

Interview about PLANT and AI

Tell us about your project. How did you start, and how did you arrive at PLANT? PLANT began, strangely enough, with an ancient garden. Not a living garden, but the painted garden from the Villa of Livia, made more than two thousand years ago and now preserved in the National Roman Museum. What fascinated me was not simply its beauty. It was the peculiar form of time contained inside it.

Everything is simultaneously alive. Trees flower and bear fruit. Birds inhabit branches. Species that would never ordinarily reach their fullest expression at the same moment coexist within the same painted season. The fresco does not document a garden so much as invent one: an impossible ecology, assembled from observation, memory, desire, and perhaps power.

There is something almost digital about it. It constructs a world rather than merely representing one.

Standing before it, I began wondering about the plants themselves. Which species were being represented? Which landscapes had travelled, through trade or conquest or imagination, before arriving on those walls? Which plants still existed? Which might disappear?

I was born in Brazil, surrounded by one of the richest botanical territories on Earth, yet it was this Roman image of nature that made me understand extinction differently. The fresco had survived its garden. That reversal stayed with me. A representation can outlive the living thing it represents.

From there I became increasingly interested in endangered plants and in the histories contained within them: scientific histories, colonial histories, economic histories, medicinal histories, stories of migration and cultivation. Plants are extraordinarily dense cultural objects. A tree can be simultaneously organism, commodity, medicine, myth, habitat, archive.

At the same time, because of my background in engineering, I had been investigating artificial intelligence, datasets, generative systems and digital forms of preservation. Eventually these two lines of research collided. PLANT emerged from that collision.

I began building datasets around endangered species and working with AI models that I could push toward my own visual language. The resulting images are then reconstructed, painted, animated and transformed. I am not trying to produce botanical illustrations. I am trying to create something closer to speculative portraits. The plant is the starting point, not the destination.

And behind the project there is a question that I still find unsettling: what happens when an image becomes more durable than the organism from which it originated? We normally think of archives as preserving the past. PLANT is closer to an archive constructed in advance. An archive for things that are still alive.

What challenges did you face at the beginning? Beauty can be dangerous when working with extinction. An image of a plant can be seductive enough that the viewer forgets that the organism itself is disappearing. I became very conscious of this contradiction.

I did not want to illustrate catastrophe. Nor did I want the plants to become merely decorative emblems of environmental virtue. So the problem became architectural: how could I construct images in which beauty contains instability?

My compositions gradually became ecosystems of their own. Plants coexist with caves, rocks, fragments of architecture, landscapes, apertures, birds and strange geological forms. Some elements seem natural, others invented. Scale is unreliable. Space folds. Nothing quite belongs where it appears to belong.

This matters to me because an ecosystem is not a collection of independent objects. It is a structure of relationships. Remove one element and another changes. Remove enough and eventually the whole system becomes something else.

I try to create the compositions according to a similar principle. Their balance should feel precise but slightly precarious, as though a small alteration might cause the entire image to reorganize itself.

AI became important precisely because it introduces instability into the process. I work with pretrained models but intervene through my own datasets, references and successive decisions. I am interested in the moment when the system produces something I could not have invented but which nevertheless seems strangely connected to what I was looking for.

Then the slow work begins: selection, painting, erasure, reconstruction, animation. AI generates abundance very easily. Art still requires exclusion.

Perhaps that is one of the misunderstandings surrounding generative technology. The difficulty is no longer necessarily producing an image. The difficulty is deciding which image deserves to exist.

Your plants often seem removed from ordinary botanical space. Why? Because botanical reality is already stranger than most fiction. A seed can remain dormant for decades. A forest can communicate chemically below ground. Plants migrate across continents without moving in any human sense of the word. Species survive empires.

I do not feel the need to make them stranger. Instead, I remove certain conventions we normally use to make nature comprehensible.

There is no stable season in these works. Geographic boundaries disappear. Scale changes. Species may inhabit spaces they could never occupy together in nature. In that sense, there is still a distant echo of the Villa of Livia. Its garden is botanically persuasive but temporally impossible.

I am interested in that impossibility because extinction also disturbs our sense of time. We tend to imagine disappearance as an event: something exists, and then it does not. But extinction is usually much slower and more ambiguous.

A species becomes rare, then very rare. Its habitat contracts. The last populations become isolated. It may continue to exist biologically while already disappearing culturally, geographically, or ecologically. There is no single moment when absence begins. PLANT inhabits that interval.

Birds also appear repeatedly in the work. Birds enter almost inevitably. Historically they have carried an enormous symbolic burden: messengers, omens, souls, intermediaries between terrestrial and

celestial worlds. But ecologically they are also travellers. They transport seeds, pollen, memory, geography.

In my images they often appear monolithic, almost fossilized. I like that ambiguity. They might be witnesses, or survivors, or perhaps remnants from another chronology entirely. I prefer not to decide.

How do you choose which plants to work with? I begin with conservation status, but rarity alone is not enough. I look for a certain density of relationships around a species: its botanical history, its uses, the people who named it, the people who knew it before it received a scientific name, the territories it occupied, the industries that exploited it, the animals that depend upon it, the political structures that shaped its decline, and, inevitably, its visual character.

Some plants arrive carrying extraordinary histories. A tree might once have generated enormous wealth through timber, medicine, dye or perfume and now survive only in fragmented populations. Another might depend upon a single pollinator. Another may have become endangered because the landscape around it has been transformed beyond recognition.

Every species opens a door into a much larger system. I do not think of PLANT as a finite series. I think of it as a growing archive. The impossibility of completing it is part of the work.

What excites you most about the future of AI in art? Its capacity to make the familiar unstable. Photography did this. Cinema did it. The computer did it.

New technologies enter art carrying practical possibilities, but their deeper effect is philosophical. They disturb categories that previously seemed secure. AI immediately unsettles words such as image, original, author, copy, imagination, memory. That interests me far more than its ability to generate spectacular pictures.

Generative systems have absorbed enormous quantities of visual culture. When we interact with them, we are in some sense navigating compressed histories of images. Fragments of photographs, paintings, scientific illustrations, advertisements, diagrams and anonymous visual conventions have been transformed into mathematical relationships and made available for recombination.

It is an extraordinary and slightly disturbing cultural condition. We have built machines that can wander through the statistical sediment of our visual history. The question for artists is what to do there.

Do you consider AI a collaborator? Not quite. Collaboration implies intention. AI does not desire the work. It does not wake up thinking about an endangered tree. It does not care whether the tree survives. That distinction is fundamental.

But it can behave like an extraordinarily productive form of resistance. It misunderstands. It exaggerates. It produces visual accidents. It returns something adjacent to what I requested and sometimes more interesting than what I imagined. That friction is useful.

I would describe the relationship less as collaboration than as a negotiation between intention and probability. The machine proposes possibilities. I decide what matters.

What do you hope AI can do in the future? I am less interested in an AI that understands me perfectly than in one capable of revealing relationships I have not yet perceived.

Imagine systems able to move fluently among botanical databases, historical archives, satellite images, colonial records, ecological models, indigenous knowledge systems and contemporary conservation research. Not simply retrieving information, but exposing connections.

A plant depicted in an eighteenth-century herbarium might suddenly be connected to a shipping route, a pharmaceutical compound, a deforestation pattern, a forgotten Indigenous name, a nineteenth-century expedition and a contemporary conservation programme.

That kind of associative intelligence could be extraordinarily powerful for artists. We already live surrounded by archives larger than any individual can meaningfully comprehend. Perhaps AI's most interesting role will not be to make things for us. Perhaps it will help us notice what has been hiding between things.

What concerns you about the future of AI in art? Sameness. Not because machines are inherently repetitive, but because systems of distribution tend toward repetition.

The danger is not that AI will suddenly become an artist. The danger is that a small number of technological infrastructures may begin shaping an enormous portion of what the world sees.

Every image-generating system contains assumptions: aesthetic preferences, exclusions, datasets, classifications, filters. These structures are largely invisible to the person typing a prompt. That should concern us.

Culture depends upon difference, including difficult difference. Art needs eccentricity, misunderstanding, local knowledge, private obsession, historical memory, contradiction. It needs things that do not scale.

The more frictionless image production becomes, the more important those irregularities may become. I am therefore fascinated by AI but not interested in surrendering decisions to it. Technology should enlarge the territory of imagination, not quietly standardize it.

After working with endangered plants, has your understanding of technology changed? Yes. We often speak about technology and nature as though they belonged to opposite worlds. I no longer believe that opposition is particularly useful.

A botanical garden is a technology. A herbarium is a technology. Scientific nomenclature is a technology. Painting is a technology. An archive is a technology for negotiating with time. AI simply makes the technological dimension of representation unusually visible.

The more interesting question is what kind of relationship a technology establishes with the world. Does it extract? Does it simplify? Does it preserve? Does it reveal connections? Does it make something visible that would otherwise remain unnoticed? Those questions matter much more to me than whether something is analogue or digital.

So in the end, is PLANT about technology or about nature? Neither, exactly. It is about memory. More specifically, about the strange moment in which memory begins before disappearance has occurred.

We are living through an era in which humanity possesses extraordinary technologies for recording the world at precisely the same time that the living world itself is undergoing extraordinary loss. That coincidence seems important.

We can sequence a genome, photograph every leaf of a plant, map its habitat from satellites, reconstruct its appearance digitally, store its image indefinitely across servers, and still fail to keep the organism alive.

There is something almost tragic in that asymmetry. The archive becomes perfect. The world becomes poorer. PLANT exists somewhere inside that contradiction.