Can AI Generated Art Transcend Kitsch?

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Abstract

Generative AI is still a fairly new art form looking to create the real and the unreal all in a completely believable setting. Generative AI has the power to create thrilling and realistic special effects, to make the mundane intriguing and the magical believable. However, no matter how artists strive, it never quite looks 100% real. There is always something missing that causes a cognitive dissonance. I wish to explore that sense, the moment where suspension of disbelief becomes slightly fractured. This paper examines the notion of kitsch and flaws in 3D CGI artworks and generative AI images. I will explore the core concepts behind modeling in 3D, the issues that arise from perfectly trying to capture expression and the nature of flaws in CGI and then further to how generative AI has impacted this environment. I will explore the Uncanny Valley and ways that artists have worked to subvert its effects. I will also examine the practice of Photoshopping photographs to make them look more artificial to contrast my statements. I believe that the more that a generated figure looks perfectly human the less kitsch it seems but that there is a moment, between perfect photorealistic renderings and cartoonish ideas, where flawless figures transcend the Uncanny Valley, but are they still kitsch? Are they still camp? I will support my position with examples taken from the world of 3D CG art, generated images from my own research and discourses on Kitsch and on camp and ugliness. I will contrast this with Baudrillard's Simulacra and Simulation (Baudrillard 1994) where I posit that the final two stages are represented by CGI and Generative AI.

Keywords: Generative AI, artificial intelligence, kitsch, CGI, 3D

INTRODUCTION

GLOSSARY:

CGI – Computer Generated Images/Imagery
CG – Computer Generated
Render – the output of 3D modeling software. A render takes the data from the model, the textures and the lights and puts it together into a two dimensional image.
Render engine – the software that creates the render.

Raytracing – a method of calculating lights, shadows, reflections and bounce lights using physics to simulate the behavior of surfaces as they would behave in the real world.
Generative AI – AI systems that work with interconnected transformers to create images and text with clarity.

Kitsch is a touch of a perfect world brought here into this one. Plastic, un-breaking, eternal kitsch, the fantastical and the banal united in perfect Technicolor. Kitsch is too perfect to be true; it is the fantasy world that lives in our heads, dreams and nightmares alike, made flesh for all to see.

CG 3D and generative AI art are in some ways an ideal artistic representation of kitsch. Everything about both of them is just slightly wrong, not enough, too much. It is fake. In the most literal sense of the word everything about generative art is fake. All of the factors could be as realistic as possible, but will still ultimately be something created on a machine using polygons and JPEGs. It is the height of artificiality. Artificial humanity, however, can give rise to the Uncanny Valley effect (Mori 1970), to reactions from audiences of revulsion rather than empathy. Adding flaws and purposely building and constructing errors in the perfection can subvert this effect. Knowledge of the perfect as well as the imperfect is required to create a convincing image. Generative AI often overfits to perfection, and in its quest for the ideal, all images end up looking bland, featureless, overly refined. As these systems have evolved, even the regular mistakes that would add a funny kitschy charm to an image have been ironed out in an attempt at homogeneity.

No matter how hard the artist works, a Generated image will never look exactly like a photograph. There are always subtle differences and flaws in a real model that can never quite be duplicated in a Computer Generated image, no matter how photorealistic. It has been theorized that the illusion of reality lies in the render engine's inability to emulate the random aberrations on a camera lens (Kolb, Mitchell & Hanrahan 1995). Others consider the recipe for realism lies in asymmetry or in flaws (Laja Uggah & Manaf 2015). I would like to explore whether we should be trying to achieve greater realism at all, is the illusion of reality the power of a CGI artwork or does the power lie in the kitschy and uncanny artificiality? Somewhere in between the fakery of kitsch and the discomfort of the Uncanny Valley, however, I posit that there lies a sweet spot. Some perfect combination of plastic artificiality, idealized beauty, the darkness of the valley implied but not overtly felt. A sense of imperfection adding to the plasticity to create a camp surreality that transcends kitsch.

There is a reason that the default render material in 3D is plastic. As in the real world, plastic is easy, cheap and inoffensive. It is also the most convincing material to model in a CG environment. Plastic is innocuous and varied, bright, crass and hard. It is kitsch. The trick begins when the artist must start working with different materials, different colors, creating more complex forms. CG art is often less about the base mesh structure and more about the textures and the displacement that is applied to that mesh to make it more life-like. It is more about the materiality than the structure.

Imagine, if you will, a wire mesh sculpture of a person. You can see that it is a person but it doesn't read as a person. The materials are the surface applied to that mesh to change it, bit by bit, into a human figure. It is still wire inside, nothing is real, but the final touches are what we find convincing. CGI is essentially a parade float- all chicken wire and surface embellishment that belie the emptiness underneath.

CG artworks are created by building a mesh. This mesh can be rigged with internal bones to make it move or left static. It is covered with a surface texture such as a photographic skin, called the diffuse layer. This may be so lifelike that you can see pores and tiny hairs, depending on the skill of the photographer and the person constructing the texture. The perfect texture is nothing without some depth, tiny pores and subtle wrinkles are all part of the displacement texture that is added. This changes the mesh in subtle ways to lend it tiny details that aid in the realism of the model. Other textures that might be added include a sub-surface scattering texture to give the skin a sense of translucency, or a specular layer to give the skin sheen in specific regions.

The model is lit and sent to a render engine where the computer calculates all of the variables such as texture, displacement, sub surface scattering, light angle and where shadows will fall. The best render engines employ Raytracing to create physics based simulation of the lights, the varied reflective natures of different surfaces and calculate how that will affect the light just as it would in the real world. Images are rendered through a camera and many photographic techniques such as depth of field, exposure, ambient and reflected light are used.

The method of modeling the mesh depends on the artist at work; usually it is just a surface construction where the skin, muscles and fat are treated as one layer. Weta Workshop's Digital Tissue System (Failes 2019) goes further, exploring one of the key failings of CGI based expression and movement. Most movement and expression is made by warping the top mesh; skin, muscles, fat, all at once. But this isn't how organic bodies work. The muscles move and rotate the bones, which change the distribution and placement of fats and skin. So an expression that we see on the surface is a complicated structure of musculature, subcutaneous fats and skin stretched and slackened over a moving surface. It isn't the surface that moves so much as everything underneath it causing it to deform and change. Weta's DTS simulates the underlying structure as well as the surface, creating a greater sense of realism in movement. This technology is bypassing the Uncanny Valley effect by creating more convincing movement – one of the key factors theorized in the unsettling feeling in the Uncanny Valley.

One of the key problems facing CG artists is the Uncanny Valley effect. The Uncanny Valley is a theory by Masahiro Mori (1970) that predicts human reaction to robots (and later to CG humans) will sharply decline the closer it gets to perfect reality while still remaining imperfect. That our empathy will rise with the robots up until the point where they become too human at which time we will experience a sharp decline.

> *However, when we realize the hand, which at first site looked real, is in fact artificial, we experience an eerie sensation. …When this happens, we lose our sense of affinity, and the hand becomes uncanny (Mori 1970)*

The Uncanny Valley model has been revisited over the years as robotics and CGI have become better and more convincing. The prevalence of CGI in movies has allowed us to deeply explore the nature of reality and fantasy and create simulations where we cannot create reality. However, the movies where simulated humans have been close, but not quite there, have performed very poorly at the box office. There is a backlash where effects are looking so good that we are having difficulty suspending our disbelief. A theory put forward in The Weta Effect:

> *Special effects look too polished now. Technology allows the creation of such unrealistic characters, creatures and locations in such a realistic way, that it's become harder to suspend out disbelief to accept them as they are (Anderton 2015).*

Could artists make use of the unsettling nature of the Uncanny Valley effect? Is this dissonance something that should be explored as a subject on its own? I suspect that if we learn further about this sense that people experience and why, we can take the elements and distil them, taking what we want, to create an unnerving but not revolting effect. It has been suggested that better movement is crucial to disrupting the Uncanny Valley effect. Is it possible that to create something mildly unsettling we need to have the potential for movement? CG artworks that are sculpted as static creations appear to have less sense of the Uncanny Valley than those that are rigged for movement. Is the potential for movement needed to dance around the edges of the Uncanny Valley?

Aesthetic problems facing 3D digital artists include whether to use human skin textures with cartoonish figures, the question of too much realism or not enough and the ever-present Uncanny Valley. One of the key areas of concern is expression. Expression in CGI is traditionally deadened or horrific (EmmaAndJordi 2015). It is reminiscent of blow-up dolls and toys, not anything remotely real. The fakeness, the sheer doll-like nature of the expressions is irretrievably kitsch. Some artists try to offset this effect by exaggerating expression or using asymmetry to create a more reassuring mien, this creates something more unsettling rather than less, such as the "DreamWorks Face" Fig 1.2 (Shota 2015). One major reason these expressions look so strange is because of the surface deformation of the mesh as opposed to the underlying structure. If you compare Gollum Fig 1.3 (Robertson 2013) to the DreamWorks Face you will notice the smooth plasticity of the DreamWorks figures in contrast to the complexity of Gollum. Using Weta's DTS Gollum's expression acknowledges the underlying structure of his face. I would postulate that the DreamWorks face is kitsch; it is something created by rote and repeated until it is a parody of itself. Is Gollum kitsch? Is he a parody? The sure knowledge that he is an artificial construct lends him an air of kitsch, however the imperfect nature of his face, twisted and deformed, gives him pathos and a depth that is completely lacking in the DreamWorks face. It is a depth that is lacking, no matter how well constructed, in similar sculpted 3D meshes below. It could be considered that although

we know Gollum is an artificial construct, we get a greater sense of emotional depth. Gollum, in this case, transcends the inherent kitsch nature of the medium and becomes something more, something irretrievably artificial, yet endearing. CGI positions itself in the realm of Baudrillard's third order, an openly artificial construct based on reality. The realistic referents are in the skin textures, in the motion capture, in the people who lovingly craft the models.

Once we start adding generative AI to the mix, again we get that lack of understanding of the details beyond the superficial, indeed, generative AI leans on the superficial in every way. It is entirely kitsch. The superficiality goes beyond the surface, to the theft of copyright works that help make the backbone of the datasets these systems rely on (Samuelson 2023). Rather than skin and tissue and skeletons, these images are generated with random noise on a flat plane and pulling from their vast resources of millions of image data, create an aggregate from their latent space. I think it is important to note that at this point these systems have never seen an actual image. It is a fanciful idea to show an image to an AI and have it create something new, inspired by what it sees, but this is an anthropomorphic fantasy.

Every image in a training dataset is reduced to numbers. Brightness and color stored only as data points in an array (Goodfellow, Bengio & Courville 2016). Models like autoencoders then compress these arrays even further into latent variables, abstract coordinates in a featureless space (Kingma & Welling 2022). Diffusion models go even further, adding and removing noise in that latent space before decoding the result back into pixels (Rombach et al. 2022). What we call an "image" is, in this system, a statistical abstraction with texture and detail stripped away, replaced by patterns of probability. The sterility of the generative AI dataset and the resulting image outputs, place them firmly within Baudrillard's fourth order. Pure simulacrum, an image without a stable referent.

Figure. 1.1


Figure. 1.2

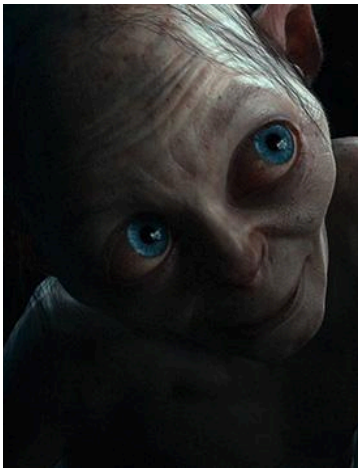
Figure. 1.3

There is a term in computer interface design referred to as WYSIWYG – What You See is What You Get. This term resonates very well with the DreamWorks face and with many elements of CGI. What you see is what you get; there is no duality or duplicity, no depth to

the final product. The depth may be in the figure's story but is it in the graphic on its own? Or are we looking at a parade float? That lack of depth is the soul, or lack thereof, of kitsch. A sense that we are seeing plastic toys devoid of expression of their own, nothing but what we bring ourselves. The expressions pack "chillaxin'" (Fig 1.1) is constructed in a similar way to the DreamWorks face. It is ridiculous, kitsch dialed up to eleven. It can only be camp. It is completely devoid of soul but seems to embrace it. While the DreamWorks face appears to be made in seriousness, this expressions pack is similarly awkward but in a self-aware way. In my attempts to duplicate Gollum Fig 2.1 and the "DreamWorks Face" Fig 2.2 Midjourney (Holz 2022) reinforced the points I am making. The Gollum face is more detailed, but is somehow empty, devoid of meaning; similarly with the DreamWorks face, we have Shrek as an empty shell. The smirk is there, but the connection to the simulation of the CGI is lost. The cycle of kitsch is complete.

Figure. 2.1 "Gollum" Midjourney V7

Figure. 2.2 "The DreamWorks smirk" Midjourney V7

Kitsch is often used with regards to plastic figurines, ceramic ducks and paintings by Maxfield Parrish. In more recent years it has become used with a sense of irony, an appreciation on its own. CGI is less recent than generative AI however perhaps the answer to both lies in a 1939 essay by Greenberg:

> *Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times (Greenberg 1939)*

While CGI is mechanical and faked, it is still crafted, it is puppeted by humans and sculpted and textured, it has bones, and a bodily sense. This quote discusses generative AI very effectively. As I discuss in my paper on generative AI and fascism, this quote directly parallels generative AI (Rosenbaum 2025). Generative AI images also give rise to the uncanny valley, they also give rise to that sense of kitsch, but without the defense of camp.

It has been postulated that camp is the perfect defense against kitsch (Dansky 2013), is kitsch the perfect defense against the uncanny? Is it the joke in a tense situation that relieves the pressure?

Camp takes the kitsch elements of artificiality, so present in CGI, and pushes them over the edge- it celebrates them. “Camp taste transcends the nausea of the replica” (Sontag 1964) in this case, replica could refer not just to kitsch ideas of replication, but also to the unsettling replica of a human that is at the core of the Uncanny Valley hypothesis. Employing camp aesthetics may be one way to subvert the Uncanny Valley effect while maintaining flawless perfection.

Stifled Smile by Alexander Lashko (Lashko 2015) Fig 3.1 an example of carefully crafted expression in CGI. This is an artist working to create a specific emotion. The model was sculpted that way and not intended for animation or filming but as a technical example of expression in CGI. You can still see that this work is CG. The slight texture stretching, the eyelashes, the too white eye are tips that not everything is quite human. Is this work camp or kitsch or neither? Does it lie within the Uncanny Valley or outside it? Consider *The Artist Himself* by Piotr Fox Wysocki (Wysocki 2015) Fig 3.2 as another example of photorealistic portraiture in CG. Another work sculpted specifically for this piece without rigging; the artist is kind enough to show some of his working models to give some clues as to the process. This work is almost photographic. But does it have a kitsch charm? Does it need it? It is an example of the high level of reality that technology can attain, but it is a floating head. Does the fact that it is a floating head make it kitsch? The fact that it was created purely as a sculpture with no rigging or moving parts changes their dynamic and alters the feel so that it is definitely less kitsch. Does that then mean that the kitsch feel to CG works lies in the ability for the model to move? In the way the model is rigged and our understanding that it can?

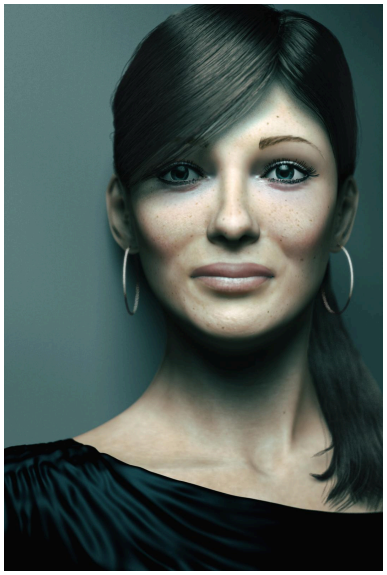

Figure. 3.1

Figure. 3.2

As a technical piece it is almost indistinguishable from a photograph. It is dramatically lit and effective. The evenness of the underlying layers of the skin however gives the skin a slight plasticity that gives it an eerie quality. I believe there is something in the fact that these works are sculpted with their expressions intact, they are not rigged to move but are static creations from the start. These works in their sculpted state read as exercises in expression and realism rather than an attempt to make art. “The "reflected" effect has already been included in the picture, ready for the spectator's unreflective enjoyment” (Greenberg 1939). *Stifled Smile* seems a little kitschier in its depiction of a person with plastic smooth skin and a lack of wrinkles or flaws. The eyelashes are over exaggerated, and the eyebrows manicured beyond perfection. *The Artist Himself* could be read as camp; in its self-portraiture nature it is like the ultimate selfie where the artist has lovingly crafted his own likeness in three dimensions. It is a nod to the classical self-portraits of renaissance artists, but with a New Media flair.

The works David Moratilla has created in his Close Up Portraits (2011) Fig 4.1 are a perfect example of specifically adding flaws to create more realism. Moratilla has added moles, surface imperfections, pitting, and tiny hairs to the model’s face. Contrast this with Robert Pralier’s Old Samurai Fig 4.2 (2009) where the sculpting is incredibly detailed, the face is pitted and imperfect and yet, somehow, seems cartoonish. Old Samurai maintains depth despite the plasticity of his skin, a perfectly imperfect work that no one would mistake for a photograph. Neither of these works are uncanny; they do not feel completely kitsch in the traditional sense of the word even though Moratilla’s work is a study in perfection and microscopic flaws and Old Samurai has a plastic sheen to his skin and artificial looking fabric. These works show an understanding not only of the Uncanny Valley but also of the need for flaws in a work. Ironically, Moratilla’s work, if used as a cover for a magazine, would see those carefully built in tiny imperfections removed and airbrushed out in the name of perfection.

Figure. 4.1

Figure. 4.2

There is a dichotomy in the way that Computer artists try for greater and greater realism by adding flaws while Photoshop experts working with magazines seek to remove perceptible flaws from real humans to turn them into something unreal and unattainable. Is the aesthetic goal of mass media to turn people into something akin to CG models? With their Idealized proportions, perfect symmetry and never aging appearance, computer-generated models should be the ideal of the fashion industry. However, most people seem to find CG models more unsettling and less believable than the Photoshopped figures on the covers of magazines.

Photoshop artists systemically remove blemishes such as tiny moles and freckles. They whiten teeth and eyes, airbrush small imperfections and wrinkles away until the skin tone in even, flawless and inhuman.

> *"With an increasing amount of photo retouching, postproduction in film, plastic surgery, and increasingly effective makeup & skin care products, we're being bombarded with a growing amount of imagery featuring people who don't appear naturally human. People who appear often in media… are creeping down into the Uncanny Valley to meet up with characters from The Polar Express." (Kottke 2008)*

Models in photographs and on the catwalk are encouraged to remove expression from their faces, to artfully sculpt senses of disinterest or slack-jawed disingenuousness. In this way Moratilla's work accurately depicts model expression. If we take his close-up Portrait (Fig 5.1) and run it through professional retouching software (Fig 5.2), we get an interesting result:

Figure. 5.1

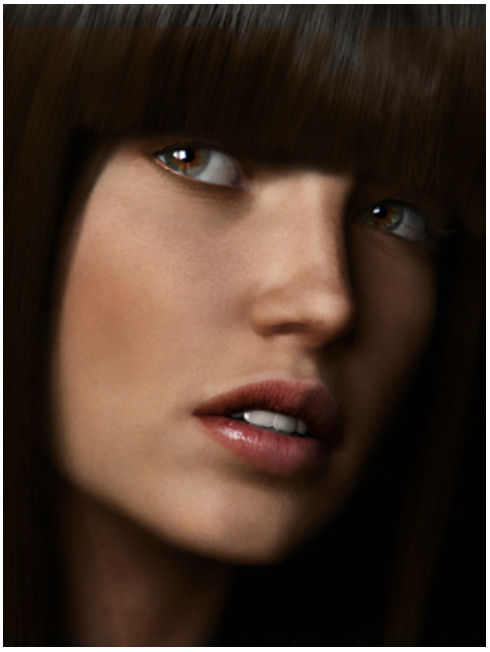

Figure. 5.2

The retouching software has taken the embedded flaws, the blemishes and painstaking details and removed them. The skin has been smoothed to porcelain flawlessness, the tone has been evened, eyes and teeth whitened. I did not change any of the structure of the model's face. The resulting image is fascinating. It looks more fake, obviously, but less, somehow, artificial. It may be the oversaturation of retouched images we see every day that makes this more acceptable, but the retouched CG render is almost more convincing. It is an acceptable form of fakery. Suddenly this piece has been returned unfailingly to the kitsch, to the perfectly plasticized image. It must follow that the way past kitsch for CG artists is in the flaws. In the third image, I used the original Moratilla image in Midjourney as a "vogue cover model" and received a completely kitsch regeneration of the original image, minus any perceived flaws and any perceived soul. If I were to move further into the fourth order, a DreamWorks CGI version of the original image would be the furthest extension away from a lovingly hand-crafted CGI portrait to an entirely simulated kitsch monstrosity[1].

Figure. 6.1 "[image] as a vogue cover model" Midjourney V7

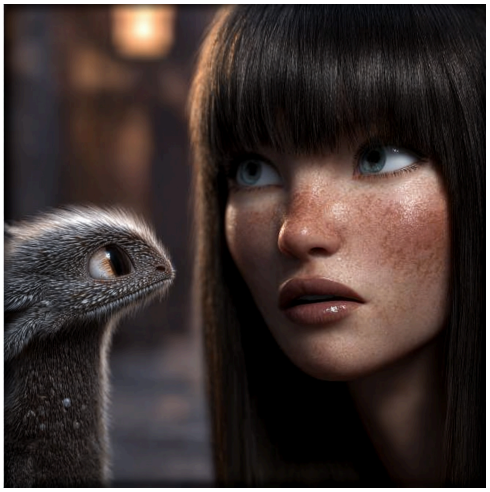

Figure. 6.2 "[image] dreamworks" Midjourney v7

It appears to me that while images that are flawless and symmetrically implausible are considered creepy if they are created using a computer. Real people that are digitally altered to be as flawless as possible are more accepted in the mainstream. Digitally altered faces and bodies are constantly exposed to us in advertising and magazines. Imperfections are considered laughingstock and something to be ashamed of, but the perfect plasticity of a CG form is less acceptable. It appears that we are arriving at the same conclusion from two different directions. If generative AI is Kitsch, the taking of something and homogenizing it and packaging it for mass consumption, then CGI must be camp, the imitation of that perfection.

[1] With apologies to Moratilla for this horrific perversion of their work

> "Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization" (Sontag 1964)

A CG model will never age; will never change unless explicitly made to. It is eternal, perfect and undying. It represents our fear of mortality as well as our love of perfection and beauty. Generative AI figures are a counterpoint to this erasing soul and expression, a celebration of homogeneity. Is their flawless nature what makes them feel so kitsch? Kitsch and camp reflect a love of preserving color, sparkle and beauty in plastic forever.

3D CGI is necessarily beautiful. Everything is symmetrical, proportional, idealized - but idealized in the most perfect aspect that a person can be as seen by a computer.
Ugliness starts to seep in through human error or design. Through intention to create a more realistic person, imperfections are designed in. Flaws add character, nuance, and duality. They add depth and a story to the sprite. In short, they turn perfection into something more human.

The perfect beauty of a computer render cannot help but be kitsch. It flows naturally that as a flawless and artificial construction it is necessarily kitsch. A render engine renders all things equally, from the subject, to each blade of grass. Everything is granted equal significance as it cannot help but treat every pixel as the one next to it. Everything is, always, either a 1 or a 0, either on or off. Generative AI works much the same way, rendering all pixels equally, but rather than calculating the light paths, the material as it absorbs and reflects light, as the volumes intensify the atmosphere, generative AI can still only see and generate a flat plane of numbers in an array that are then resolved into an image. The uncanny valley has reemerged again in generative AI works as a system that cannot understand the underlying structure of a person is tasked with recreating images of people. The faces generated by generative AI are areas of uncanny valley (Kishnani 2025). It is easy to blame issues like too many fingers however, as these systems improve, I posit that it is the lack of grounding, the flattening, that fourth order of simulation that truly pulls us into the uncanny valley.

The question remains, if camp is a way to save CGI from kitsch, is there any way to save generative AI from being consigned to kitsch forever? Can we make generative AI camp or is it forever doomed to be a fascist aesthetic (Rosenbaum 2025)? My personal answer to this is to unite CGI and generative AI, to lean so far into the fascist aesthetic that it cycles around to camp. Just as Springtime for Hitler in the musical The Producers turned authoritarianism into camp, my work, *Slopocene Icons,* works with deliberately fascist-coded AI slop. I turn them into 3D models using generative AI, and then use 3D techniques to destroy or vary them, add bright colors and ridiculous aesthetics all to drive home the concept of generative AI as a fascist aesthetic.

The kitsch qualities of generated images cannot be denied, whether generative AI or CGI, they are purely artificial with an endearing plastic quality that ensures that it will always look slightly wrong, slightly overproduced, slightly fake. When those qualities are enhanced,

celebrated, when the medium with its flaws are understood, it can transcend the notion of the Uncanny Valley or celebrate it, but if the piece goes too far towards perfect reality with too many imperfections, too much reality, we may reject it as too real, too wrong. If the way into the Uncanny Valley lies in movement and the way into kitsch lies in flawlessness it follows that we can work within those areas to create something new. There appears to be a tiny perfect moment in this new Uncanny Valley, wholly CGI, with one foot in the valley and one foot in kitsch where we can explore the realm in-between, the perfect defense against the artless crassness of kitsch and the revulsion of the Uncanny Valley.

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