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# iNVENTX Creative Exhibition

## SUSTAINAISSANCE IN PRACTICE: Quiet Materials, Loud Meaning

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### The Self that Still Survives

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#### Abstract

*The Self that Still Survives* explores the quiet erosion of identity in a world increasingly defined by speed, efficiency, and artificial intelligence. It reflects on the gradual loss of the spontaneous human spark of creativity, an essence that thrives on flaws, mistakes, and imperfection. Inspired by surrealist art, particularly the work of Salvador Dalí, the piece employs the imagery of a melting figure and static flowers to embody the tension between the organic self and the synthetic forces shaping contemporary life. This transformation symbolises the gradual dissolution of emotional depth and individuality as creative practices become aligned with idealised standards of perfection. In line with the theme *SUSTAINAISSANCE: Emotion, Expression, Identity*, the work provokes reflection on what is being preserved in an age that prioritises efficiency over authenticity. It questions whether the emotional and creative dimensions that define human experience can be sustained, or whether they will quietly dissipate in the pursuit of optimisation and technological progress. Ultimately, this piece invites a reconsideration of sustainability not merely as productivity or innovation, but as the preservation of emotional integrity, individuality, and human presence within an increasingly automated creative landscape.

**Keywords:** Surrealism; Human-machine interaction; Identity and technology; Creative authenticity; Artificial Intelligence in art; Hybrid creative practice

**Received:** 23 June 2025, **Accepted:** 25 February 2026, **Published:** 30 June 2026

## Artist Statement

*The Self that Still Survives* reflects my journey in the creative industry over the past decade. As I navigated a fast-paced world driven by efficiency and AI, I realized that something vital was slipping away. The spontaneity of creativity, once fueled by experimentation and mistakes, has been replaced by the relentless push to optimize and perfect. In this pursuit, we've lost the space for flaws, errors, and the freedom to fail. The very qualities that make our work authentic and human.

Inspired by surrealist artists like Salvador Dalí, who challenged our perceptions of reality<sup>1</sup>, this piece explores the tension between the organic self and the synthetic forces of progress. The figure, initially calm, begins to melt, her face dissolving into something artificial. This transformation symbolizes the gradual loss of identity and emotional depth as we conform to idealized standards of perfection. The flowers around her, once symbols of growth, now remain frozen in a repetitive, lifeless pattern. Too perfect, too controlled. What once symbolized life now reflects how the drive for optimization stifles creativity, individuality, and true expression.

This work engages directly with the theme of *SUSTAINAISSANCE: Emotion, Expression, Identity*. It poses a question: In a world shaped by technology, can we preserve what makes us human—our emotional depth, creativity, and authentic imperfections—or will they quietly disappear in the pursuit of progress?

Blending surrealist influences with contemporary AI techniques, *The Self that Still Survives* examines the blurred line between human and machine. The piece combines hand-drawn illustrations with AI-generated distortions to ground the figure in humanity while highlighting the tension between authenticity and technology.

The process began with hand-drawing the figure in Procreate, preserving her organic nature. In Photoshop, I layered a floral background, subtly altering it to feel both natural and synthetic. AI-generated elements—melting forms that at first glance seem organic, but reveal their machine-made origins—disrupt the scene, symbolizing the quiet erosion of identity by technology. The final stage refined the lighting, texture, and mood, preserving the delicate balance between reality and the artificial.

## Materials and Techniques

The creation of *The Self that Still Survives* followed a deliberately hybrid process that mirrors the conceptual tension explored in the work itself, the interplay between organic human authorship and synthetic machine intervention. The artwork was developed through a combination of hand-drawn

illustration, digital compositing, and AI-generated visual manipulation, allowing the making process to become an extension of the conceptual inquiry into identity, authenticity, and technological influence.

The initial stage began with hand-drawing the central figure using Procreate. This phase prioritised intuitive mark-making, irregular line quality, and expressive imperfections, preserving the artist's bodily presence and emotional intention within the image. The figure was conceived as a calm, organic form, rooted in human gesture and traditional illustrative practice. This manual stage was essential in establishing a sense of authorship and emotional grounding before any computational intervention took place.

Subsequently, the hand-drawn figure was imported into Adobe Photoshop, where a layered floral background was constructed. The flowers were digitally refined to appear both natural and artificial; visually precise, repetitive, and subtly symmetrical. This compositional decision intentionally reflects the tension between growth and control, organic life and synthetic order. At this stage, colour grading and texture adjustments were applied to unify the visual space while maintaining a sense of quiet unease beneath the surface harmony.

The most critical intervention occurred through the incorporation of AI-generated visual elements. Using AI-based image generation tools, melting and distorted forms were introduced into the composition. These elements were selected and curated by the artist, rather than generated randomly, ensuring that machine outputs remained guided by human intention. Although the forms initially appear organic, closer inspection reveals their artificial origins, creating a visual ambiguity between natural decay and algorithmic manipulation. This disruption symbolises the gradual erosion of identity under technological influence, a process that is subtle, invisible, and difficult to resist.

The final stage involved refining lighting, texture, and tonal balance across all layers. This phase focused on integrating human and machine-generated components into a single cohesive visual field, where neither dominates completely. The resulting image exists in a state of unresolved tension; visually polished yet emotionally fragile, technologically sophisticated yet conceptually melancholic. In this way, the technical process does not merely support the concept; it actively performs it. The artwork becomes both a representation of hybrid identity and a product of hybrid authorship, embodying the very condition it seeks to critique.

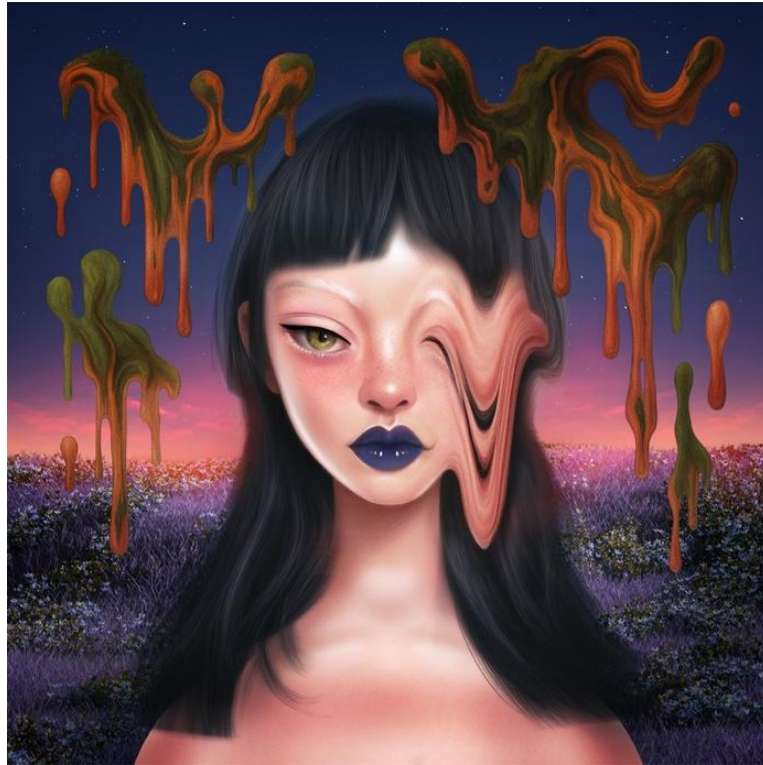


Figure 1. *The Self that Still Survives* by Kharlal Nisha Sarfuddin

## Conclusion

*The Self that Still Survives* is both a reflection and a call to action. It holds space for the contradictions we face in contemporary creative practice: the ease of digital creation versus the erosion of authenticity, the desire for technological progress versus the need to remain grounded in what is emotionally real. The work does not reject technology, but questions the cost at which efficiency, automation, and optimisation are embraced without reflection.

In a world that moves faster and smarter each day, true sustainability may not lie in what we perfect, but in what we consciously choose not to lose. It lies in preserving the imperfect, vulnerable, and deeply human aspects of creativity that resist standardisation and algorithmic control. Ultimately, this work invites viewers to reflect on their own relationship with technology, and to consider whether progress can coexist with emotional depth, individuality, and the fragile conditions that allow authentic expression to survive.

## References

- [1] Martinez-Conde, S., Conley, D., Hine, H., Kropf, J., Tush, P., Ayala, A. and Macknik, S.L., 2015. Marvels of illusion: illusion and perception in the art of Salvador Dali. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 9, p.496.

## **Acknowledgment**

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Faculty of Creative Multimedia at Multimedia University for their unwavering support throughout the journey of creating *The Self that Still Survives*. Their encouragement, support and guidance have been invaluable in shaping this piece. It's been a privilege to be part of a community that continually fosters creativity and critical thought, allowing me to explore and express my vision. Thank you for providing me with the space to grow and the opportunity to share this work.

## **Funding Information**

The artist did not receive any funding from external parties for the creation or publication of this artwork.

## **Authors' Bio**

***Kharlal Nisha*** is an artist and educator with over 15 years of experience in the creative industry. Having worked as an Associate Creative Director in advertising, Nisha has developed a deep understanding of creative strategy, storytelling, and visual communication. This background has shaped her approach to art, blending commercial insight with artistic expression. Now, as an Advertising Design lecturer in the Faculty of Creative Multimedia at Multimedia University, Nisha is passionate in teaching the next generation of young creatives. Through both her professional work and artistic practice, Nisha explores themes of self-identity and personal growth, shaped by her cross-cultural experiences across Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Her work reflects how environment, culture, and the accelerating pace of technology shape both personal and creative evolution. By blending surrealist influences with contemporary AI techniques, Nisha delves into the shifting boundaries between humanity and machine, challenging perceptions of identity, emotion, and expression in an increasingly digital world.