

Machines don't dream

Artificial intelligence reminds us what it is to be alive, to create and reflect

Enuma Okoro

16 June 2023



'Sundown (Number Nineteen)' (2019) by Xaviera Simmons © Courtesy the artist and David Castillo

When I'm at home in my apartment in New York, one of the last things I see at night and one of the first things I see in the morning is a quote attributed to Van Gogh. The small 30cm by 40cm frame hangs quietly on a wall in my bedroom and, in gold lettering set on a dark midnight blue

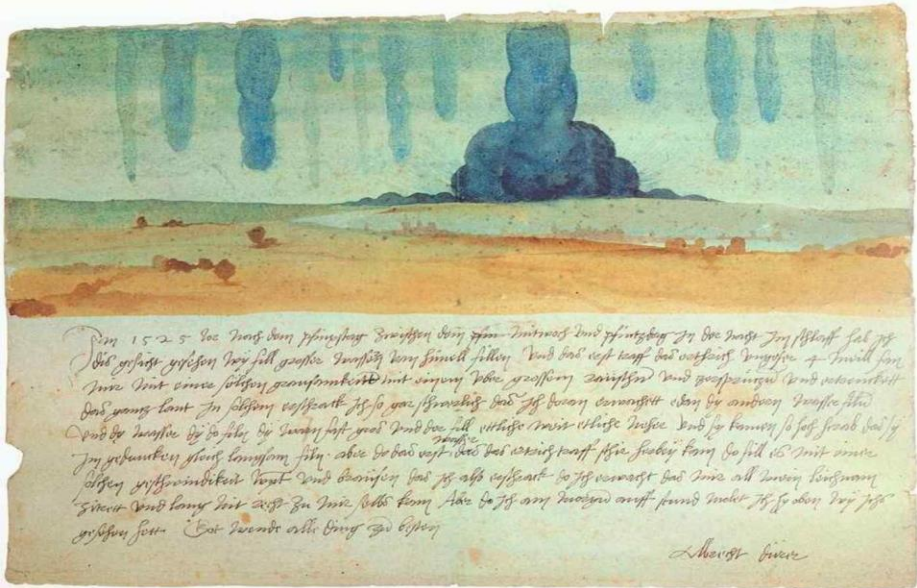
background filled with small gold stars, it reads: “For my part I know nothing with any certainty, but the sight of the stars makes me dream.”

I’ve read those words thousands of times, but for some reason the other morning I lay in bed staring at them and found myself thinking again about the development of artificial intelligence. As a writer, I’ve already had a few friends half-jokingly tease me that soon my services will be rendered extinct by apps such as ChatGPT. The reality is that the rapidly growing possibilities of AI should cause greater and wider concern for all of us.

Though I have my armchair opinions about AI — mostly not good — I can’t pretend to know much about that conversation from a technological or even scientific framework. But I do know what it is like to be human, to be alive in a wild, creative, reflective and unpredictable way. It is part of being embodied.

Among the many things AI is doing, there is one we may not be thinking of so much: that it is giving us the opportunity to remember some of the invaluable, unquantifiable and irreplaceable aspects of being alive. And maybe as we remember these things, we might find ourselves embracing our aliveness with more intention.

The German artist Albrecht Dürer painted “Dream Vision” in June 1525 after a fitful night’s sleep that included apocalyptic visions. The watercolour shows a modest landscape with small trees spotted around the terracotta-coloured earth. From the centre of the canvas, a large downpour of water descends from the blue sky, accompanied by smaller columns of falling water. Even with the cool colour palette it is a bleak scene. Beneath the image, Dürer describes the terrifying sounds of thundering water and loud winds in his vision, and how he woke trembling. He was so moved by this dream that he painted it as soon as he was able.



‘Dream Vision’ (1525) by Albrecht Dürer

This painting might seem an odd example of what is invaluable about being alive. Yet I was drawn to it because it is a creative work that resulted from someone who valued the ability we have to dream, and paid attention to his dreams. At the time, Dürer would have been surrounded by the political and societal tensions caused by the Reformation and the German peasants' revolt earlier that year. Who knows if his apocalyptic dream stemmed from fears he had about the state of the world he inhabited. Or what this dream changed about his life.

Dreaming is something machines cannot do; being alive and able to dream, we have this mysterious well of subconscious information that can be tapped to access and learn from parts of ourselves that aren't readily available in our waking hours. When I am in a season of regular journaling I often try to write down my dreams on waking, especially if they were stranger than usual or if I awoke, as Dürer did, with a lingering physical sensation. There have been times when there is such a consistency to the things I dream about that I realise how my subconscious is helping me better understand and work through a deep worry or emotional problem.

The New York-based American interdisciplinary artist Xaviera Simmons makes art through photography, text paintings, installations, sculpture, performance and video. Her work explores how personal and collective identities are formed, notions of empire, how the past affects the present, and the history of people of Africa and African diasporas. The 2019 work "Sundown (Number Nineteen)" is part of a series juxtaposing historical photographs with the artist's present-day created images, considering experiences of black people across time. "Sundown" refers to a time in 20th-century history when many American towns had rules that black people had to get out of the town by sundown or suffer the consequences.

In this work, Simmons stands against floral patterned wallpaper. She is dressed in a bright swimming ensemble, a billowing skirt over what looks like a black diving suit. A blue swimcap on her head, she holds in one hand an enlarged black and white photograph of black children swimming in segregated waters. Her other hand holds a picture box or binoculars of some sort up to her eyes. She is peering through it at something we can't see.

One of the many reasons I treasure looking at old photographs is because it reminds me that being alive now is its own unique and invaluable experience. I am moved by the ability to consider how people lived in notably different ways than I do, often within aspects of society and culture I find hard to imagine. For example, being a black woman, it is always incredibly challenging to see 19th and early 20th-century photos of Africans taken by Europeans during a time when the world was even more deeply tinged by the colonial encounter. Or to see images of segregated life in western countries from just 60-70 years ago.

Simmons' image of a woman peering into both the present and perhaps the future, while bearing this image of the past up to the viewer, is to me a reminder of our human capacity to engage with memory, and the accountability, culpability and responsibility that can come with that engagement.

On whichever side of history we find ourselves, we all have some role to play in working towards creating a more life-giving and just world for everyone. To be able to see and negotiate with the past provides the opportunity to consider how we live now and how we desire to live into an ever-coming future.

I also love this work of art because the photo of the children playing in the water speaks to the human potential for joy in being alive, even in the midst of living in unjust conditions, and the resilience we can summon to stay living and seeking to thrive, hard as it may sometimes be.

To be alive is also to recognise oneself as connected to a history of others, and to understand that how we live now will affect those who have yet to come, who will look back and consider how the legacy of our aliveness prepared for their own, in both beautiful and terrible ways.

The British-Ghanaian painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye is known for the way she seems to give storied lives to the imaginary subjects of her paintings. So much of her work reminds me of the beautiful complexity of what it means to be alive, both as an individual and as part of a community.

Her 2012 painting “Interstellar” struck me with its arresting vibrancy and almost tangible energy. A man dressed in green dance pants and green shirt is caught in a dance pose. In the centre of the canvas he balances gracefully on the toes of his right foot. The other foot is stretched out sideways, his leg suspended in mid-air, and his arms outstretched. It is as if he’s lifting off for a move from a second-position ballet stance. The energy from this small movement pulsates through him and seems to silently but perceptibly reverberate outwards.

It is magnetic. The artist achieves this effect with what can only be described as pulsating brush strokes of colour that start off in a vibrant green close to his body, slowly diluting in intensity until warm olive shades begin to blend with the brown earth. The painting itself seems to have its own life-force energy.

There is so much I love about this work. Although the figure is alone, there is a sense of him charging with the environment around him. He is throbbingly alive, aware of the power and beauty of being embodied, but he is also connected to what surrounds him, the seen and the unseen. It highlights the reality that, whether we acknowledge it or not, by being alive we are all energetically in relationship with the people, places and things with which we make contact. But the quality of those relationships is determined by how we show up in our own lives and in the world.

The title, “Interstellar”, literally means between the stars. I can’t help but read this in a poetic sense: that to be alive is to exist in galaxy of constellations, within a solar system of existence that contains many worlds, of which we, humans, are just one. There is also the celestial world and the natural world, and we are in relationship with everything else that shares this space between the stars.

But being alive is to be conscious of this positioning among the stars, where we may not know anything with any certainty but we do know the gift of being embodied and able to be in kinship with ourselves, with others and with creation.