

The landscape of technology and art

Artificial intelligence, climate change, and a blue ballpoint – artist Stephen Ellis lets us in on the influences behind *Unfolding*, his latest exhibition.

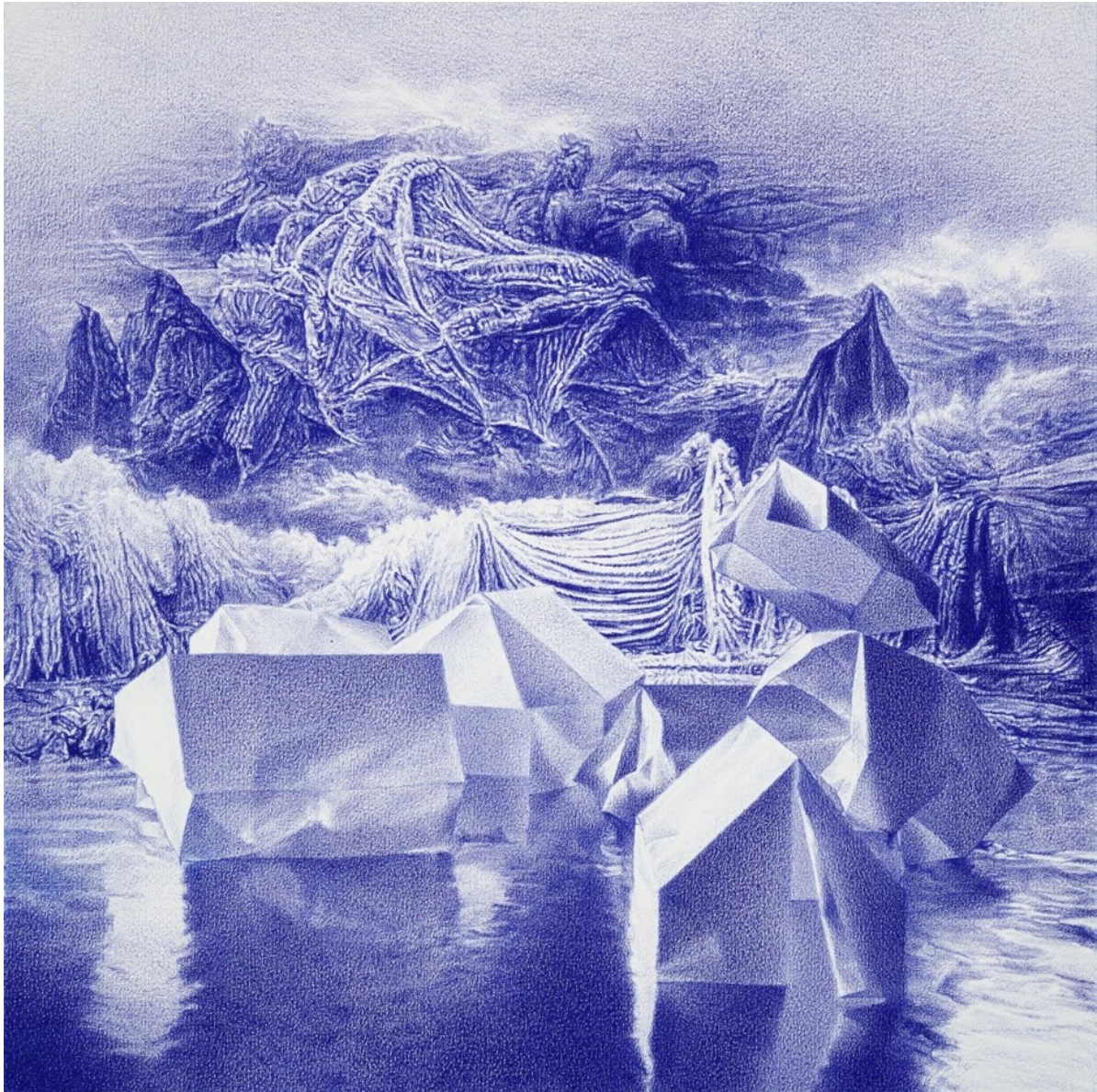
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Stephen Ellis in his Auckland studio.

What sparked your interest in Artificial intelligence technology (AI), and how has it helped to shape this new work?

This body of work grew from the last suite of drawings I showed at Sanderson. They were lockdown still life works drawn from 3D computer models, and they got me looking further at the role of new technologies in image-making. That and re-reading Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein," which I guess is the original AI story. The AI has been an eye-opener. Image generation from text is unpredictable at best. It took me many attempts to learn how to achieve imagery I could use. The process has been to write a verbal prompt, from which the AI generates an image. I've taken as many as four of these images to make each drawing, combining them with real-world objects in dioramas, as I have done in past series. What excites me about the AI is that it is completely agnostic about pictorial convention. The images are all surface, there's no consideration of figure and ground, no composition, and no content. I have to bring all that in later.



Stephen Ellis, Unfolding 1, 2022

Why is this work and the exhibition called *Unfolding*?

These drawings return to the environmental themes that have long concerned me. There's a news media formula that describes crises, disasters, and catastrophes as "unfolding" when in fact they have already arrived. The word "unfolding" was used in all the verbal prompts I gave the AI image generator that I've been using in my modelling process. Drawing, for me, is a very slow revelatory process; the image unfolds through the accumulation of tiny marks.

Where did the inspiration come from to explore themes of environmental degradation and climate change?

Environmental degradation and climate change are the themes of our time. I think of my work as inheriting the Sublime; we are again painfully conscious of our powerlessness in the face of colossal natural forces, and the changing of the landscape can't be ignored.

You often work in a monochromatic palette or in a vivid blue. Is there a reason?

I've worked in monochrome for a few years. Partly because I'm no good with colour, but mostly because there's a gravitas to monochrome. I think of it as "documentary"; documents, photography, film – serious stuff comes in monochrome.

The vivid blue comes from a series of ballpoint pen drawings I was making a few years ago. The blue has a dual heritage of the extreme rarity of lapis lazuli, and the humble ballpoint.



Stephen Ellis, Unfolding 4, 2022

Has your experience working in the film industry over many years changed your practice?

Film work is fast and fleeting, I think my practice is a reaction to that. Rather than minutes or hours on an image I can spend weeks, even months. The film industry has been a fantastic school for a whole lot of reasons. Most of all it has taught me about light; how to light a scene, how to light the dioramas I stage before I draw.

You spend a long time over each work and draw in meticulous detail. When did you start working in this way?

It I think it started with my Masters degree. I had undervalued drawing, and even thought my project was about objects. But the intense focus of the project let me take drawing as far as I was able. It's now a necessary and meditative process, which feels true for me.



Tell us something we might not already know about you.

Let's see... I married a Swede. Although we've since separated, living in Sweden gave me access to a whole lot of northern tradition which has been influential.

What's up next?

I think there will be more "Unfolding" drawings, and there's more I can learn from collaborating with AI. After each body of work I go through an agonising period of doubt, which becomes research, which in turn becomes something new.

Unfolding will show at [Sanderson Contemporary](#), Auckland until 28 August 2022.