

The real problem with NFTs? They're ugly

The art market is feverish for non-fungibles — so how come they're all so unappealing?

Louis Wise MARCH 14 2022

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The email arrived, like so many others, announcing a “historic NFT sale” of [“fRiENDSiES”](#) by [“FriendsWithYou”](#), that is soon to take place at Christie’s. This was nothing new. Historic NFT events now arrive daily. I looked at the “fRiENDSiES”, cartoonish digital figures in rainbow-bright colours: one resembling a pink-cheeked blue mouse in acid-yellow dungarees, another wearing what looks like a multicoloured lampshade. The artists, [Samuel Borkson and Arturo Sandoval III](#), announced that “this is the future of art”. They see the project as “a wave of hope and optimism” looking to create “a garden of friendship”.

I hope it doesn’t spoil this garden of friendship to say that the NFTs looked dreadful?

These are tough times for art fans. We are constantly told that NFTs are the future of art, if not the present. The recent deluge of enthusiasts includes [Damien Hirst](#), [Daniel Arsham](#), who presented his own sale last year, and the British Museum, which has organised NFT sales related to its recent JMW Turner and Hokusai exhibitions in collaboration with [LaCollection](#). There’s much, much more. The art market is positively freaky for the non-fungible. But quite apart from the dizzying financial speculation, a doubt persists: the work seems to lack any artistic ambition. A possible nadir is the recently announced sale of NFTs of *Orgasm to Hell* by [Pictor Roy](#), an image that portrays an ejaculation by Hitler. The 10 NFTs are expected to reach \$50mn.



JMW Turner's *The Johannisberg*, 1817, was recently minted and sold as an NFT by The British Museum and La Collection © The Trustees of the British Museum, 2022. Bequeathed by Robert Wylie Lloyd

“Right now, I’m browsing on websites and I’m thinking, ‘Oh God,’” says art adviser Sibylle Rochat, who runs the [Rochat Art Consultancy](#) and is a mentor for the [Sarabande Foundation](#). “For an art lover like me, it’s terrible!” She’s not alone. Talk to many art insiders and — if only privately — they’ll express horror at the stuff which is, apparently, a hot commodity. Even the younger generation of artists I spoke to find the work bewildering. “I would maybe be interested if it wasn’t so disgusting,” says one artist in her late 20s, who has shown at several contemporary London galleries. “The work looks like the stuff in those weird shops in Camden or Soho where all they sell is magnets.”

Rochat is a bit more nuanced. Thanks to her clientele, she has been drawn into the world of NFTs, and helped several collectors buy some, but she remains cautious. “I think NFTs make sense as collectibles,” she says. “In art, we’re not there yet.”

NFTs all have the same kind of aesthetic. It’s all neon-y and the same kind of subject. It feels like they need to catch up on art history

Sibylle Rochat, of the Rochat Art Consultancy

She, like many, is clear to differentiate between “collectibles” — the sports-card-style series that includes [Bored Apes](#), the Lobstars and more — and the artists trying to provide something, well, artier: one-off editions, specific pieces. But the line does seem blurred. “If you look at art NFTs, they all have the same kind of aesthetic,” she says. “It’s all neon-y, like purple, pink and blue, and it’s the same kind of subject. It feels like

they need to catch up on art history.” She does add that what a lot of these NFT creators are doing is “amazing” on a technical level. “But for us, it’s not that interesting. It’s like a footballer talking for two hours about the way they’ve turned their feet.”

For old-school collectors, there seem to be three ways of understanding NFTs as desirable — beyond their ability to make money. First, they are a means of reproducing historic images: see LaCollection’s work with the British Museum, where they expanded on the Turner and Hokusai shows by offering NFTs as a type of limited-edition digital print. Accessible, affordable(ish) and available all year round, these open up art archives to a wider public. It helps “prolong and complete” the exhibition experience, says LaCollection’s co-founder Jean-Sébastien Beaucamps — allowing access to what exhibitions or museums can only partly show. He agrees that the general offering of NFTs has been poor, but argues that this is a great way of letting the wider public understand them. (Another arguably “soft” way in is to sell your NFT alongside a physical artwork, which many do — but then, isn’t that just a sexy new way of selling a physical artwork?)



British-Nigerian artist Zina Saro-Wiwa is selling NFTs linked to limited-edition gins, including (from left) Sarogua Spirit Guinea Corn Leaf, Green Orange and Akogbara (Oil Bean) © The Illicit Gin Institute and Montague Contemporary



Saro-Wiwa describes her NFTs as a “conceptual intervention . . . it’s this idea of what is value? What is currency? Gin, historically, was a type of currency in colonial Nigeria” © Bernd G Mueller

Secondly, you could admire NFTs as a type of conceptual art flourish, a virtual contract between artist and audience. Take the Swedish artist [Jonas Lund](#), who sold an NFT requiring that whoever bought it give five per cent of their annual income to good causes; if the buyer was found to renege on this, the NFT was programmed to self-destruct. Meanwhile, British-Nigerian artist [Zina Saro-Wiwa](#) is selling [NFTs](#) linked to a [limited-edition gin](#) for \$2,000 a bottle. The NFT is a “conceptual intervention”, she says. “I offered it as an NFT, because it’s this idea of what is value? What is currency? Gin, historically, was a type of currency in colonial Nigeria, so it leans into that.” She admits she is still getting to grips with the whole thing – and that, yes, stuff like Bored Apes is “awful” – but felt it was more important to dive in. “I don’t want to be on the sidelines.”

Thirdly, most obviously, it's a way of finally getting to grips with digital art. For a long time, this genre has been acknowledged but never loved by the art market, mostly because it couldn't be monetised properly – before NFTs, the digital files could be too easily reproduced, so it's been hard to sell – thanks to NFTs, they can now be certified. But still, the art has to be up to scratch. Artists just trying to mint an NFT of an old painting won't get very far, says Joe Kennedy, co-founder and director of the [Unit London](#) gallery and the online art platform [Institut](#). “It's about using the technology as a form of expression,” he says. “As opposed to, you know, animating a cat.”

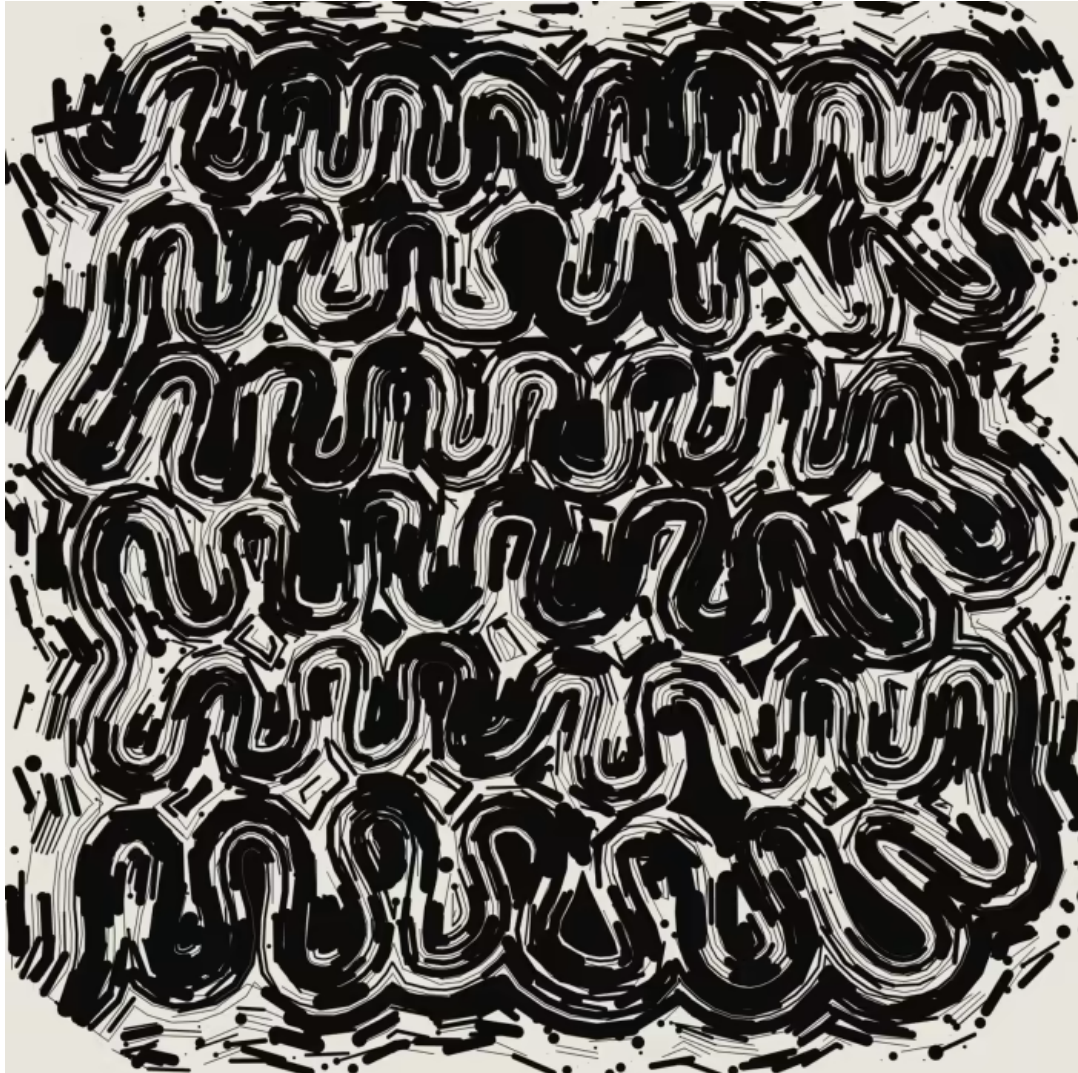
At Unit London, a glossy, cavernous space just off Oxford Circus, Kennedy patiently makes the case that NFTs are a serious proposition. He agrees that the market is variable, but he is there to change that. “Our main goal is to engender some kind of quality, especially through curation, and to articulate some sophistication and taste within the space. It's wide open for it to happen right now, because it's so new.”



The Unit London gallery's show features limited-edition digital prints of classic paintings such as da Vinci's Portrait of a Musician © Courtesy of Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana (Milan) and Cinello

Currently Unit London has a show, *Eternalising Art History*, which involves reproducing limited-edition digital prints of classic paintings on screens (the NFT ensures they have a specific, non-reproducible digital signature). Leonardo's "Portrait of a Musician", for instance, the original of which hangs in Milan's [Pinacoteca Ambrosiana](#), now gleams brightly from a screen in Unit London, framed in an exact ornate replica of the original frame, made by the only people allowed to do so. It's nice enough — it's eerie — it's surely also just an extremely high-end reproduction.

Downstairs on his laptop, Kennedy shows me more innovative works by artists like [Maxim Zhestkov](#), [Tyler Hobbs](#) and [IX Shells](#). Zhestkov is, Kennedy explains, a “generative artist who uses code as a visual language”. His work comes across as vast ominous swirls: think a bleak-chic apocalyptic screensaver. “It’s just so beautiful, and there’s such a science to it,” says Kennedy. “All of these dots that are moving are all pieces of code.” Others clearly agree: the last work of his, sold on Institute as a one-of-one NFT, made \$330,000.



Elektroanima 0.9 by generative artist Tyler Hobbs © Tyler Hobbs/Courtesy of institut.co

There are clear reasons why many NFTs' visual stylings often seem graphic and hyper-coloured, childish and crude. They're a nascent art form; and the people who are wild about them are precisely those alienated from, or not interested in, the traditional market. After all, the biggest NFT artist is Beeple, who last year sold an NFT of his work *Everydays: The First 5,000 Days* for \$69.3mn, again at Christie's — catapulting him into the top three most valuable living artists, according to the auction house. Kennedy points out that when Beeple recently opened a show of work at [Jack Hanley](#) in New York — of painting and drawings, actually — he told Artnet that (shock, horror) he'd [never previously been to an art opening](#).



Hanging Ocean Chunk (To Be Dragged Up Cliff Faces, Strung Across Ravines, and Suspended From The Forest Canopy) 1, 2022 on the High Line by Ashley Bickerton on CollectAR, Lehmann Maupin's new AR Platform © Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin New York, Hong Kong, Seoul and London

This will surely change, though, as traditional artists, gallerists and curators muscle in. [Lehmann Maupin](#) gallery has just launched CollectAR, “a new platform designed to present and collect NFTs in augmented reality”. The first three NFT artworks on offer have been minted by the artist [Ashley Bickerton](#), whose work is in the collections of MoMA, MOCA Los Angeles and Tate Britain. These NFTs — which will be sold in editions of six for \$10,000 each on March 29 — will allow users to access versions of Bickerton's *Ocean Chunk* series across New York City in AR form.



Floating Ocean Chunk (South Pacific for North Atlantic) 1, 2022 above the Hudson River by Ashley Bickerton © Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin New York, Hong Kong, Seoul and London

It all sounds very radical, but even Bickerton is sceptical: “Does it feel like a future of art? Yes. *The* future of art? No, not even close. Not even close. I’ve already lived through painting’s imminent demise, how many times now?” Yet he is also prudently intrigued. The *Ocean Chunk* series uses shimmering CGI to explore the glorious visual properties of water. “There are so many aspects you can change with NFTs . . . You can change the water at the time of day — its texture, its surface dynamics, the ripples and waves.

“If it’s just a thing where the whole idea is unique private ownership, it’s not so interesting,” Bickerton continues. “But if it becomes a sort of thing in and of itself, with its own vernacular driven by its inherent technology, then it is interesting — much more so.”

Rochat seems to think that we’ll want more NFTs, too. “The eyes and the brain are muscles,” she says. “The more you train them, the more you look, they get bored. I can have the most beautiful painting in my house — after years, my brain wants something else.” Therefore, once the execution of NFTs matches their flashy concept, that’s when something interesting will happen. Look at the Impressionists, she says by way of example. It was only when they found techniques to match their ideas that the work became transcendent. “Perhaps NFTs will be like that,” she suggests. Is Maxim Zhestkov the new Monet? I’ll leave you to bet all your ethereum on it.

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