

"Disable the River": Eco Soma Methods of Painting and AI Surrealism

Petra Kuppers
University of Michigan, USA
petra@umich.edu
<https://www.petrakuppers.com>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2026.17.2.6251>



Crip Drifts are methods for moving through the world as a disabled artist living with pain: touching, being-with, sensing in a world that is likewise disabled, compromised, thriving in complexity. Crip Drifting develops out of a surrealist/post-situationist heritage of psychogeography. When I crip drift, I spend time in a particular site, drift aimlessly, let myself be influenced by the world, by what I see and by the material realities around me. Something snags me, and I explore it—through movement and dance, words, sketches or quiet observation. Narratives begin to knit together as I stay in open attention, touching prior knowledge and research to the potential histories of a particular stone or plant. Fantastical vistas open up as my imagination connects somatic being, material presence, and the power of story. In this short visual essay, I will touch our local river's water to the water-draining cultural complex of AI, in particular Large Language Models.

In one of my crip drifts over this past year, I spent time at our local Huron River, on Anishinaabe territory, land colonially known as Michigan. This is a place I often visit: I feel nourished by the waters, by the light, by the plants, even as I am aware of the toxic histories of this river, the industries that have contaminated it over the years. I hold these contradictory emotional fields together in my bodymindspirit, in a method of being in this complicated world that I have called eco soma in my academic writing. Here I am: observing flow, the light on water, debris, ducks, vegetation. These days, Michigan environmental narratives often focus on the ongoing development of data centers, including one right here, by the shore of the Huron River. These are giant Data Centers for Large Language Model (LLM) processes, ready to drain water, raise temperatures, pollute and shift our world in exponentially threatening ways, aligned with our human digital consumption processes. That day, limping along the riverside, I meandered and then sat.

Here is an acrylic painting inspired by this evening visit (24x19 inches, acrylic on recycled canvas). I painted it at home, in my studio, calling back the multiple sensations of being by the riverside, working with light and color.



Image Description: expressive brush-strokes assemble an image of a fast-flowing river, potentially in evening light: reds and oranges reflect in the waters. The vegetation at the riverbank shimmers in greens and complementary reds. The image is angled, as if the viewer's head is cocked, giving a sense of dynamism. In the middle of the flow, a triangular-shaped tree limb reaches out of the river, white water signifying the direction of flow. The tree limb's orange echoes the vegetation by the river bank, pulling foreground and background together.

I rarely use generative AI due to its overwhelming resource implication, and in particular its water use, anathema to an eco-artist. But I do engage it every few months to create a handful of images, not more—I try to be very economical with my usage, and to have clarity about what I am looking for, aware of the environmental costs of my search.

I do so to create and track surrealist disability/AI crossings, as the language models clearly shift and adapt over time, (relatively) sensitive to ongoing user input about stigmatized imageries. So what do these Large Language Models know about disability imagery? If one were to collect images of disability representations from the past 100 years, most would be negative, full of stigma: victim images of poor cripples and institutionalized mad people. It's only relatively recently that more complex significations of disability have emerged in disability arts and culture, driven largely by the rising visibility of disabled artists. These more liberatory images, though, make up a smaller percentage of what is out there, and most LLMs use overall ratios, without weighing time factors or the identity of originating artists. This incorporation of data of all ages is also a highly complicated issue in its own right: AI

raids cultural archives without compensating makers, acknowledging sources, or understanding sources' bias.

How can I use arts-based methods to track these knowledges, how I can I use this project to enrich my communities' understanding of LLMs and how they intersect with disability art communities? How can we take (back/on/forward) the modes of (image) production in an AI age?

I generated the image below out of Gemini, a generative AI model, in early 2026, using the following prompt in combination with my original painting: "disable the river." This is of course an impossible score or input—"disability" can mean so many things, and how can a river be disabled?

I create my own original art as a disabled artist, and I can point to the traces of my disabled, pain/mobility-difference identity in the paintings I create, even when there is no literal trace of disability. In this case, with my drift by the Huron River, I am entering a slow being-with. I see the time spent, these crip time moments by the river, watching, hanging out, communing, as part of my particular flavour of a disability aesthetic. Can an AI analysis recognize that attentive slowness, this kind of crip time making, as a disability characteristic? As part of this prompt, I upload, or "sacrifice" my own painting, feeding it to the LLM—fully aware of the implications of this "exchange:" the painting now becomes part of the huge data set that associates around both "rivers" and "disability."

So what did AI identify as potential disability signifiers in my river image?



Image Description: Gemini AI picks up quite accurately on the nature of my brush strokes, and mimics them very well. The intervention in the image assembles around the tree limb in the water: a strand of twisted water crosses the tree now, pulls it under. On the flow side of the river, water is pulled up like a dark wall, crossed with light white streaks.

This seems intriguing: in this AI imagination, "disability" becomes a picture of hindrance, of turbulence, creating a vortex in the image. Indeed, a cross appears in the bottom half of the painting: "do not go here."

My next prompt was "crip the river," using a more contemporary/academia-leaning way of referring to disability in English-speaking contexts. Gemini wasn't willing to go crip hip—it went old school, instead, linking the word "crip" to gang contexts. Here is what it offered to me.



Image Description: my original acrylic painting is preserved at the level of brushstrokes, but the colors are all pulled into a blue and gold spectrum, and blue is one of the colors associated with the Crips gang. Blue-patterned bandanas abound in the water – paisley shapes echo water drops. In the middle is still the orange tree limb, with a blue bandana wrapped around it as if a neck. Words like "CCC," (a reference to the Colton City Crips) "Rollin 60's" (a reference to a particular set of the Crips gang), "NHC" (refers to Neighborhood Crips) and "Westside," as well as crowns, echo graffiti-style gang tags on the streets of Los Angeles.

The image offers an important reminder to US Disability Studies about how "crip" still reads to many as a reference to gang identification and belonging—this LLM clearly had a hard time wrenching itself out of that reference field, one with a longer history and more presence in popular media, toward a more disability-focused connotation.

I do enjoy that the new AI painting is quite a neutral image—tagging, bandanas, and the beautiful patterning speak to community creative expression, not to racist images of violence and segregation.

In my last experiment with these river paintings, I went back to “disable the river,” using a slightly different painting I did of the same scene that same week, focused on the same wooden stump in the water, again on a recycled canvas I had found in our local scrap store. This second image isn’t tilted; the river’s edge is level.

This time, when shifted by AI, “disability” becomes something different: a lush vegetation, a literal river “disabled” on the level of geographic shift—from water to growth medium.

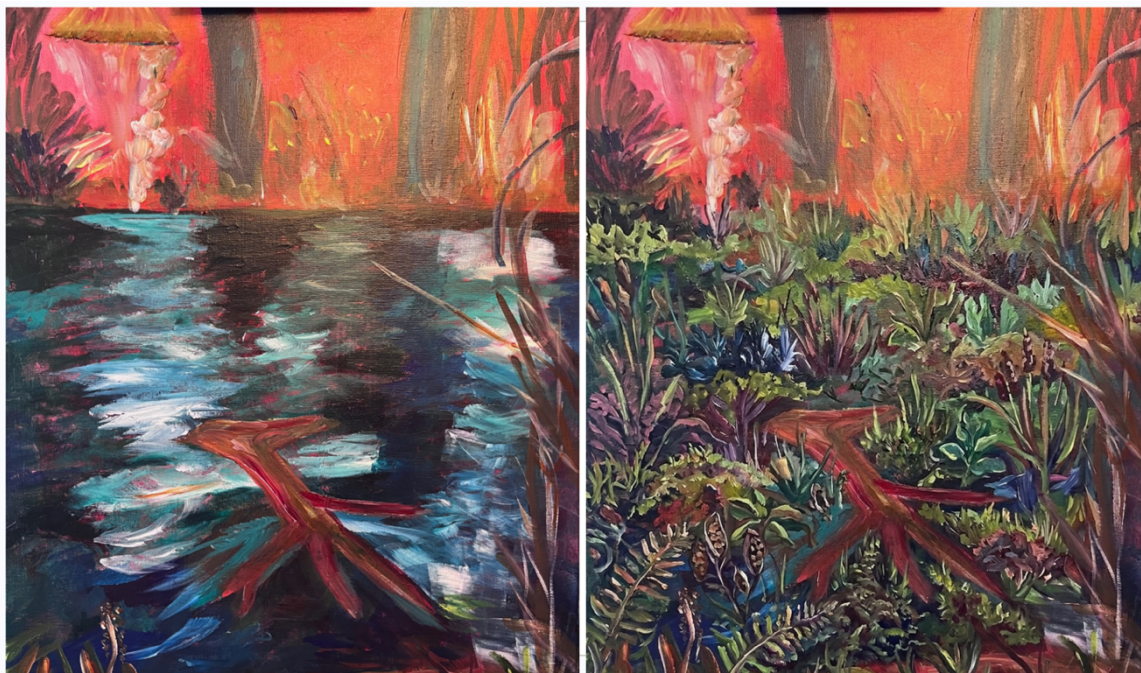


Image Description: on the left is my original acrylic painting, very similar to the earlier one, but now stilled, level, with a horizontal horizon. The scene is generally calmer—the white reflections in the water are not as turbulent, and the direction of waterflow is harder to discern. It’s more balanced and peaceful, but less dynamic. On the right is Gemini AI’s answer to my instruction: instead of the boldly brushed water, the tree limb in the foreground is now surrounded by ferns, grasses and sedges—all brushed in with verve, like my water marks were earlier, but now green with hints of blue. The horizon/water’s edge is obscured by the lush growth.

This disabled river has moved underground—it is now groundwater, a nourishing invisible presence that brings about abundance. My interpretation here is very positive: I am an active reader, looking for hope and lushness in these technological mires. I read this new image not in terms of vanishing (the river water, something that echoes discourses around data centers and their consumptions). Instead, I choose to read the shift in AI’s treatment of my river painting in terms of holding, grounding, layering, an interdependent enabling.

These exercises in surreal and willful AI collaboration combine my own careful crip drift attention, grounded in my painful embodiment and its need for rest by the riverside, with generative AI and its aggregate repertoire for disability.

When I give talks about my ongoing AI and Disability Project, I can explain how LLMs work, how tokens/reference fields become associated with one another, how these "neuronal" links become strengthened through repetition and accumulation.

And I can show through my artistic practice how these associations are not natural, but can be manipulated, stretched, played with. We can in turn learn to not use AI, in particular ChatGTP and LLMs, thoughtlessly, but to explore and expose the cultural imaginary around disability through the reference fields the systems offer back to us.

A hope against hope: every time I upload original work, I nudge the LLM incrementally. I teach it, train it, intervene in it, in barely perceptible steps, toward enriching what "disability" becomes associated with—in this case, rivers, waters, flow, turbulence, nourishment.

We are artists in the world, drifting, adrift, hopefully learning to collaborate with the forces of water and land and plants. We can think/feel/paint/be interdependent with the earth and its more-than-human loves. We can understand the jointness of struggles, even while acknowledging the deeply unjust power relations of the past and the present. We can use our tools to push for political change that shifts toward an embrace of environmental justice for all, and an acknowledgement of extractive harm in all its dimensions.

Understanding how AI works and making conscious decisions around it while it poisons our rivers and warms our environment, is part of what I have elsewhere called an eco soma method: a compromised, complex, halting, clasp-together of self and world. I offer these paintings and their transfigurations as an example of what eco-arts-based research into new technologies can look like in our AI-hungry world. Let's pause, let's sit down, let's paint and muse, and then foray out to see what happens in the technological in-between.