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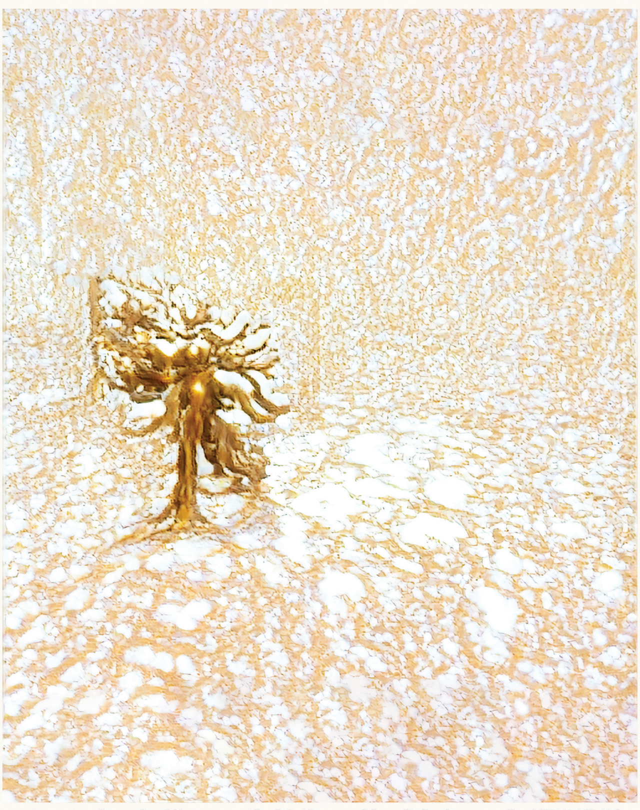
machine rêverie

Human-machine interaction artist aurèce vettier discusses the latent space of dreams and the intersection of human consciousness and AI art with Elisabeth Sweet, using his project le travail des rêves as a starting point.

About the Author

Elisabeth Sweet
Elisabeth Sweet is a poet exploring patterns of randomness. Her poetry has been exhibited in New York City, Paris, Tallinn and Amsterdam.



aurèce vettier, *a large-scale gold bronze tree with subtle AI-generated forms displayed in an art gallery* (AV-2024-U-485), 2024. Courtesy of the artist

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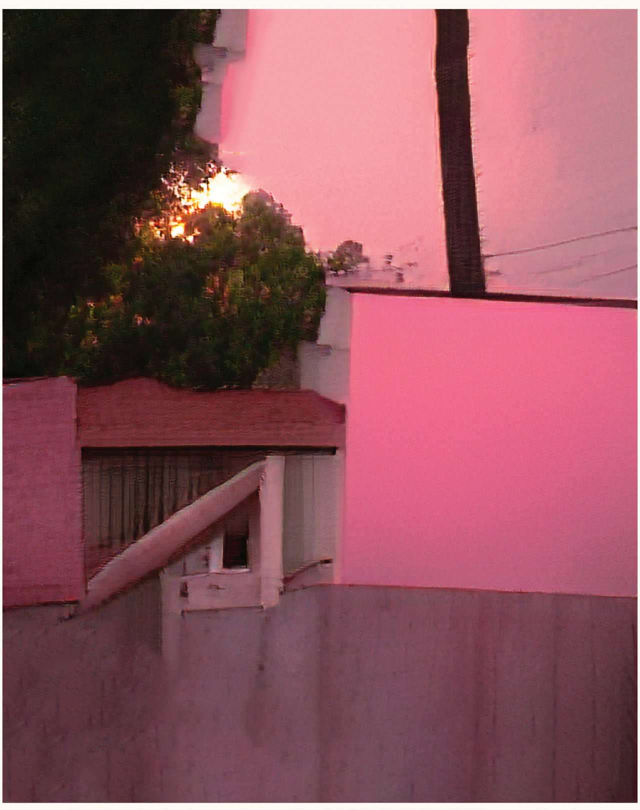
Dreams enrich patterns of reality. The mind derives meaning from nightly recursions, weaving past with present and sometimes foreshadowing the future. In 1959, before she ever touched a computer, Vera Molnár developed la Machine Imaginaire, a thought system governed by randomness that she used to generate drawings by hand and machine throughout her career. Seventy years later, aurèce vettier has assembled and trained a sophisticated algorithm that proposes interpretations of his dreams. Exchanging representational exactness for low-resolution symbolism, he invites the audience to interlace their own meaning into le travail des rêves*, exhibiting at Bright Moments Paris, 2024.*

Elisabeth Sweet: In your previous work, *Potential Herbariums*, you trained a GAN (Generative Adversarial Network) with images of old herbaria to create "the impossible forms of plants dreamed up by artificial intelligences." Tell us about what you used to train the AI model for *le travail des rêves.*

aurèce vettier: My approach combines intimate, carefully curated data with powerful algorithms, projected into the real world using artisanal processes and skills such as painting, bronze sculpture and tapestry. These highly personal data and models enable me to develop a stable aesthetic that I use to tell all kinds of stories.

Since 2018, an important component of my work uses GANs to propose an imaginary nature of near-impossible shapes. In late 2021, I began working with CLIP+GAN models, which allow me to generate images from text. These CLIP+GANs are trained on photos from my childhood to the present. I have a very extensive film archive thanks to my father and my past as a photographer. I use these models to visually represent my dreams and the emotions they bring me, thus achieving a form of introspection. *Circular Ruins* (2022) was the first exhibition of this practice. For *le travail des rêves,* exhibiting in Bright Moments Paris (2024), I re-trained the model with more recent photos, notably taken with my smartphone.

With *Potential Herbariums, Circular Ruins* and now *le travail des rêves,* I am creating a visual ecosystem, full of astonishing nature, fantastic animals and rare atmospheric phenomena.



aurèce vettier, *a Los Angeles sunset dreamt up from Paris (AV-2024-U-484),* 2024. Courtesy of the artist

Elisabeth Sweet: What surprised you while developing this series?

aurèce vettier: When I create a prompt based on my dreams, the machine must return an image, a proposal. For some dreams, the prompt only consists of one word. With others, the dream was almost impossible to describe because it was not visual, but composed solely of pure emotion. If I'm not satisfied with the machine's proposal, I ask for another one. When I feel that the proposed image represents my dream, I make a subjective and intuitive call to stop asking and move on.

The surprise comes when this subjective intuition is affirmed in the physical world days or months later, by chance of conversation, eye contact, or some kind of epiphany. I am surprised by the accuracy with which this model represents the impalpable, the intimate. Above all, it shows a filigree of thought that has always been there, in the data set, in my childhood photos up to the present day. *le travail des rêves* confirms the validity of this process as a method of introspection. This series captures some of my roughest years as well as absolutely intense, wonderful adventures and encounters. You will find shooting stars, flocks of yellow butterflies sent to me by loved ones from the afterlife, the crossing of vast forests and objects that are emblematic for me, such as the sacred icon in the basilica on the island of Tinos.

> When I look at this body of work, it's the precise story I wanted to tell at this very moment.

When the series was finished, I experienced a blissful moment in which I understood that I had nothing to add or remove. As these works leave my studio, the point is no longer to talk about me, but to let others appropriate these visuals, by interpolating and interweaving the present and missing information with fragments of their own lives.

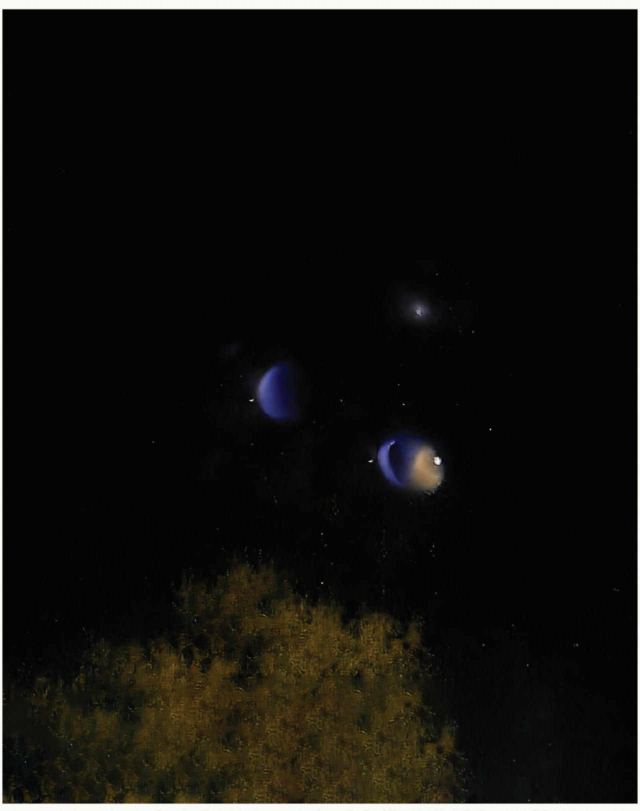
Elisabeth Sweet: There's a triad at work here, formed by your conscious mind, your subconscious and your AI models. Each is naturally mysterious, yet this body of work suggests that their harmony can demystify. Vera Molnár said, "The machine, thought to be cold and inhuman, can help to realize what is most subjective, unattainable, and profound in a human being." To what degree do you think AI helps us better understand ourselves, linking conscious and subconscious, mind and machine?

aurèce vettier: When I ascend a mountain, I start from the earth and try to reach the sky. Along the way, I reflect, sweat, evacuate some ideas and transform others. I listen to the sound of the water and the animals that were there before and will be there after. When I reach the summit, I feel a sense of pride and calm and the mountain was a kind of catalyst.

I use AI as a catalyst too, or more precisely, as a percolator. AI models have absorbed immense amounts of data and it is possible to produce any kind of image, video, or sound in high fidelity. However, just because you have a box with many colored pencils, doesn't mean you have to use all those colors in your work. I'm especially enthusiastic about AI's capacity to digest intimate data and explore latent spaces, rather than the all-out generation of visuals.

> I use AI to increase the quality of introspection and to reveal what is within but not yet visible, densifying time and the stories I tell through my work.

My solo shows in France and Greece showed fragments of this narrative: plants, shapes and landscapes glimpsed in dreams and poems linking them all together. With *le travail des rêves*, I'm starting to connect these fragments and tell a longer story, which began with the crossing of a colossal forest.



aurèce vettier, *a multitude of moons appearing in the night sky (AV-2024-U-416).* Courtesy of the artist

Elisabeth Sweet: You use low resolution as a method of abstraction and connection. Tell us more about this choice and how you think resolution plays a role in generative AI, during a time when AI-generated images are both criticized and lauded for being "too perfect."

aurèce vettier: With *le travail des rêves*, I am constructing pareidolia [seeing meaningful images in random patterns] rather than exact representation. The computing power I summon remains low and the algorithms I use are intentionally old. An upscaling algorithm improves resolution but doesn't add any detail to the images. With low resolution, it's impossible to know precisely what these images represent, yet our brains and experiences allow familiar shapes to emerge, in the manner of interpolation.

Recently, I met an extraordinary person who transformed my relationship with time. She invited me to read *Simulacres et Simulation* by Jean Baudrillard, in which Baudrillard describes four successive phases of the image: One, it is the reflection of a profound reality; two, it masks and distorts this reality; three, it masks the absence of a profound reality; and four, it has no relation to reality, becoming its own simulacrum.

> These AI-generated dreamscapes combine the four phases, perhaps going beyond pareidolia because interpolation is required both from the emitter and observer.

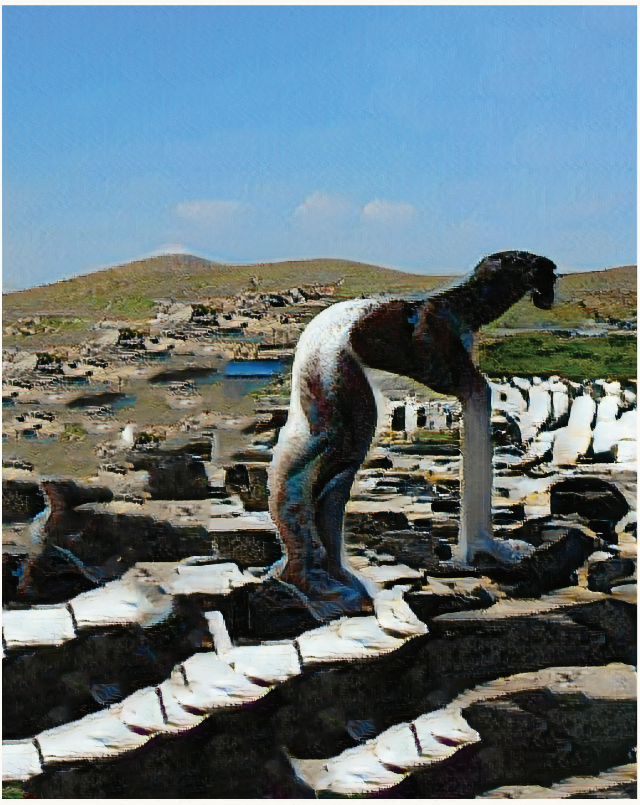
Consider *a family gathered in a field watching a massive shooting star and its trail of dust above them* (AV-2024-U-387): I dreamt this based on a real-life experience after I had just lost a member of my family. She was there and she was gone at the same time.

Now, try to count the family members gathered in the field. It's impossible; however, we see a family emerging from this soup of pixels—this is a pareidolia. The image is a reflection of something I've experienced, yet it inevitably distorts reality. In the end, it may be its own simulacrum.

Elisabeth Sweet: There is often a sense of familiarity in dreams. We enter places we have never been yet we know and feel immediately comfortable. You collaborated with Vera Molnár in 2023 but you did not meet at her studio. With *a working session in the atelier of Vera Molnár* (AV-2024-U-447), did you feel as if you had been there before?

aurèce vettier: Absolutely, I think the compelling part about this piece is that some of the works have been reconstructed just on the basis of the prompt and the works could be by Vera, couldn't they? Maybe her work already exists in the Internet's imagination and the AI model captures it. The female figure sits in a welcoming and friendly posture; the mood is serene. This is what I felt when I visited her during our collaboration in 2023, entitled *AD.VM.AV.IA*, curated by Vincent Baby.

I can say this about all the pieces in the series. Among all the images offered by the machine, I chose only those which intuitively corresponded to what I had seen. I left out a lot of the more spectacular images because they didn't have that "familiarity" effect.



aurèce vettier, *a view of the sacred island of Delos (AV-2024-U-439)*, 2024. Courtesy of the artist

Elisabeth Sweet: You and I share a love—perhaps an obsession with—René Duamal's *Mont Analogue / Mount Analogue*. There's a line in the book that I often contemplate: *"La porte de l'invisible doit être visible" / "The door to the invisible must be visible."* I see a direct relation to part of the description for *le travail des rêves*: "in the tides of pixels appears a light we couldn't see before." What has this tide of pixels revealed to you about your own work, about your path, that you did not see before?

aurèce vettier: I have a very strong work discipline. Every day, it's a pleasure for me to think, read, discover; it gives me a lot of energy. I spend time setting up AI models, gathering data and carefully labeling them. When I get to the creation phase, I no longer think. This is the time to let go, to be in pure intuition, because I've placed myself in an aesthetic and intellectual context where I'm confident and can give way to pure emotion.

With *le travail des rêves*, I've passed a new milestone, where I enter this intuitive zone and the images help me discover interesting facets of existence. I have been able to move forward in phases of grief and simultaneously live in the present, appreciating this difficult yet very rich path and the little everyday adventures life offers. In my work and in my personal life, I seek to see the light we don't see, indeed a very Daumalian concept whose passion we share. It's probably a way of life.

Elisabeth Sweet: Aspects of public discourse position AI as an entity driving us blindly into the future. Some say that we live in a post-human era, implying the death of the human as it was known. Your work suggests that AI is a tool that can help us detangle grief by looking at the past and embracing the present amidst great loss. In a way, this helps us remain or become *more* human. Considering *le travail des rêves*, how does AI deepen our connection with the human experience?

aurèce vettier: It's fashionable nowadays to talk about posthumanism and absolute scientific positivism. However, this enthusiasm must not conceal a collapse of thinking. AI will enable huge advances in medicine, therefore profoundly changing our relationship with death. Yet, these tools can also recognize faces and predict complex human behavior. How can we avoid abuses of control and restriction of freedoms? How can we compensate for the immense energy required to train and put these tools into production?

I'm very much in line with Vera Molnár's thinking: far from seeking to make spectacular, perfect visuals, I use the machine to make proposals, giving myself the right to make modifications, to rearrange, to bring disorder. I am not interested in reinventing what already exists, but rather by using tools that explore the latent space of dreams, memory and nature. Because that's what we are: human, whose beauty comes from imperfection and whose amazement can occur at any moment, in the twinkle of pareidolia.

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aurèce vettier embodies a collaborative, open and hybrid approach through an algorithm-generated alias. This identity, like all of aurèce vettier's work, bridges the 'real' and 'data' spaces. In the tangible world, it allows creation—drawing, painting, sculpting—while in the virtual realm, using artificial intelligence, it explores multidimensional forms. Since 2019, the machine-generated elements serve as raw material, expanding conceptual possibilities rather than being finished works.

Elisabeth Sweet is a poet exploring patterns of randomness. Her poetry has been exhibited in New York City, Paris and Tallinn. She is part of the core team at theVERSEverse and supports exhibition production at Feral File. Through writing and live interviews, Elisabeth cultivates conversations with artists and curators around process, values and meaning.

Suggested Reading
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Linda Dounia on Memory Machines
Peter Bauman • February 19, 2024
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Interview
Editor's Picks
Lauren Lee McCarthy on Software Values
Peter Bauman • February 13, 2024
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