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# 'A conversation between spirituality and technology'

As part of Christie's ongoing dialogue about the role of digital technologies in art, we speak to director Martha Fiennes and actress Salma Hayek about *Yugen*, their groundbreaking AI

artwork that generates perpetually moving images

For seven years the award-winning film-maker Martha Fiennes — director of 1999's *Onegin*, starring her brother, Ralph Fiennes — has been experimenting with digital films, utilising complex computer coding with post-production effects to create moving image artworks that self-generate perpetually in continuous, non-predictable cycles.

For her latest project, *Yugen*, Fiennes has fed layers of pre-recorded action sequences, musical scores and digital backgrounds into a custom-built gaming engine, which then uses artificial intelligence to composite layers and add effects such as weather and lighting. The result is a 'moving image artwork' which has no start, no finish, will never repeat itself, and is the result of the computer's decision-making capabilities. Above is a Christie's exclusive trailer for the work.



'As we embrace these new technologies, we can keep pushing their power and potential,' says *Yugen*'s director, Martha Fiennes

Fiennes first employed the combined technologies for her 2011 piece *Nativity*, working with the producer Peter Muggleston to develop the technology necessary to create an applied science she has brand-named 'SLOimage'.

Her latest iteration of the format, which features the Hollywood actress Salma Hayek — star of the 2002 Frida Kahlo biopic, *Frida* — is named after a Japanese concept of aesthetics which loosely translates as 'a profound, mysterious sense of the beauty of the universe'. The work, which was commissioned by Tendercapital and unveiled in September at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice, is being previewed in London

on 5 October during Frieze Week at the Serpentine Galleries, in an event sponsored by Gucci and featuring an introduction by the curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist.

Here, as part of Christie's ongoing dialogue about the role of digital technologies in art, and ahead of the first auction of a painting created by an algorithm, we speak to the director and actress about the work, and the future of AI and art.

### **Where did the idea for *Yugen* come from?**

**Martha Fiennes:** 'I have always had a leaning towards experimental film — triggered by my first encounter with early Surrealist films when at film school. I was struck by how powerful they were, despite — or even because of — their non-rational nature. But I also felt I had to unlock a different kind of mechanism to really synthesise this urge.'

With the more recent, extraordinary acceleration of digital post-production technologies, the potential to find this new landscape, or platform, was opened up.'

### **What is *Yugen* about?**

**Martha Fiennes:** 'It's a kind of stimulation, really. The work is best encountered as you would a painting. You look for your own interpretation of it, and stay with it for as long as you wish. For me, it's an exploration of the

principles of multi-dimensionality and the subconscious — and the question of who or what is actually running the universe. I have attempted to characterise this through an allusion to a powerful feminine deity.'



'I think that there are occasions when technology subconsciously connects you to something inside of yourself' — Salma Hayek, star of *Yugen*

## What can you tell us about the creation of *Yugen*?

**Martha Fiennes:** 'I directed a series of performance actions with Salma against a green screen. This material was then processed in post-production before being finally uploaded into the computer engine. Separately to this, original music was written by my brother, the composer and producer Magnus Fiennes.'

**Salma Hayek:** 'What made it different to working with a normal film is that while there were clear directions, you're working in the abstract, because you don't know what is going to happen at the outcome.'

## **How does the technology work?**

**Martha Fiennes:** 'My team and I adapted a Unity gaming engine. All selected moving image material, or "data", is uploaded into the machine and coded with instructions and restrictions. The computer then uses this AI to decide which sequences to play and in what order. It makes all decisions "in real time" and is therefore forming its own narrative sequences. It is always "an unknown" as you watch it. There is intelligence in this randomness — the computer is running the show and it releases the director from full control over the narrative idea.'

**Salma Hayek:** 'To me it feels like magic, which means the output is unexplainable. But I am horrible with computers.'

## **In terms of performance, how did you have to adapt to the technology?**

**Salma Hayek:** 'Because of the speed of the frames used when shooting, each shot only lasted a couple of minutes, which made trying to get into character

frustrating. I also felt limited by the physical space of the green screen.'

## How do you envisage this kind of artwork evolving?

**Martha Fiennes:** 'The ultimate dream for me is to use this technology to create a huge game that is a work of art. Naturally it would need to be properly funded — in all likelihood by an entity who understands digital technology and the great potential here to create extraordinary experiences for people. I feel a constant feed of imagination and ambition. As we embrace these new technologies, we can keep pushing their power and potential.'



'Every time you see the work it is fresh, and alive, suggesting that there is creativity in the technology' — Martha Fiennes

## How do you think technology and creativity can work together?

**Martha Fiennes:** 'To me, technology is only as powerful as the human consciously using it, or alternatively, perhaps unconsciously *being used* by it. This piece gave me an extraordinary chance to play with data and the proverbial "ghost in the machine". We're handing over potential to the computer to throw up these synchronicities, so perhaps there is an intelligence somewhere. Every time you see the work, it is fresh, and alive, suggesting that there is creativity in the technology.'

**Salma Hayek:** 'I think that there are occasions when technology subconsciously connects you to something inside of yourself. *Yugen* is art about the subconscious, and a conversation between spirituality and technology. But we mustn't get lazy with creativity, allowing computers to mutate it. If we let technology do everything it can damage us. I don't think it can ever replace the soul behind creativity. Sure, technology can connect us to creativity, but to me, it all depends on the observer.'

## Can a computer ever truly be creative, or intelligent?



**Martha Fiennes:** 'I reckon that human beings recognise the energy of another human's work. But if you ask me, we're at the beginning of technology. "Intelligence" is a cultural buzzword in technology and it still hasn't, to my understanding, touched the nature of the human, or the soul, or our great and complex relationship to where we come from. I don't think AI is, relatively speaking, intelligent... yet.'

Limited edition SLOimage works, including *Yugen* and *Nativity*, are available for sale. For enquiries please contact [Long&Elgar](#).

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**POST-WAR &  
CONTEMPORARY  
ART | VIDEO**

Main image:

*Yugen* by Martha Fiennes, 2018.

Two editions and two artist's proofs

Highlighted sale

Prints & Multiples

NEW YORK  
23-25 OCTOBER

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