
iNVENTX 2025 Creative Exhibition

SUSTAINAISSANCE: Emotion . Expression . Identity

Icons of Sustainaissance

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Abstract

Three digital paintings entitled Sustainaissance envision cultural icons—Michael Jackson, Bruce Lee, Jimi Hendrix—as icons of environmental sustainability. Fusing digital environmental storytelling with classical iconography, the works respond to the exhibition theme "SUSTAINAISSANCE: Emotion. Expression. Identity." Each portrait depicts its celebrity subject in a narrative tableau that connects destruction of the natural environment to symbols of renewal and rebirth. Juxtaposing expressive portraiture with the emotional resonance of iconic figures, the series frames sustainability as a personal issue. Each icon's legacy and identity are harnessed to evoke empathy and inspire collective responsibility towards the earth. Augmented reality integration and the use of cutting-edge digital tools further enrich the narrative, demonstrating how innovations in new media can give ethical messages and emotional expression added resonance. In all, Icons of Sustainaissance turns nostalgia into an aspirational call for environmental consciousness by harnessing digital art and cultural iconography.

Keywords Sustainability, Digital Portraiture, Emotional Expression, Cultural Icons, Environmental Storytelling, Augmented Reality

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Artist Statement

Concept and Theme

Figure 1 shows the digital artwork. Michael Jackson appears in the centre of the portrait, as a crusader of Earth, standing between a polluted and burning cityscape on the left side of the painting and a green, flourishing landscape with alternative forms of clean energy on the right side. The peace symbol and the slogan “Cintai Bumi” (“Love the Earth” in Malay) is given in Michael’s shirt, visualizing conventional motifs associated with environmental harmony by invoking the theme of blissful renewal. The pose and facial expression, to which Michael’s exaggerated body gestures and intense singing soul gave a passionate presence in life, light up emotional catharsis as the icon stands as a pillar of light in the darkness of environmentally damaged realms. This piece is true to the idea of Sustainaissance because it re-reads the iconocultural legacy of Michael Jackson – pop legend, pop singer, pop performer and pop humanitarian – together with the literary motif of destruction and resurrection, leading us to an emotional reconnection and to the sense of a sustainable identity toward renewal.

Icons of Sustainaissance is inspired by the idea of bridging the past and the future by using universally recognised individuals with the context of a sustainable renaissance. The concept reimagines three cultural legends as icons of environmental art, bridging worlds confused with inner struggle towards environmental destruction and healing. Michael Jackson, Bruce Lee and Jimi Hendrix are placed in allegorical environmental contexts to explore how emotion, expression and identity come together in the theme of sustainability. The persona and legacy of each icon informed the thematic direction of the portraits: Michael Jackson, known for his humanitarian anthems, is positioned as an advocate for planetary healing; Bruce Lee embodies a philosophy of balance; and Jimi Hendrix represents creative freedom and expressive vitality. Bruce Lee is situated within an environmental allegory that directly engages with the theme SUSTAINAISSANCE: Emotion, Expression, Identity by establishing an emotionally resonant relationship between cultural identity and sustainability. Through the familiarity of a well-known icon, the artwork invites audiences to connect with sustainability as an expressive and emotionally grounded concern. While sustainability is explored in each renewed icon’s narrative, it does not serve merely as a contextual background, but rather as the moral centrepiece of the allegory, expressed through strong contrasts such as destruction versus growth and chaos versus beauty.

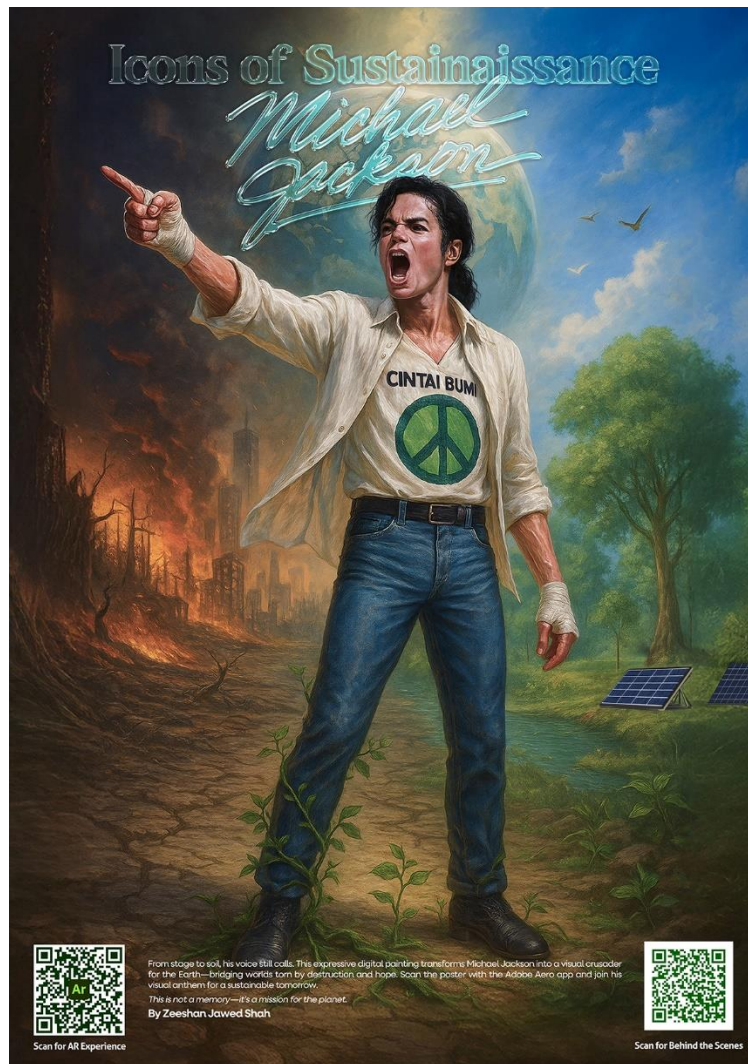


Figure 1. Michael Jackson – From Destruction to Hope

Approach and Process

Production of this series utilized an exhaustive, digitally native workflow blending 3D modeling, digital painting, and immersive media. I began by constructing photo-realistic 3D character models of each figure. For the initial sculpting, I used Blender, then generated finely tuned models with a realism befitting the human anatomy and facial detail of the likenesses of Michael Jackson, Bruce Lee, and Jimi Hendrix through Epic Games' MetaHuman Creator. These unembellished models laid the groundwork for posing and composing the scene. Using Marvelous Designer, a 3D computer graphics software program specifically used for virtual cloth simulation, I cut, sewed, and simulated the hallmark costumes in the series—components such as Bruce Lee's iconic yellow jumpsuit and Jimi Hendrix's psychedelic attire—carefully considering the fold and fabric behaviors. All the scenes and character were then textured in Adobe Substance 3D Painter in painstaking detailing of the real world. Through a combination of hand-painting and procedural texturing, I achieved a range of surface qualities across the scenes: from scuffed up clothing, to strands of hair on skin, to the burn and grime of the battlefield,

to foliage, moss and rough barks. These textures enhance the realism of each scene and carry the imposed theme to life.

Unreal Engine was used to combine all assets for staging and lighting the content: real-time lighting rendering in Unreal Engine allowed to create dynamic lighting setups which accentuated the dramatic mood of each portrait (e.g., dark shadows and firelight in the Bruce Lee scene, or bright green aura in the Jimi Hendrix scene). The stage also provided the ground to place in small animations as well as interactive elements. Adobe Aero was used to add augmented reality elements to finished posters by adding animation triggers to the posters which are activated when viewers use mobile devices to view artwork (e.g., flickering flames, swirling smoke, or pulsating musical waves which match the character). The artwork received experimental cross-media integration which allowed audiences to experience the artwork beyond traditional canvas viewing, creating an immersive participatory experience. The final imagery was exported in layers via an iterative process before being composited in Adobe Photoshop. In Adobe Photoshop, rendered layers were composed with each other by adding painted highlights and atmospheric effects as well as typographic element (Icons of Sustainaissance title and each icon's name in a stylized manner) in order to create a poster-like finish. The workflow iterated between 3D composition and 2D post-processing in order to finesse both technical detail and the emotional impact of final imagery. This combination of methods and tools is indicative of an innovative creative process which merges traditional methods of storytelling in art with contemporary methods of digital creation and interactive technology.

Meaning and Impact

In Figure 2, Bruce Lee's dynamic martial arts kick is reimagined as a symbolic strike against environmental destruction. As Bruce Lee delivers a jumping kick into the air, he drives his foot into a dark smoky menacing figure representing pollution or destruction, dispelling the menacing figure into smoke and dust as he drives his foot across its body. The menacing figure loses its form and disintegrates into a cloud of smoke and dust as Bruce Lee drives his foot, and instead Bruce Lee becomes the centrepiece of the composition that is still balanced on both sides by darkness on the left and by the light emitted by the blazing sun on the right. The ashen smoky figure that is the menacing figure is juxtaposed with the fiery energy of life represented by blazing orange light. Bruce Lee, with an intense stare and body held back exudes resilience, determination, and might. Through the resurrection of Bruce Lee's image as an icon of protection of nature, this artwork reclaims the fight against environmental destruction as a battle for mutual coexistence with nature and makes a powerful statement in illustrating a visual depiction of sustainability and resilience.



Figure 2. Bruce Lee – Strike for Balance

In Figure 3, Jimi Hendrix is depicted in a thriving green ecological environment suggesting renewal and creativity. This message is enhanced by vibrant flora, musical notes, and stylized swirls or sound waves, highlighting Hendrix's presence and creativity intersected with the environment. The bright and psychedelic hues of the image reflect the time period's energy and the interconnected message of environmental awareness. Hendrix calmly and contently gazes off, further suggesting the renewal of ecological sustainability through creativity and cultural identity.

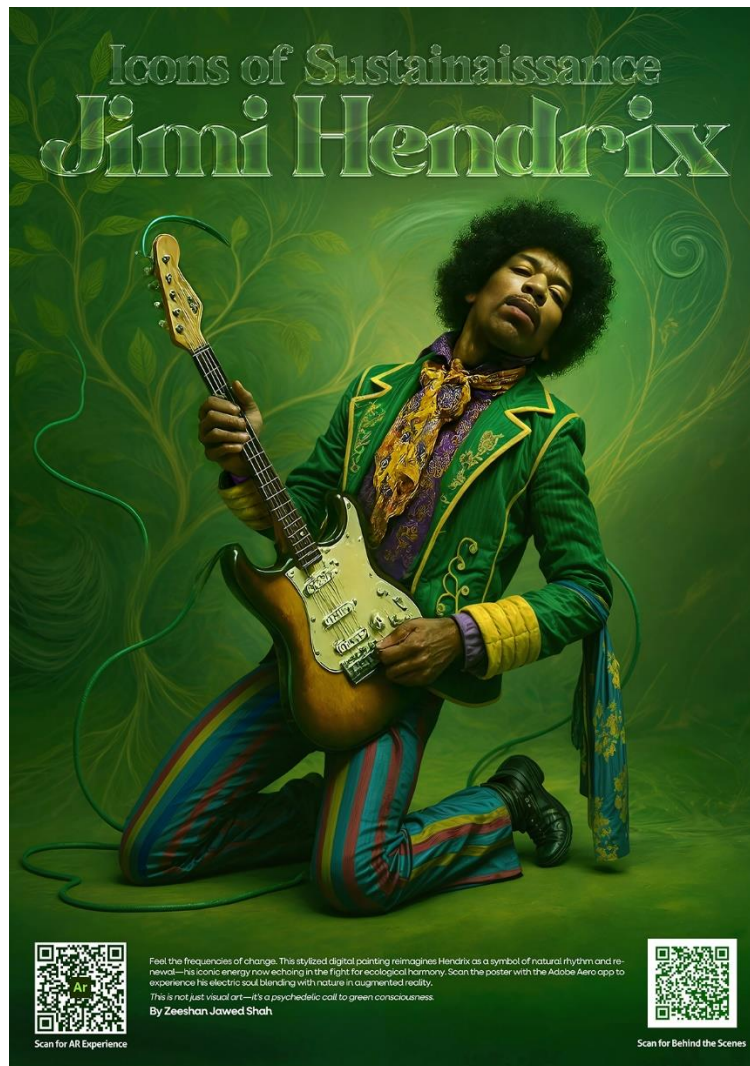


Figure 3. Jimi Hendrix – Harmony of Renewal

By using beloved cultural icons and turning them into messengers of sustainability, each portrait in Icons of Sustainaissance contains a narrative of sustaining the environment. Overall, the series serves as a call to action on multiple levels: First, by appropriating familiar cultural icons, the artwork adds an additional layer to the existing emotional connection between the figures and the viewer. If viewers already feel an attachment to these icons, that emotional bond can be extended towards environmental stewardship. In other words, by witnessing Michael Jackson's passionate advocacy for the Earth (Fig. 1), Bruce Lee's symbolic confrontation with environmental destruction (Fig. 2), and Jimi Hendrix's presence within an imagined ecological harmony (Fig. 3), viewers are encouraged to recognise environmental sustainability as a shared collective responsibility. Specifically, the portrait of Hendrix demonstrates how free expression through creativity, artistic liberty, and balanced ecology can cohabit in harmony, urging viewers to question their own agency in upholding the wellbeing of the environment.

Each drawing's story is one of crisis and hope, representing how even amid ecological destruction there is still a possibility for renewal if we act swiftly. I hope that this narrative agency inspires introspection and creates a sense of emotional urgency: an initial effect triggered by the shock of the represented damage, carefully mitigated by each icon's charisma, to sustain and persist in the viewers' memory, engaging one another in reflections on what must be done to confront the state of our environment. Eliciting people's sense of urgency, hope, or sensitivity by conviviality as inducement, the artworks trigger a reaction beyond paintings themselves. Ultimately, the entire artwork seeks to inspire the viewers—transforming one's love of the artistic icons into a driving force for public action on the current environmental crisis.

Materials and Techniques

The project chooses to adopt digital materials and techniques mainly because they permit both hyper-realistic imaginative vision and interactive capacity. The project base is made of high-fidelity 3D models, which were the main media on which all visual content was been created. The union of 3D modelling and texturing (Blender and Substance 3D Painter) tools provided accurate likeness and atmospheric effects that are unprecedented in other types of traditional media. The project needs 3D work because this medium offers photorealistic foundations that turn Michael, Bruce and Jimi into convincingly believable figures that appear to be present in these scenes. The 3D base then is treated with digital painting in Adobe Photoshop to incorporate expressive elements such as colour grading and various stylistic elements. The mix of 3D realism with 2D painterly overlay creates a hyper-realistic effect that enhances the Sustainaissance idea of bridging traditional art world aesthetic with modern-day content.

Crucially, the addition of an augmented reality (AR) solution as a technique lifts the work from a dormant image into a more than merely visual one. By utilizing AR via Adobe Aero, the work introduces an interactive medium; each printed portrait can be scanned by the viewer onto a smart device to reveal further animated and audible layers to the work. This particular technique was chosen to enhance the emotional weight of the work; the AR experience incorporates a multi-sensory channel that can directly impact the viewer's sight and hearing—the emotional message becomes more palpable. For example, an AR experience might see the flames and smoke inhabit Bruce Lee's scene in real-time or the wind and guitar strings sounding from Jimi Hendrix's scene for a very short moment. AR adds a spatial-temporal dimension to the narrative. Additionally, the choice of media: digital modelling enabled the fabrication of realistic digital articles of clothing (cloth simulation) and believable environmental assets (trees, fire, solar panels etc.) without any physical resources (which is a very sustainable approach by eliminating physical waste). In this sense the choice of paper and canvas prints were especially functional in interfacing with real-time rendering and the AR interactivity. Every technique mentioned was relevant to the overall concept of realism, the power of symbol, and captivation. To conclude,

materials (the purely digital assets and software) and technique (3D/2D hybrid artmaking and AR solution) were considered to support the concept of the work: they serve as the methods to achieve visual fidelity for the sake of being true to the icons' identities, the versatility of storytelling of dramatic environmental themes, and the innovative opportunity to reach further into the audience.

Artistic Influences

The inspiration behind this artwork is heavily cultural in nature(s) and artistic in character. On the first level, they are, of course, the cultural natures of the icons themselves: the choice to frame Michael Jackson in the role of a guardian of the Earth has drawn strongly on his music and publicly articulated missions of healing the world (from "Earth Song" and numerous other songs, to the larger legacy of his humanitarian work); the philosophical legacy of Bruce Lee (such as the phrase "Be water, my friend" that derives from the interview cited above, and alludes to fluidity and balance, within the larger corpus of his martial arts philosophy) has been a key part of the inspiration to conceive the way he resonates with natural elements and opposes the destructive forces; while the imaginative creativity of Jimi Hendrix and his countercultural legacy of the 1960s (from the psychedelic art of the period, love and peace movement and its mode of cultural expression) has been a primary source of inspiration behind the choice to use the vivid green colour palette and whirling patterns in his portrait to invoke the natural rhythm and balance in the ecology. On the artistic side in particular, the main sources of inspiration behind this project were the artistic legacies of hyperrealism and classical propaganda art: if the hyperreality style, that draws influences from modern digital artists and 3D character art was indispensable to achieve not only a realistic lifelikeness, but a vivid emotional expression of the artwork, the propagandistic compositional style (the central heroic figures, sharp contrasts and the textual message in the form of a slogan or a call to action) was a nod to the propaganda and political posters that capture attention and galvanize people behind an idea, and around a cause. This amalgam of stylistic inspirations could be read as both a cinematic poster, and a rallying call for sustainable action in the environmental movement, but the influence of the environmental art movement and the growing genre of eco-activist art, nourished the work with a broader frame of reference for the way art and culture can interact with the issues of climate change and sustainability. At last, the convergence of emerging technology (AR and interactive media) was inspired by contemporary multimedia exhibitions of similar kind, and the digital artists that couple the digital experiences to enrich the content and expand the storyscapes. By recognizing and openly referencing these inspirations, Icons of Sustainaissance position themselves in a borderline position: standing on the cultural shoulders of giants and artistic traditions, they recycle the words and images of the past to rise to the challenges of one of the major global issues of the present.

Conclusion

Icons of Sustainaissance can be seen as a synthesis, in which heart, tech and history, interplay in symbiosis for a sustainability story. Together, its three symbolic portraits highlights the themes of rebirth, balance and environmental harmony, and reveals the idea that even symbols of popular culture can be reconceived as advocates for the planet. The value of the artwork resides in its distinct approach: it suggests that through the combination of artistry with audacity, the interaction between instinct emotion and refined technological savvy can be transformed into an expressive language. Through its potential impact, each artwork taps into the emotional core of a legendary persona and transforms it into a collective reflection on our shared responsibility in confronting environmental challenges. The opportunity is to broaden the conversation on sustainability beyond the language of science and environmentalism into heritage and shared emotional history, where parts of the audience's fantasies, hopes and fears can be mirrored and identified in the face of a legend. Icons of Sustainaissance in turn shows how art can suggest future directions by drawing from memory, legacy and nostalgia and alchemising the familiar through challenging creative work that can inspire future generations to carry the flame of sustainability by rekindling its pulse. Conveying a message that resonates with contemporary audiences with a voice of shared emotional history in its references, the project highlights a path for a rebirth in our consideration of the earth.

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Authors' Bio

Zeeshan Jawed Shah is a digital artist whose practice focuses on hyper-realistic 3D art, filmmaking, and virtual reality. He is currently pursuing his PhD at the Faculty of Creative Multimedia, Multimedia University (Cyberjaya, Malaysia), where his research explores the intersection of immersive technology and visual storytelling through creative practice. Alongside his doctoral studies, Shah teaches at Prince Mohammad Bin Fahd University in Saudi Arabia, sharing his professional expertise in digital media and design. His work integrates advanced digital techniques with themes of environment and culture, contributing to the development of conceptual creative multimedia arts.

Interactive Augmented Reality (AR) Experience & Behind-the-Scenes

Download the Adobe Aero app on your mobile device to unlock an immersive augmented reality experience. Open the app and scan the physical poster to see Jimi Hendrix come vividly to life, watch as he performs amidst vibrant visuals inspired by his iconic legacy and ecological harmony depicted in the artwork.

"Witness the Legend. Feel the Harmony. Interact with Sustainability."

To explore how Icons of Sustainaissance was meticulously crafted using advanced digital tools, view an exclusive behind-the-scenes video on YouTube:

Behind the Scenes: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0kM8Wpm_ZhM&t=2s



Scan the QR code to watch Behind the Scenes