Reassessing Medium-Specificity and Dehumanization: The Creative Process of Indonesian Painters in the Age of Generative AI

PPMI FSRD 2026 – TOP DOWN

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Abstract

While a growing body of empirical and philosophical literature documents tendencies toward dehumanization in AI-mediated artistic production, relatively few studies have reconsidered these tendencies through the lens of medium specificity within the modernist commitment, most rigorously formulated by Clement Greenberg, that each art form sustains its dignity by working from within conditions intrinsic to its own medium. This conceptual article offers a Greenbergian reassessment of the shift from manual to algorithmic production in contemporary painting, framed through the creative practices of Indonesian painters whose processes range from fully conventional handwork to entirely AI-assisted image generation.

Keyword: generative AI; painting; medium-specificity; dehumanization; creative process; Indonesian painters; cultural resilience

Introduction

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) presents a different kind of challenge. A consistent finding in recent empirical and philosophical scholarship is that generative AI tends to produce dehumanizing effects in artistic practice. These effects cannot be reduced to fears of technological replacement; they concern the structural reorganization of the creative process itself. Issak (2021) shows that the more closely an AI system performs like a human, the more the human collaborator is repositioned as an operator rather than an originator. Yalcin et al. (2020) and Machado et al. (2021) argue that AI systems can simulate but cannot experience the affective and embodied conditions from which artistic expression emerges. Wang et al. (2024) and Dwivedi et al. (2023) document a philosophical shift from "meaning" to "output," namely, a migration of value from the lived act of creation toward the visual result generated from a prompt. The cumulative claim is that AI mediated image creation, when adopted without reflective constraints, hollows out the substance of the painting process and weakens the authorial signature historically carried by it.

Research Method

We synthesize recent scholarship on AI art with Greenbergian formalism and Harold Rosenberg's counter position of action painting to develop a four-dimensional analytical framework—origination, embodied encounter, material experimentation, and authorial presence—through which the ainting process can be examined as a site where human dignity and medium-specific value are either sustained or eroded. A qualitative research design, based on a literature review and multi-case artist interviews, is also proposed. The article contributes (i) a renewed reading of medium-specificity for post-AI conditions, (ii) a process-oriented analytical instrument for distinguishing humanizing from dehumanizing modes of AI engagement, and (iii) a non-Western inflection from Indonesia that broadens a debate thus far dominated by Euro-American voices.

Discussion & Result

Greenbergian modernism addressed a different question—how painting could remain meaningful amid the challenge posed by photography and design—but the structure of its answer can be applied to that question. The medium of painting is not exhausted by the painted surface; it includes the temporally extended human process through which paint inhabits that surface.

Preserving medium_x0002_specificity under post-AI conditions means preserving these process conditions: the temporal depth of creative motivation, embodied encounter with the motif, material friction, and the indexical bond between stroke and body (Norouzi & Prinz, 2026). Each can be preserved without nostalgia because each performs work that algorithmic generation.

If the analysis above is correct, the painting process is not only an aesthetic matter but also an ethical one. It is a site where human dignity, in the specific form of authorial agency, is realized through artistic creation. The dehumanization literature is correct to identify the cost of emptying this process, even when the resulting image is visually impressive. The Greenbergian framework adds analytical traction by formulating the features of the process that must be preserved for painting to remain a practice of human meaning rather than a mode of image production indistinguishable in kind from advertising or algorithmic content. Two corollaries follow. First, the question is not whether artists should use AI, but how and at which phases they should integrate it. When used in ways that protect the four dimensions of the painting process, AI can expand the medium without violating it. When used in ways that displace those dimensions, AI moves beyond the medium of painting altogether and enters another field with its own legitimate norms.

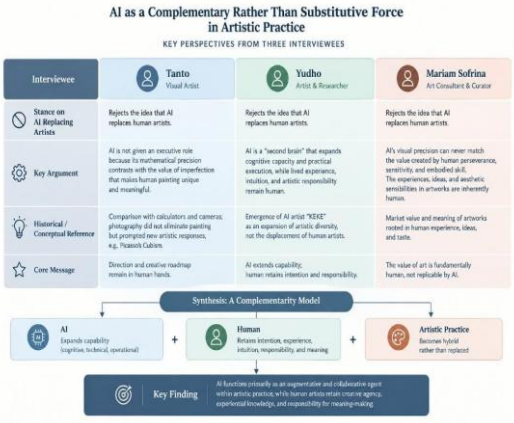


Figure 1: painting Mariam Sofrina at Venice Biennale 2026

Mariam Sofrina uses Photoshop to edit photographs produced through direct photographic shoots, rather than as a primary tool. In her view, the value of the work remains grounded in perseverance, sensitivity to feeling, and hand skills that cannot be replicated by robotic precision.

Tanto (R.E. Hartanto) is a figurative realist painter. AI replaces part of the Photoshop stage (adjustments to costume, color, and lighting) and accelerates visualization, but it is never given the role of making compositional decisions because AI results are considered "too correct, mathematically perfect"; it is precisely the imperfection of the human hand that makes the work "charming."Figure 6. 03.06 PM, 2013 by Mariam Sofrina

Yudho (an installation/LED-based practitioner; the document does not provide his full name) has used ChatGPT and Claude almost daily for research, brainstorming, and coding since 2023. He describes AI as a "second brain, third and fourth hand"; creativity is understood as emerging from an ongoing conversation among human, AI, and medium rather than residing entirely in the human mind.



Conclusion

Tendencies can be diagnosed more precisely when read through Greenberg's commitment to medium-specificity, adequately reconstructed for the present moment. Four dimensions of the painting process—origination, embodied encounter, material experimentation, and authorial presence—provide a vocabulary for asking, of any concrete artistic practice, whether AI integration expands or erodes the painting medium.

The empirical study framed by this conceptual article—a comparative analysis of approximately five Indonesian painters distributed across the manual-to-algorithmic spectrum—will refine the framework against actual cases. We expect the resulting account to be useful not only descriptively, in mapping current practices, but also normatively, in equipping artists, educators, and curators with an operational vocabulary for the choices demanded by this new situation. Painting has survived previous technological displacements by relocating its dignity in properties that no competing medium can fully appropriate. We suggest that it can survive this one using the same strategy, provided it is willing to articulate what those properties are and preserve them.