowing seriously as research. We have been told for two generations that to write about painting we must defer to the historians, learn the language of theory, that our own first person account of the studio is just anecdote, not serious. This is wrong. The painter's first person account of the studio is one of the only real sources on what is happening on the surface, and it is exactly the knowing these systems need most.

There is research that measures exactly this, how hard these models converge on one narrow look, with prompts and correlations and large simulations to show the convergence is not chance. The numbers are real and they are useful. They get reviewed, they get cited.

What they will not do is put a body in front of the question.

That is what *Expressions Under Suffer* does. A viewer stands in front of the covered faces, the ones that refuse and the ones that consent, and the negotiation happens in the body, not on paper. They leave the room with a different relationship to the question than they walked in with. It is a different knowing. It changes how they look at every machine image they meet for the rest of their life.

The audit cannot put the body in the room. The painting cannot give a p-value. Together they make a fuller account of what happens when we ask a machine to make us a face than either could alone.

That is the argument. It is small. I think it holds.



## The Icon, the Glyph, the Irreducible

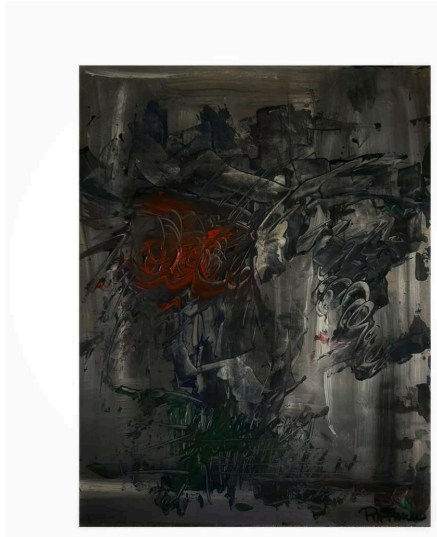
**I**n the winter of 1945 into 1946 Picasso made eleven prints of a bull, all pulled from one stone. The first is a real bull, weight, muscle, shadow under the belly, the head at its angle. The second is a little simpler. By the middle ones the muscle is going. By the end the bull is almost only outline, and the last one is a single run of contour, just the marks that still make your mind say bull. The horns. The hump. The line of the spine. The tail.

The series is famous and it is taught everywhere, and the reason is not that it is pretty. The reason is that Picasso showed, across eleven steps, what reduction in painting actually is. Reduction is not taking away. Reduction is finding the marks that carry the weight.

The bull is a bull because the spine curves a certain way and the horns sit at a certain angle and the mass hangs over the legs a certain way. Those are the load bearing facts. He found them and threw the rest out.

The same can be done with a face. I have been doing it to the central face I keep painting in *Expressions Under Suffer*. Small ones, on cream paper, two colours at a time, red and black, then brown and black. Each one strips the face down to the fewest marks that still read

as a face, to find which marks carry the weight and which are only decoration.



*Reduction study. The central face stripped toward its load bearing marks.*

The brow carries weight. One horizontal mark high in the picture, and a vertical coming down under it, is already enough to read as a face. The icons knew this. The mask traditions of West Africa and old Mesoamerica knew this. The brow and the centre line are the floor.

What you add above the floor is the whole inquiry. Eyes scratched as holes change what the face is doing. A mouth changes what it is saying. A cloth changes what it is hiding. A drip changes what it is costing.

So this little series is a method for me. I am finding my own load bearing marks. I am learning which moves in the big paintings the face cannot live without, and which were only ornament. It is teaching me my own vocabulary.

This is good for any painter to do, and it is very good to do now. The painter who knows their load bearing marks can carry them across many paintings without losing the thread. The painter who does not know them will make work that changes on the surface but never settles into a body.

It is not the same as having a style. Style is on the surface and can be copied. The load bearing marks are underneath, and they have to be found, by the painter, over time, by working the inquiry until the necessary marks separate themselves from the decorative ones.

And here is where it meets the machine. The machine, for any prompt, gives you an image full of marks, all of them looking load bearing because they are all there. Nobody asked the machine which marks are essential. It was asked for a complete image and it made one. Full of detail, plausible, convincing on the first look.

The painter who has done the reduction looks at that and sees something else. An image that was never reduced. Many marks, none of them load bearing, because the model was never made to decide which ones matter. Ornament without structure.

That is a thing the painter can use. I can make a surface that is hard reduced, only the marks that carry weight, and by that reduction alone it reads as the work of someone who decided, which the machine output does not. The reduction is the signature. It is the proof that a body that knew what mattered was here.

And the decision is older than the photograph and older than the algorithm. The decision is what painting has always been. Every time, the painter had to choose where the pigment goes, which marks to commit, which to drop, which ones carry the weight. The painter always had this job. Now the job is just more visible. Now it is the difference between a painting and an image.



## Algorithmic Refusal

I want to put a name on what is happening in the art world right now, because once a thing has a name you can take part in it on purpose instead of by accident.

Here is the thing. After about four years of these image machines going from a research toy to a product to something that is just everywhere, the art world has started, more and more organized, to refuse them.

The refusal is on record. In late 2024 more than eleven thousand creative people signed an open letter against training these systems on human work without a licence. Painters signed, sculptors, photographers. A separate letter in Britain pulled hundreds more. Thousands signed to ask Christie's to call off an AI art auction. Surveys in 2026 say something like eighty five percent of artists keep away from AI completely, and around eighty eight percent will not use it to generate images at any stage.

The refusal is in the institutions. Paris Photo said its 2026 edition would take a no-AI policy and keep out work with detectable generation in it. Arles took the same line. Smaller galleries in the United States and Britain have written it into their collection policies, AI generated work not eligible.

The refusal is in the money. Auction houses and sales rooms are reporting a price premium for work that is verified human made, real and measured, in some categories more than twenty percent over comparable AI assisted work. The market is paying cash for the absence of the machine. That is not sentiment, that is price finding a thing it has decided is scarce.

I want to call this algorithmic refusal. The name only describes it. It does not say the machine is evil. It says the art world has looked at the arrangement the machine offers and decided it will not take part in it, and it has reasons.



*Synthesis Under Suffer.*

The arrangement the machine offers is this. You type a description into a box. The system hands you an image. No body was in any room. No body negotiated with any material. The image is, in the engineers' own words, a sample from a distribution, and the distribution was learned

from a huge pile of training data that, mostly, included the work of the very painters who are now refusing it. So the system gives back, statistically, the conventions of that pile.

The arrangement is unacceptable to the art world on at least three grounds. One, the training data was taken without a licence, and the painters in it were never paid. Two, the output then competes directly with the labour of those same painters. Three, the thing I have been calling the body, an image with no body is a different object than an image with one, and the art world has decided it cares about the difference.

This refusal is not new in shape. The same thing happened when photography arrived, and it hardened over forty years into the foundations of modern art. It happened with mechanical reproduction and the Arts and Crafts movement. It happened with print and television and Pop Art. Each new machine produces a refusal, and each refusal sets, over years, into what we later call an era.

The era we are in now is the era of algorithmic refusal. The critics have not named it yet. They will, within ten years. I am naming it here because the name matters. The painters who take part in this moment under a clear position will be more legible to history than the ones who took part by accident.

What does it look like, as a practice. It looks, first, like work that is materially specific, where the choice of material is visible and could not have come out of a box. Second, like work made openly from a position, where the painter will tell you what conditions it was made under, the cost, the time, the room. Third, like work that knows the machine exists and knows what kind of surface it can and cannot make, and goes to live in the place the machine cannot reach. Fourth, like work that joins the other refusers, signs the letters, applies to the no-AI fairs, says out loud that this is happening.

One last thing about the word refusal, because it carries weight. To refuse a technology is not to be a Luddite. The real Luddites were textile workers with a specific grievance against specific machines under specific bosses. The casual use of the word, anybody who dislikes new technology, is unfair to them and useless to us. Refusal is not hatred of progress. Refusal is a position. It says, I have looked at what this offers, and I will not take part in this arrangement, and here is why. The painter who refuses the machine is not against the machine. The painter is simply going to make a different kind of object, with the one material the machine does not have, which is a body, and is going to be specific about the difference.

The machine cannot do that. It is doing other things, some of them useful. I am not interested in whether it is useful. I am interested in what painting is, in a world that has the machine in it. The answer the scene is arriving at, more and more, is that painting is the making of surfaces the machine cannot make.

Small claim. I think it is the only one that holds.



## VIII.

# A Note to the Younger Painter

**T**his chapter is straight talk. If you are reading this and you are at the start of a painting life, or thinking of starting one, or already deep in one and not sure how to go on, I am writing to you.

You are working in a moment your teachers did not work in. Their moment did not have, as a fact of daily life, a system that makes you any image, in any style, in seconds, for free. Yours does. It is not going away. It is going to get deeper.

There are about three ways to answer it.

One, ignore it. Paint like it is not there. This is not stupid but I think it cannot hold. The machine is in the room whether you look at it or not. Your viewers know it is there, the market knows, the institutions know. To pretend it is not is to make work that does not know its own moment, and that work will date.

Two, use it. Prompt the system, generate, paint back into it, use it for studies or ideas. Some painters are doing this, and for an established painter with a strong vocabulary already, using it as one more tool, I think it can be defended. For a young painter it is more dangerous, because before you have your own vocabulary the machine will hand you its vocabulary, quietly, in ways that are hard to see and harder to undo.

Three, refuse. Work in material, on purpose. Make surfaces that are clearly from a body. Stand with the others doing the same. Be open about your position. This is the harder road. It is also, the way I read this moment, the one with the strongest place in the long run. The institutions are moving to it. The market is moving to it. The critics will follow.

If you are taken by the third road, here is what I would say. You will not agree with all of it and you should not.

Read, seriously, and keep reading. Painting is also a thinking practice. The painters whose work lasts were almost all readers. Read Berger. Read Sontag. Read Sylvester on Bacon. Read whoever helps you think. Read slow, twice if it earns it.

Make a great many paintings. The ratio of made to shown should be ten to one, more like twenty to one. The unshown ones are where you learn what your inquiry is. Do not rush to show. Showing too early fixes work that was not yet load bearing.

Find your load bearing marks. Do the reduction. Take your subject and strip it until it collapses, and look hard at what you removed in the step before it broke. Those are your marks. Commit to them.

Spend real time with materials. Test everything you can afford to test. The materials are not interchangeable. The choice of material is the argument.

Work from your actual position, not an idea of one. If you are an immigrant, the work will know it. If you grew up watching certain things in your family, the work will know it. If your standing has been contested, the work will know it. Do not borrow a position that is not yours, the work will not survive a viewer who has lived it.

Write a little every day about what happened in the studio. It does not have to be good, it has to exist. In three years you will have a

thousand small notes, and they will be the closest thing you have to a record of what you learned.

Find one person whose judgement you trust, who has no reason to flatter you, and show them your work once a year. Once a year is enough. That meeting is the best critical thing you can build.

And keep the body alive. The body making the paintings is the body that has to live in the world. Sleep, eat, move, drink water. The painters who are still working at seventy are the ones who looked after the body at twenty. The body is the instrument. Keep the instrument.

Do not be afraid to argue, later, with everything I have said here, including this. The argument I make is the one I can make now. The one you will be able to make in twenty years will be different. Make that one when you can. Make this one in the meantime.



## Epilogue

# The Studio Tonight

**I**t is late. I am back at the wall I wrote about in the prologue. The window is dark. The dust has settled.

The painting from the last three days is on the floor, half dry. One of the smaller ones, two by three feet, mixed media on paper. The face in it came forward more than I meant it to, the eyes scratched in, the brow heavy, the mouth one horizontal mark under a vertical drop. It belongs to the reduction series but it has more face in it than the others. The face wanted to come.

I have learned, in these years, not to argue with what the painting wants. The painter who argues with the painting usually loses, because the painter is one body and the painting is many decisions, and the decisions together often know more than I do in any single moment.

It will dry tonight and tomorrow. In the morning, when the light comes back, I will know more about it.

I will end on what this book is for. It is for the painter reading it who is trying to decide whether to keep painting in a moment when painting looks like it might be going obsolete. I have argued it is not going obsolete, but that it has to know what it is doing, and has to be able to defend, on the surface, the worth of having been made by a body. That worth is not nothing. And this moment, when the art

world is arguing again about the body and the image, is an opening for any painter willing to take part in it on purpose.

You do not have to be a genius to take part. You have to be specific. Know your materials. Know your position. Know what the machine can do and what it cannot. Make work that does what the machine cannot, with as much conviction as you have. That is enough. It is, in fact, all that has ever been asked of painters in a moment of change.

I am one of those painters. So are you, if you are reading this and you are still in the studio.



*The studio tonight.*

It is late. The wall is darker than when I started writing. The painting is drying. Tomorrow I will be back at the wall. So, I hope, will you.

# Notes and Acknowledgments

**T**his book was written in 2026. It draws on, and is in conversation with, a small number of texts I want to name. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin, 1972). Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in *Illuminations* (Schocken, 1969). Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977). Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (Hill and Wang, 1981). David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon* (Thames and Hudson, 1975, expanded editions). T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death* (Yale, 2006). Lucy Lippard, *Six Years* (University of California Press, 1973). Christopher Frayling, *Research in Art and Design* (Royal College of Art Research Papers 1.1, 1993). Henk Borgdorff, *The Conflict of the Faculties* (Leiden University Press, 2012). Graeme Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research* (Sage, 2010, second edition). Kate Crawford, *Atlas of AI* (Yale, 2021). Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression* (NYU Press, 2018). Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology* (Polity, 2019). Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Sternberg, 2012) and *Duty Free Art* (Verso, 2017). James Bridle, *Ways of Being* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022). Yuk Hui, *Art and Cosmotronics* (e-flux and University of Minnesota Press, 2021). Adrian Stokes, *The Image in Form* (Penguin, 1972).

Some of the painters discussed and named in this book have, across years, taught me what painting can do. They include Francis Bacon, Marlene Dumas, Cinga Samson, Amoako Boafo, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Adrian Ghenie, Cy Twombly, Brice Marden, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Pierre Soulages. The book also owes a debt to painters working in Bangladesh and the broader South Asian diaspora whose work has shaped my understanding of what figurative painting can do in postcolonial conditions, including Zarina Hashmi, Nasreen Mohamedi, Rafiqun Nabi, Jamini Roy, Abanindranath Tagore, Zainul Abedin, SM Sultan, and Tayeba Begum Lipi.

The painting series *Expressions Under Suffer* was made between late 2025 and June 2026. The body of work was made possible by the patience of friends and colleagues in Toledo, Dhaka, and elsewhere whose names I have not used in this book at their preference. They know who they are. Thank you.

This book is, finally, a draft. I expect to revise it. I expect to disagree, in the years to come, with arguments I have made in it. I expect the reader will also disagree with some of them. This is, I think, what books are for. They are arguments offered into a conversation that is older than the writer and that will outlast the writer. The writer's job is to make the argument as well as they can at the moment, and to let the conversation do the rest.

Prithwee Toledo, 2026

Plates

## The Work

**T**hese are some of the works the book was written next to. Mixed media on paper, made in Toledo, 2026.



*Plate I*



*Plate II*



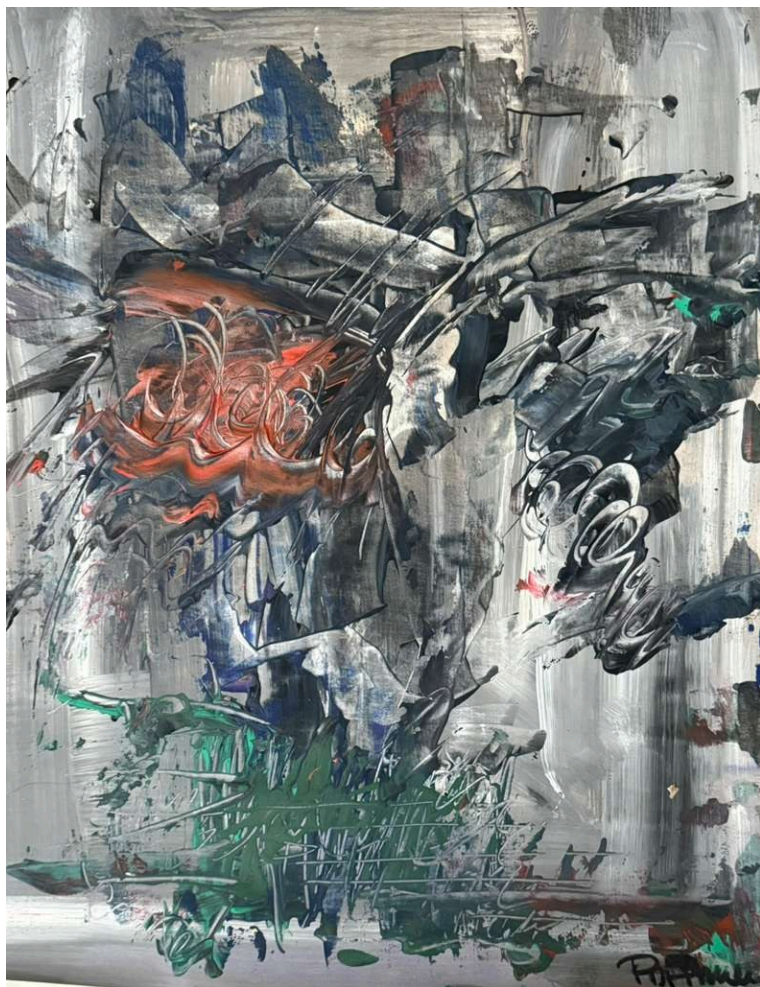
*Plate III*



*Plate IV*



*Plate V*



*Plate VI*



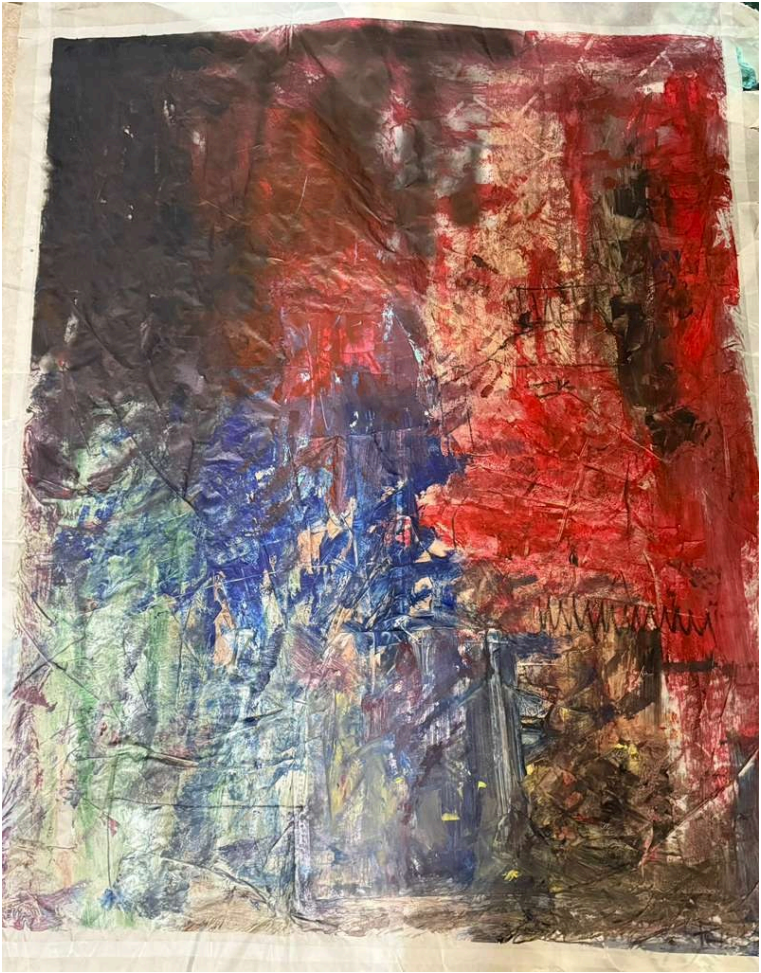
*Plate VII*



*Plate VIII*



*Plate IX*



*Plate X*



*Plate XI*