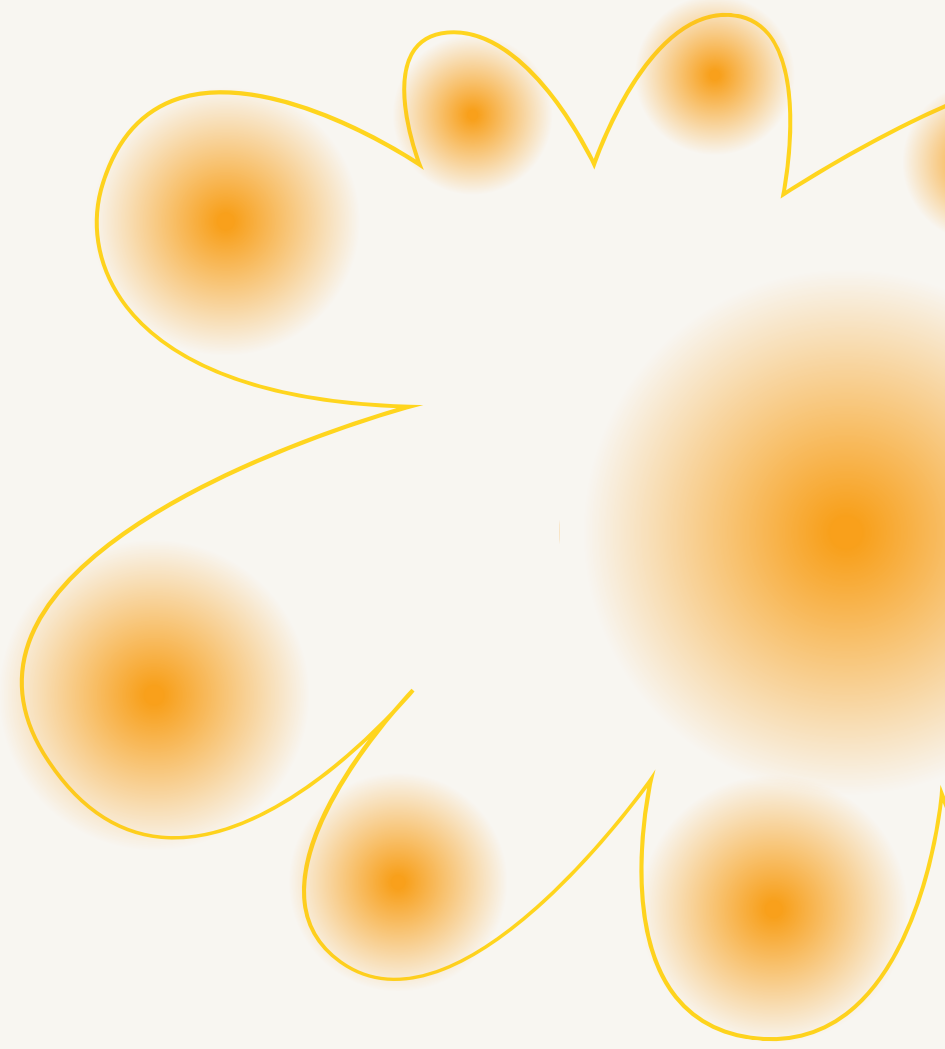Santa Clara
Markkula Center
for Applied Ethics

Before You Prompt

Conversations on Ethics, AI, & the Future of Creative Work

By Zara Shroff '25
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About The Author

I'm a senior communication major at Santa Clara University, and I've always wanted to work in the creative world. Fashion, media, art direction; these are the spaces I want to live and build in for the rest of my life.

But I've also been constantly told that those spaces don't matter anymore.

That AI is here to take over.
That if you're not a "techie," you're replaceable.

As someone who's committed to a creative path, I wanted to understand if those messages are true, and if they're even ethically okay to spread in the first place.

Will AI actually replace creative roles?

And if it does, should it?

Is it ethically sound to imagine a world where every artwork, film, and product design is created by a machine?

I took these questions to artists, animators, art directors, and designers —people working at the edge of their fields and thinking seriously about what AI means for creativity. This guide is a collection of their perspectives and mine, written not from the top down, but student to student.

I developed this project as a Hackworth Fellow under the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at the Journalism and Media Ethics program It's a creative and ethical inquiry into what it means to be a designer, or any kind of creator, in an AI-saturated world.

I hope it helps you ask better questions, feel less alone, and stand your ground as a creative in a time that keeps trying to automate imagination.
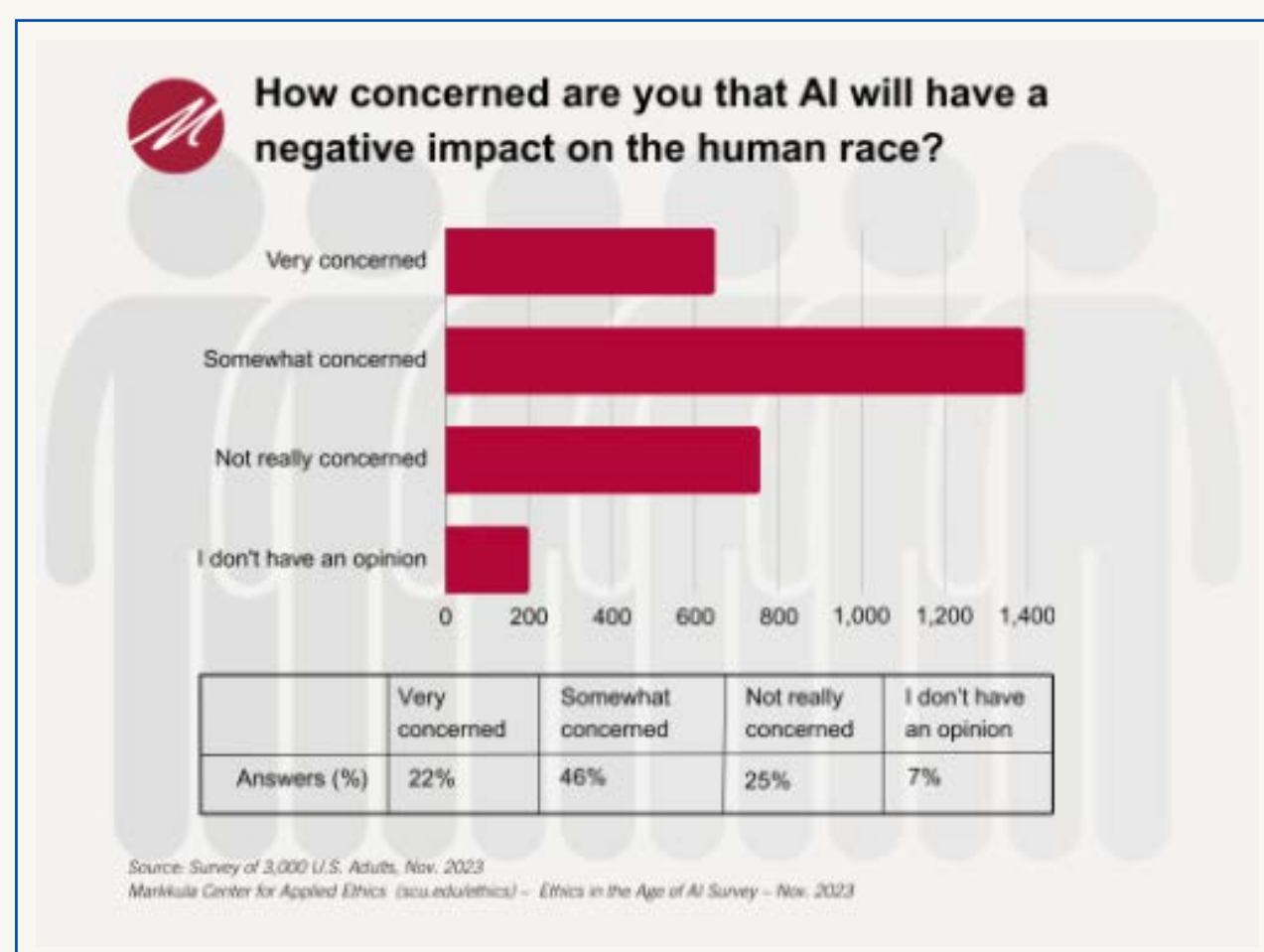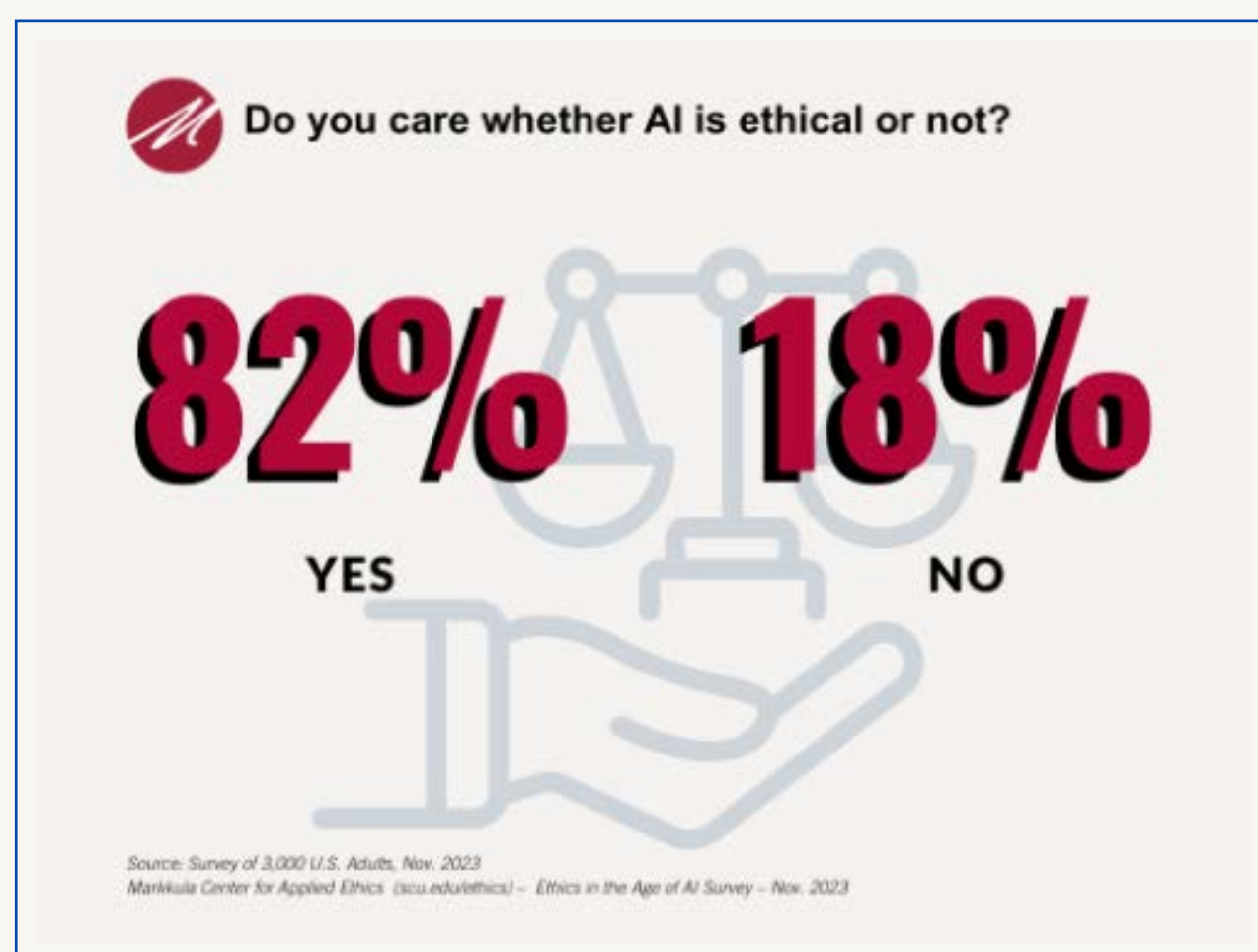— Zara Shroff
 Santa Clara University, Class of 2025

Why Ethics Matters in the Age of AI

AI is now generating ad campaigns, writing movie scripts, and designing logos faster than most of us can think. Tools like OpenAI's Sora and Adobe's Firefly are reshaping the entire creative process (Adobe). That doesn't make creativity obsolete. It makes it more important than ever.

Public concern reflects this urgency. A 2023 national survey commissioned by the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University **found that 82% of Americans care about whether AI is ethical**, while **68% are concerned that AI could negatively affect the human race** (Markkula Center for Applied Ethics). These findings reveal a growing consensus that unchecked innovation is no longer acceptable.

Do you care whether AI is ethical or not?

82% YES   **18%** NO

Source: Survey of 3,000 U.S. Adults, Nov. 2023
Markkula Center for Applied Ethics (scu.edu/ethics) – Ethics in the Age of AI Survey – Nov. 2023

How concerned are you that AI will have a negative impact on the human race?

	Very concerned	Somewhat concerned	Not really concerned	I don't have an opinion
Answers (%)	22%	46%	25%	7%

Source: Survey of 3,000 U.S. Adults, Nov. 2023
Markkula Center for Applied Ethics (scu.edu/ethics) – Ethics in the Age of AI Survey – Nov. 2023

Governments and institutions have started responding. In 2024, the European Union passed the AI Act, mandating transparency in AI-

generated content and requiring respect for copyright and cultural integrity (European Parliament). UNESCO also released updated global guidelines emphasizing that AI must support, rather than supplant, human creativity (UNESCO). These developments represent a shift: ethics is no longer an adjunct to AI innovation; it is increasingly becoming its foundation.

This shift raises another question: How are professionals navigating this change?

The Ethics in the Age of AI survey which gathered responses from 3,000 anonymous Americans via Pollfish, helped ground and contextualize my project (Markkula Center for Applied Ethics). While the MCAE study offered a quantitative, survey-based snapshot of public opinion, my research builds on that foundation by extending the conversation through qualitative, exploratory methods.

When ethical boundaries are clearly defined and implemented, AI has the potential to become a powerful tool for human expression.

As Salesforce found, people are far more likely to trust and benefit from generative AI when there's a "human in the loop". Someone guiding the process, catching blind spots, and making sure the output aligns with real-world needs (Prouty).
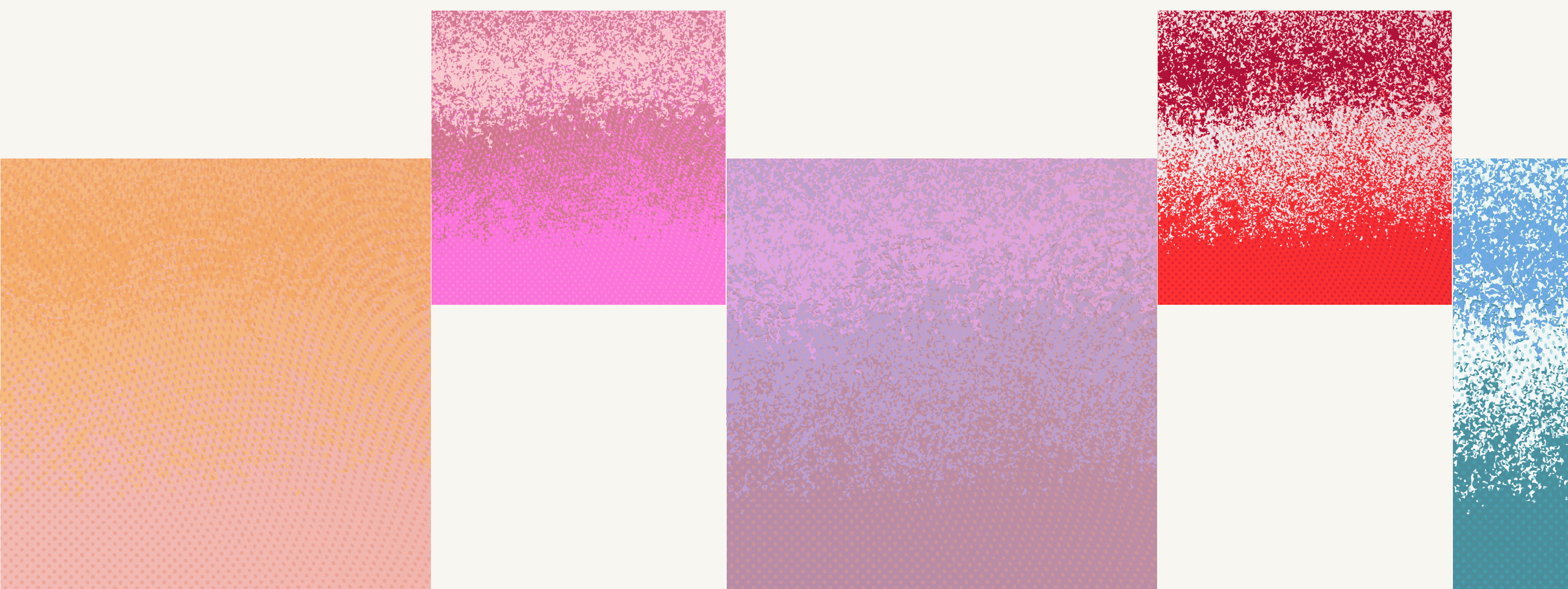
INTERVIEWS

Andrew Mayne

AUTHOR, ILLUSIONIST, FORMER OPENAI DEVELOPER

Key Takeaway: AI is a tool, not a threat — and the most creative people will be those who learn how to wield it.

AI AS A TOOL FOR CREATIVITY

Mayne urges us to stop anthropomorphizing AI. It's not a rival or replacement — it's a tool, like a camera or a paintbrush. Used right, it amplifies human imagination. Used poorly, it reflects our fears.

"Imagine trying to explain James Cameron's films to someone in 1838, when the first photograph was invented."

This quote underlines his view: Every great technological leap expands the *"opportunity space"* for creatives. AI is no different. It won't shrink jobs — it'll shift them.

AI ECONOMY = SURPLUS, NOT SCARCITY
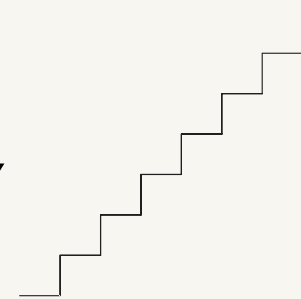
In Mayne's optimistic future, the AI-powered economy won't reduce value — it'll reveal more of it. Tools are becoming accessible to everyone, not just the elite:

"In the AI economy, there will be zero percent unemployment… Everybody has value."

It's a future where creators won't need a team of engineers — just curiosity and a willingness to learn the tools.

RESISTANCE IS A PATTERN

Creative resistance to new tech is nothing new. Mayne points to Toy Story as a case study. Many in the industry rejected it before release, but now it's foundational.

"Before Toy Story, people didn't take computer animation seriously. Look at what happened."

He also compares this resistance to older roles being phased out quietly, like color timers in Hollywood. If we call AI tools unethical because they disrupt the old, then: *"We shouldn't have film either. It took away what came before it."*

TIPS FOR STUDENTS

Mayne encourages young creatives to **embrace the tools**.
You don't have to be a techie — just someone willing to learn and play.

Get good at AI.

Understand how copyright works.

Ask questions about how these models are trained and who builds them — not just what they generate.
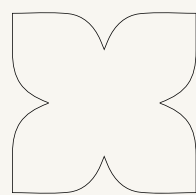
Michael Grant

DESIGNER & FOUNDER, GET CURRENT STUDIO

Key Takeaway: Every creative needs a North Star for what they will and won't do with AI.

AI AS TOOL, NOT THREAT

Grant sees AI as something to be worked with:

"It could be an ally—and it could totally replace some functions that were performed by humans.

At Get Current Studio, AI is used to save time on admin-heavy tasks like proposal writing and client research. On the creative side, it's a workaround for budget constraints.

"We've used AI in its image-generating features to do creative things that stay within budget for smaller publishers who may not have a budget to hire... a bespoke illustrator."

For students and emerging creatives, his message is clear: AI can help you move faster, but it can't replace your instincts or your vision.

RESPECTING THE CRAFT
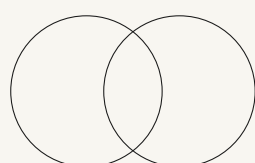
AI can generate clean visuals fast—but Grant believes there's still huge value in what only a human eye and hand can do.

"There's going to be a longing for authenticity... AI emulates."

He's not just talking about aesthetics. He's talking about work that *feels* real, something AI can't fake. For students entering design-heavy fields, his advice is simple: go analog when you can.
Use your scanner. Cut things out. Take your own photos.

"The more you can get tactile with what you're producing… the more authentic it will feel."

FIND YOUR ETHICAL NORTH STAR
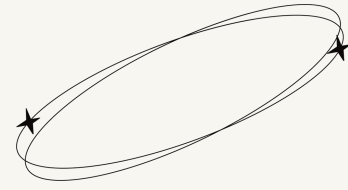
"Have values and ethics be the centering component of your AI use. Everyone needs a North Star for what they will and won't do with AI."

Grant compares it to driving a Lamborghini : *"You know it'll go 200 miles an hour. Do you need to take it there?"*

This metaphor captures the essence of responsible innovation. AI is powerful but a sense of creative identity are more important than speed.

"It's a never-ending cycle. AI will try to emulate, but it'll never replace what you uniquely have as a point of view."

TIPS FOR STUDENTS

Use AI to overcome blocks, but don't skip the messy middle
- "First drafts matter. Shitty work on the cutting room floor has value."

Your POV is your power
- "Shape your point of view and make sure it's present in your work."

Don't fear failure
- "Social media has made everything look production-ready, but real work includes drafts and discovery."

SUGGESTED AI TOOLS:

figma

CANVA

AKIFLOW

Adobe Creative Suite

Mark Paterson

ANIMATOR, MOTION DESIGNER, EMMY WINNER

Key Takeaway: I kind of understand the Luddite point of view. I never thought I would say that, but I kind of get it now.

DISTINGUISHING AI FROM AUTOMATION

Paterson is quick to draw a distinction that many miss: AI isn't the same as automation.

"After Effects will create in-betweens… now that's saving me work. But that's not AI."

He respects software that helps artists work faster. For example, keyframe interpolation (the ability for software to fill in frames between poses) isn't new. It's efficient. But he's critical of how generative AI, in contrast, often cuts humans out entirely.

"It's like we're going to hand that over as well to a computer… what's left for us to do except just type into a prompt?"

CREATIVE WORK IN A POST-AI ECONOMY

Paterson doesn't use image-generating AI in professional work. But he has tried it recreationally.

"I made a Christmas card with it… just a fun little thing to mess around with. But I wouldn't dare use it for something serious."

His concern is about quality, but also about what's at stake. He describes generative AI as fundamentally derivative:

"It finds the average of everything it's studied… it can never really create something meaningful."

He's not alone in his skepticism. Most peers he's spoken to, he says, are *"scared, disgusted, or just angry."*

PROCEED WITH CAUTION

Paterson understands why younger creatives might lean into tools like ChatGPT for writing help, scripts, or code:

"For a while, it was quite good at spitting out workable code… but lately, it's been really bad."

He warns students not to accept AI outputs at face value.

"It has this certainty that it's right… but it clearly isn't. You can't just take it as truth."

His advice? Cross-check always!
"Even if it means checking across models, or asking it to cite what it's trained on—that's important."

Kathy Aoki

ASSOCIATE DEAN OF THE SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES, ARTIST

Key Takeaway: *The artist's role in society still remains the same... to ask people to think about things they normally don't want to think about.*

AI AS A TOOL, NOT A PARTNER

Aoki doesn't currently use AI in her practice, and she's candid about why.

"I tried a little bit ..., it's like a whole career to try to figure out how to get the prompts to do what you want."

While she acknowledges that some artists have incorporated AI effectively by feeding their own datasets into the system, she's not convinced it suits her process.

"The dataset of my personal history is what brings [my work] to life."

ON DATA THEFT
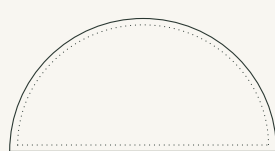
Aoki is especially troubled by the way artists' works are scraped into AI training sets, usually without consent.

"It's essentially like theft of somebody's artwork."

However, she credits Adobe for more ethical practices, noting:

When you use AI, which you can do in Photoshop and Illustrator, they've gotten the rights for all of the artwork in their datasets, which is what they say." (5:37–6:09)

THE CREATIVE PROCESS
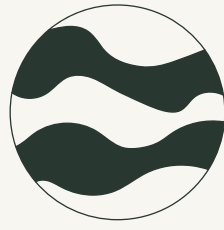
Aoki makes it clear: real creative skill comes from hands-on experience, not just typing prompts.

"I like the idea of knowing how to do things… not following a YouTube tutorial moment by moment.

Though that doesn't mean she's anti-AI. In fact, she encourages students to become AI-literate

"Understand the (AI) tools… there are a lot of weak paths (aka downsides) of being a creative artist that don't need to go that far and can be solved readily."

Her suggestion? Learn both.

"Think, okay what do you have first, and now that I'm stymied—okay ChatGPT or DALL· E—what do you have for me visually?"
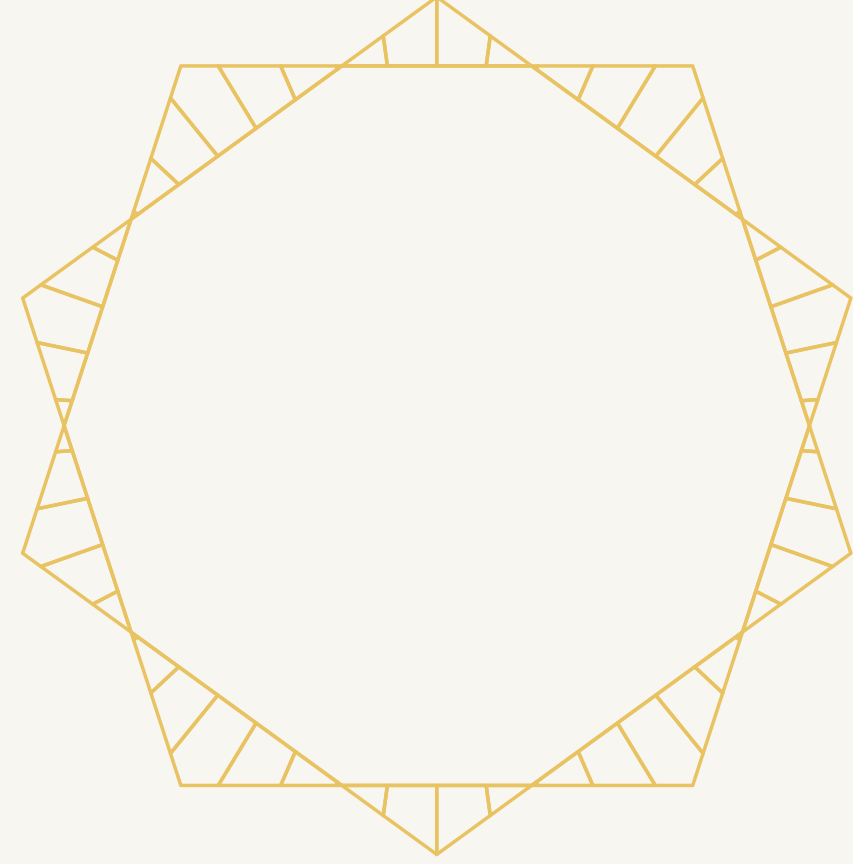

To mock up a logo for her *Koons Ruins* (Aoki) collection, Aoki experimented with DALL·E using prompts inspired by Jurassic Park.

"I didn't use anything that came out of AI… it had more memory of public images and put them together for me."

It worked as a tool for recall, not for creation. As she put it:

"You also have to know about it to ask it to do that research too."

Mon Thai

ART DIRECTOR & CREATIVE STRATEGIST

Key Takeaway: The human still has to know what kind of prompt to put in to get the result that they want.

AI FOR CONCEPTING, NOT REPLACING

Thai's approach to AI is grounded in real-world production: storyboarding ideas and bringing characters and worlds to life on a tight timeline.

"I think AI is amazing for that—you could quickly create a mood board or even your entire idea and get it to render something visual quickly that you could share."

She and her team used it on Benefit's Bad Gal Bang campaign to prototype an alien character with one giant eye (perfect for a mascara campaign).

The photographer they hired, Leanne Chai, generated a one-eyed Cyclops alien using Midjourney. That AI-generated image became the foundation for the final creative.

"Literally that was the image we used, and we've worked with this amazing set designer/costume designer, and she built us this alien head.

So for this specific example… it helped us bring to life this character that came out of the photographer's imagination."

YOU STILL GOTTA THINK

Even when AI helps speed things up, Thai doesn't confuse efficiency with intelligence.

"If I'm going to design a poster, it can't design the whole poster for me.

I still have to actively think about it, think about the layout, the placement of the text the images etc."

She's used Photoshop for years and now sees how generative features streamline cleanup work. But the polish? The finesse? That's still human.

"If I want it to be super perfect, I still have to go in there and manually clean up pixels."

ADVICE FOR STUDENTS
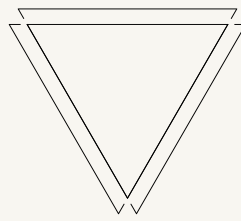
When asked about the ethics of AI being trained on artists' work without consent, Mon was honest: she had concerns. However, her takeaway for young creatives?

"I should be more schooled about this technology before I criticize it."

Top Tips:

- *Use AI to pitch and visualize fast, but don't skip the thinking*

- *AI can get you 80% of the way, but you'll still need to refine*

- *Stay curious. Learn what the tech is actually doing*

"With any profession, the more you learn a tool or your tools and artist tools, the better you will get at your job, right? If you understand how to use it."

Qualitative Group Analysis

SHARED PERSPECTIVES

1. **AI is a tool. NOT the creator**

Regardless of discipline, every interviewee emphasized that AI should serve creative people, not replace them.

- Andrew Mayne called it "a paintbrush, not a painter," and warned against anthropomorphizing AI

"It's a tool. It amplifies human imagination. Used poorly, it reflects our fears

- Kathy Aoki echoed this, saying she only uses AI if it helps realize an idea she's already imagined:

"I would always be using it to try to achieve whatever I invented in my mind."

- Mark Paterson was even more skeptical:

"What's left for us to do except just type into a prompt?"

2. **Prompt Literacy Is a Creative Skill**

They all noted that the *value* of AI depends on how well the user can prompt and refine it.

- Mon Thai praised Midjourney for helping visualize ideas quickly, but stated:

"You still need a human to refine the results it gives you."

- Michael Grant further emphasized:

"AI can get you there faster—but only if you already know where you're going."

DIVERGING VIEWS

1. **Is AI helping or destroying creativity?**

- Paterson is deeply critical of image generation:

"It's a mediocrity machine… at worst, it's almost like a declaration of war on the human soul."

- Mayne, on the other hand, sees AI as the next leap forward, akin to the invention of photography or film:

"We shouldn't have film either. It took away what came before it."

- Mon Thai sees practical value:
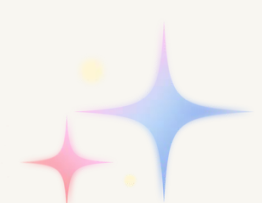
"For a creative, it's actually a tool that is empowering us to do our jobs better."

WHAT SHOULD STUDENTS LEARN?

Consensus

- Learn both handcraft and AI tools.
- Don't outsource your thinking.
- Build your own mental dataset.

Paterson: "You can learn After Effects in days, but that's not the same as knowing composition or color."

Aoki: "Understanding how to get from point A to point B and actually learning that yourself has value."
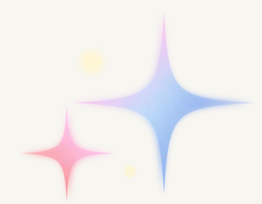
Grant: "There's going to be a longing for authenticity. The more tactile and original your work, the more it'll stand out."

Reimagining AI Ethics

(with a little help from my SCU peers)

In 2018, Rafael Guerrero, an engineering student at Santa Clara University, published a practical and thoughtful reinterpretation of the Markkula Center's "Framework for Ethical Decision Making," applying it directly to engineering design projects (Markkula Center for Applied Ethics). His work didn't just describe the 6 core ethical lenses developed by the Markkula Center; it showed how each could be applied to real-world engineering scenarios, from cookstove-powered refrigerators to exoskeletons for construction workers (Santa Clara University).

I was inspired by Guerrero's clarity, but I work in a very different domain. As a creative student interested in how AI intersects with design, art and media, I realized that ethical tensions don't just come from physical prototypes or hardware constraints. They come from invisible decisions: what data a model is trained on and whether AI-generated work should be attributed to a human. So I reimagined the Markkula Center's 6 ethical lenses to solve the dilemmas faced by creatives in the age of AI.

THE 6 ETHICAL LENSES

AT A GLANCE

Rights Lens
Focuses on protecting people's basic rights—like autonomy, privacy, and being treated with dignity. ▶

Justice Lens
Asks whether benefits and burdens are being distributed equally or according to need or merit. ▶

Utilitarian Lens
Considers outcomes. The best action is the one that brings the most overall good. ▶

Common Good Lens
Looks at how actions impact the community and shared resources. ▶

Virtue Lens
Focuses on personal character. Ethical choices shape who we are and who we aspire to be. ▶

Care Ethics Lens
Centers on empathy and relationships. Ethics means caring for people in their real-life contexts. ▶

The *Before You Prompt* Framework
+how to read it

This framework is inspired by the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics' six ethical lenses (Markkula Center for Applied Ethics); however, it truly came to life through conversations with the designers, writers, and technologists I interviewed for this project. What I noticed across every conversation was that while their mediums varied, each of them had their own internal system, a way of checking whether their work felt right and ethically responsible. Whether they were questioning authorship or the impact of automation on culture, all of them were already doing this kind of reflection. This framework captures that instinct and translates it into something tangible and repeatable.

You don't need to apply all 6 lenses every time you create. Think of Before You Prompt as a creative gut-check, an accessible reflection tool to help you pause and ask the right questions before you publish, post, or share work that involves generative AI. The questions aren't meant to constrain your creativity, they're here to protect your voice and remind you that what you put into the world shapes culture, even when you're just starting out.

Use this the way you'd use color theory or a style guide: not to follow rules, but to create with more intention.

1 THE RIGHTS LENS

Whose work or data is being used, and did they agree to it?

- If I'm referencing/remixing someone's visual style did they get a say? Should I reach out to them?

- If this project involves real people (faces, voices, stories), do I have their consent?

2 THE JUSTICE LENS

Is this fair, not just for me, but for others in my field?

- *Am I replacing someone's paid creative labor by using a tool instead?*

- *Would this same work be judged differently if I didn't disclose that AI was involved?*

3 THE COMMON GOOD LENS

Does this help or harm other creatives?

- If everyone used AI like I am right now, would that be good for the future of fashion, journalism, or film, or bad?

- Does this strengthen or weaken trust in creative industries?

4 THE UTALITARIAN LENS

Am I creating more good than harm?

- *Am I using this to express something new, or just to generate something fast?*

- *Is that gain worth the cost, whether that's misinformation, creative theft, or audience trust?*

5 THE VIRTUE LENS

What kind of person will my actions lead me to become?

- *Would I feel good telling my mentor, peers, or audience exactly how I made this?*

- *Does this feel aligned with the kind of artist, designer, or creative I want to become?*

6 THE CARE ETHICS LENS

Am I acting with compassion for the people my work touches?

- *How does this affect the people I'm collaborating with or building for?*

- *Am I being thoughtful about the cultures, or identities reflected in this work?*

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