

RESEARCH SUMMARY

ABSTRACT

In the collective imagination, the rise of generative AI is often perceived as putting pressure on practitioners, particularly animators deeply attached to hands-on techniques. Meticulous and time-consuming frame-by-frame processes stand in sharp contrast to the immediacy of modern digital tools, which are increasingly capable of mimicking handcrafted aesthetics¹. This project investigates the visibility of creative labor in contemporary image-making, especially in relation to the growing use of opaque AI-driven production pipelines. More precisely, how is the painstaking nature of stop-motion experiencing a shift of meaning in the age of AI? Does its effort and slowness still hold value when its outcome can be imitated by digital tools?

Let the Craft Shine (Projection 1) began from two parallel visual responses to a shared metaphorical prompt - “a pair of scissors wearing a tutu, performing a ballet solo on the stage of a paper theatre” - one generated through AI image systems, and the other constructed manually through stop-motion animation. This juxtaposition revealed that the AI production pipelines remain largely invisible in their outputs. Oddly, influenced by traditional animation conventions, my initial approach to stop-motion also sought to conceal its own mechanisms, masking production artefacts off-set and off-camera in favor of illusion and magic. This observation led to a methodological shift: rather than hiding these elements, a subsequent iteration attempted to foreground the making process as evidence of human touch, ingenuity, and resourcefulness.

The project evolved into a scaled-up, stop-motion performance in *Let Us Make the Craft Shine* (Projection 2). Driven by Nomint Studio²'s mindset, this more audacious work translates the initial prompt into a human-scale installation that actively attempts to spotlight the humans behind the craft. Two performers replace mechanical rigs to puppet an oversized pair of scissors. Shot outdoors at night, the craft emancipates from the spatial constraints of the studio, while engaging with a collective of collaborators whose precious labor, improvisations, and struggles are made visible within the final piece.

CONTEXT

This project is situated within the niche field of stop-motion animation, a craft that seems more relevant than ever in the age of Ai.

It is strongly influenced by the standpoint of Nomint Studio, a key reference in the industry of stop-motion. In their website's “About” section, they state: “when something is genuinely hard to make, audiences feel the care behind it”. In an era where creative processes tend toward automation and effortlessness, engaging in stop-motion becomes a way of dedicating time, attention and intention to storytelling. Choosing this long and demanding production process can thus be understood as an act of care and commitment towards an audience.

This perspective speaks to brands that value craftsmanship and transparency such as Ffern, a natural fragrance maker deeply attached to sharing the artisan roots of perfumery. The brand favors organically shot campaigns in natural environments, produced by its own in-house film-making team. It recently collaborated with stop-motion animator Alix Bortoli to translate the orange notes of a scent into a narrative, staged in a wooden theatre where each brushstrokes remain perceptible. The texture of crepe paper is also visible, evoking the rough touch of orange peel using ordinary material substitution. These physical traces show a desire to create an emotional connection with the viewer.

¹ Coleman, E.(2025) *Claymation in prompts*. @elicoleman_

² Nomint is a London based creative studio specialized in advertising, across stop-motion, 2D, 3D, and mixed media.

Beyond the notion of effort, Nomint Studio advocates for pushing the limits of stop-motion through “moonshot ideas” and “outrageous craft”³. Their recent productions demonstrate a clear willingness to embrace ambition and risk for distinctive storytelling. In the context of their collaboration with the BBC for the coverage of Milano Cortina 2026, Nomint chose fire as an animatable material to reflect the idea of self-overcoming at the core of the values of the Olympic competition. This set a significant challenge: how to work with an element that is inherently uncontrollable with a technique like stop-motion, that relies on precise planification and mastery of each frame? The studio successfully overcame that struggle after an extensive technical experimentation, including 14 different modes of combustion in the final 45-second piece that contains flames, sparks and explosions. This bold and adventurous mindset encouraged me between Projection 1 and Projection 2, to scale up my project from a miniature setup to a human-scale production, shot in a context as uncertain as a nighttime park. Although ambitious, this outdoor nocturnal setting seemed like the most meaningful way to echo the dark atmosphere of the studio from the first iteration, while freeing myself from its spatial constraints.

When I discovered Nomint’s fire piece on a large screen at the D&AD conference on AI and Craft, I was particularly struck when co-founder Marilena Vartzi explained that audience reactions to the final rendered images were not what captivated viewers the most. Instead, the video of the behind-the-scenes generated much greater engagement, as it revealed the complexity of the milestone production and allowed viewers to grasp the physical reality behind the film. Without this additional documentation, it would have been impossible to fully appreciate the risks involved, such as exposing lenses and cameras to heat, as well as the use of tools like pocket bellows and techniques such as light painting.

In this sense, my project progressively operated within this logic of sharing the creative journey along the final polished outcome. Poppy Thaxter explains in an article that “behind-the-scenes content is no longer optional” for creatives. A stop-motion film alone is no longer sufficient to assert its materiality; nowadays, it requires complementary content that documents its making, even if this implies extra labor for the practitioner, a non-negligible point underlined in the article. More than proving its human roots, it serves as an educative tool to inform the recipients of the role of each step of the creative process. Behind the outcome are hidden decisions, struggles, and iterations. I attempted to incorporate the phases of storyboarding and prop fabrication, transformed the transparent wires/rigs into red threads, and showed my hands instead of hiding them in my last Projection 1 iteration. In Projection 2, I tried to embed in the edit the struggles of logistics by sharing the tumultuous journey to the shooting location. I also used the team’s thoughts on set as a background voiceover.

More broadly, rooting my practice in stop-motion also made me aware of its fundamentally multidisciplinary nature. Rather than belonging to a single artistic domain, it works as a true crossover of creative practices, a space that gathers numerous hands and skills. While I initially enjoyed exploring its different roles independently in Projection 1, scaling up the piece revealed the necessity of collaboration.

At a time when Ai-driven productions facilitate self-sufficiency and individualism, I recognize the value of a “Do It With Others” approach, widely developed within web initiatives through open-source practices, but as equally relevant in this case. For Projection 2, I launched an email open call within UAL network, and was struck by the diversity of profiles that engaged with the project, each bringing their own expertise to the table. The pre-production team was composed of one Costume Designer who helped me build a giant pair of scissors and its tutu, and 4 other set designers coming from art direction, film-making, product design and narrative environment backgrounds. Performers also volunteered to animate the movement of the scissors, extending the possibilities of stop-motion to a choreographic dimension, inspired by Japanese Bunraku Puppetry⁴. Camera operators contributed to capturing the scenes and backscenes, bringing technical knowledge to the shoot.

³ Still referring to their words in the website “about” section.

⁴ UNESCO recognized art that consists of the theatre performance of three puppeteers all wearing black, coordinating their gestures onset to bring life to a half life-size puppet

PROJECT CONTRIBUTION

This enquiry questions the relevance of engaging in handcrafted image-making in the age of AI, a context where access to polished visual outcomes is increasingly immediate, automated, and internalized. As generative tools make it possible to simulate crafted aesthetics, this project asks how image-makers who construct their work from scratch can continue to assert their practice. More specifically, it considers how a slow, attentive, and materially grounded approach, contrasting contemporary production rhythms, can still carry meaning.

The very fact of choosing an artisanal process is, in itself, a proof of commitment to the message being conveyed. This research explores how to make that choice visible, and how to communicate it so that it is not mistakenly associated with a simple pursuit of aesthetic, which, in this case, would be comparable to an AI-generated result. It proposes a broader vision of the designer's role, one in which they become both the maker and the mediator of their own work. Nowadays, labor is in vain if it is not shared: the aesthetic result of a craft is no longer enough. Effort today might lie more in the way we reveal the time, the struggles and the meticulousness involved in that piece of work. In this sense, this project extends the scope of graphic design beyond the screen-based outcome and invites us to endeavor making it performative and shared.

On a personal level, this project highlighted the tension between planning and uncertainty, anticipating and absence of control. Working outdoors at night introduced variables such as weather conditions, the responsibility of rented gear, and the unpredictability of the environment. I learned to prepare multiple scenarios while accepting that none would unfold exactly as I expected. In this context, the support and solidarity of the team played a crucial role in enabling me to take these risks.

This project resulted in an extremely enriching relational and collective experience, which I consider as valuable as the final outcome itself. I came to understand stop-motion as a true convergence of skills, and became aware of its collective nature, precious next to modern auto-sufficient and isolated experiences of production. This project also taught me how to reach out to others and engage with practitioners. From a professional perspective, it allowed me to connect with key figures in the field, such as Laure Chapalain⁵, Alix Bortoli, and Marilena Vartzi. It has encouraged me to continue thinking at a larger scale and to embrace risk as part of the creative process.

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⁵ Animator and former lecturer in motion design history at Gobelins, Laure Chapalain is the founder of Camera Botanica, a non-profit organization offering stop-motion workshops centred on biodiversity.

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