

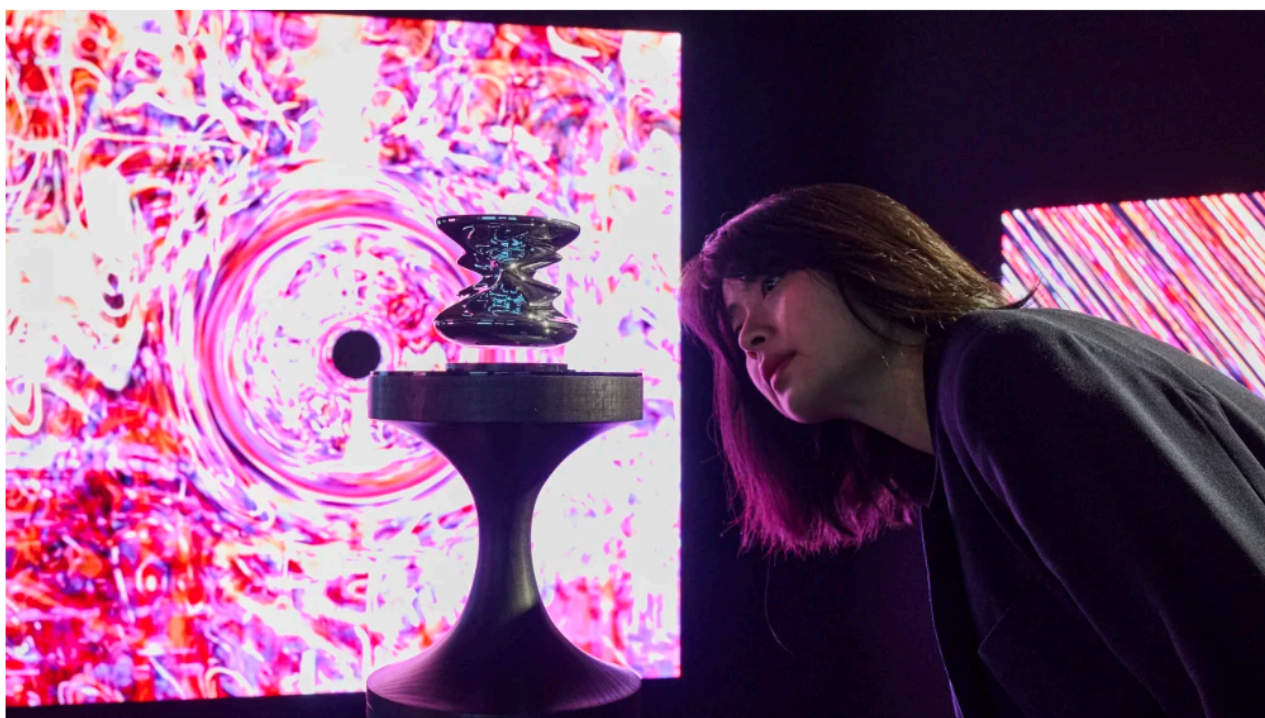
Decoded

Just what is phygital art, and why is Dubai going big on it?

By Mark Tutton, CNN
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https://edition.cnn.com/2023/05/29/middleeast/dubai-phygital-art-spc-intl/index.html?fbclid=PAAaal3097qb5rPzunprcDR7uvQbIDJhFxGu9xYiO3TXpe3iNFtKcCGflq1J0_aem_th_ARIGLorED8nAR5qY5dF8a-3W5BFN37NHQQRsroJkX-FmmuMsfQa0TWYy01wAdvxKvE



Cedric Ribeiro/Getty Images for Art Dubai

Phygital works were among the highlights at Art Dubai in March 2023.

(CNN) — “Phygital art” may not be the most elegant phrase in the English language, but it is generating a buzz in certain circles.

“Phygital” is a portmanteau of physical and digital – describing artworks that bring together the best of both worlds to create something entirely new.

Interest in digital art has grown since NFTs exploded into the mainstream in 2021, making headlines when artist Beeple sold one for \$69 million at auction. But since then, enthusiasm for NFTs has cooled. Some see phygital as a way to ground digital works in more trusted, traditional forms, while others see them as a way of familiarizing the public with the idea of digital art.

Phygital works have started appearing at forward-looking galleries around the world, and with an exciting spate of recent initiatives, Dubai is seemingly determined to put this artform on the map.

The Art Dubai international fair has a digital component exploring new media and technology trends, including phygital works. In 2021 the Firetti Contemporary gallery held an exhibition called “NFT/ IRL” (in real life), displaying physical artworks next to their digital counterparts; The Mondoir Gallery recently opened in downtown Dubai, specializing in NFTs and embracing phygital, while the Theatre of Digital Art features phygital in its high-tech multisensory exhibitions.



Immersive NFTs are on display at this Dubai art space

01:55 - Source: [CNN](#)

CNN asked some of Dubai's most progressive art institutions why the city is among the vanguard of this innovative format, and whether phygital is a significant new movement in art, or just an unwelcome addition to our vocabulary.

The following responses have been edited for length and clarity.

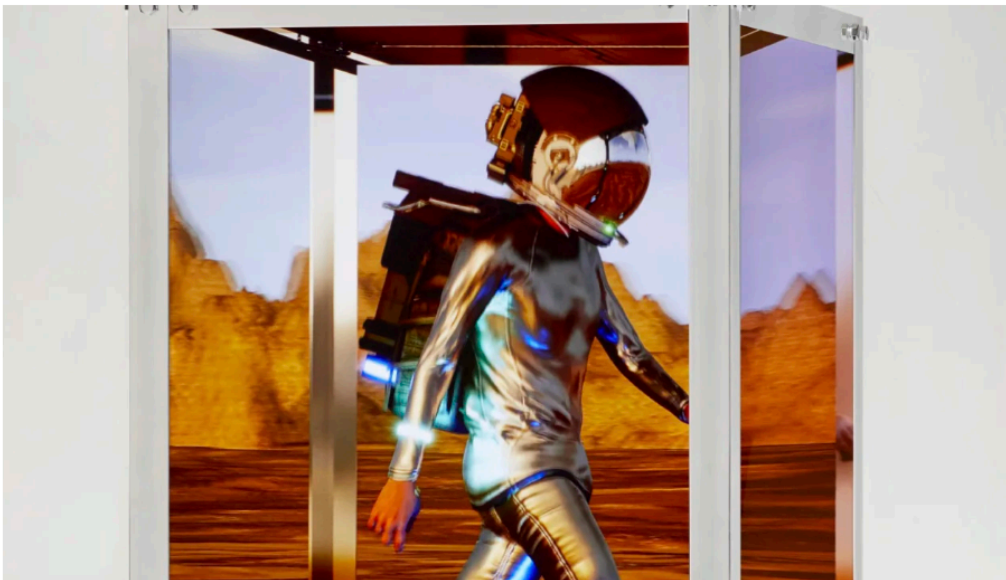
How would you describe phygital art?

Mara Firetti, founder and managing partner, Firetti Contemporary: Phygital art aims to bridge the gap between the digital and physical world, often blurring the boundaries between them. It can take various forms, including interactive sculptures, mixed-media installations, digital paintings, and performances that combine live elements with digital projections or effects.

Pablo del Val, artistic director, Art Dubai: Phygital has elements that we consider traditional, such as an architectural space, a three-dimensional structure (like a sculpture) or a physical structure that you can touch, combined with digital elements such as 3D-printing technology, blockchain technology, augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR) ... and/or artificial intelligence (AI) elements.

Could you give an example?

Pablo del Val: One famous example would be [Beeple's "Human One."](#) The work is sort of a kinetic video sculpture – four video screens, polished aluminum metal, mahogany wood frame, dual media servers, endless video with a corresponding dynamic NFT. It shows an astronaut walking in a universe of waste and leftovers. Well-known artists such as Jeff Koons and Frank Stella have also produced phygital works where their collectors can 3D-print their sculptures.



CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LTD. 2021

"Human One," by artist Beetle was sold at auction by Christie's in 2021. Separately, Christie's hosted its Art + Tech Summit at Art Dubai this year.

How does phygital art differ from NFTs? Is there overlap between the two?

Pablo del Val: Phygital works of art can also be NFTs, but a phygital work of art doesn't necessarily need to be an NFT.

Amir "Mondoir" Soleymani, founder, Mondoir Art Gallery: Technically, all assets held on the blockchain are NFTs. Digital art stored on the blockchain as a non-fungible token can be experienced physically through digital displays that allow viewers to observe or interact with the digital creations in the case of installations. Phygital is a method of connecting the digital and physical dimensions. This can be used for off-chain NFTs or assets.

Where does AI art fit into this?

Pablo del Val: AI is one of the elements that allow a work of art to be described as phygital. Artists working with artificial intelligence programs, neural networks, code, and algorithms are creating bodies of work that take the viewer to a level of reality that mixes what is true and what is not. Images, situations, actions and characters can be manipulated, creating situations and actions that never existed ... Artists who have pioneered this approach include Refik Anadol, who launched a new project at Art Dubai in March.



Cedric Ribeiro/Getty Images Europe/Getty Images for Art Dubai

Artist Refik Anadol launched the immersive installation "Glacier Dreams" at Art Dubai 2023 in March.

Why is phygital art important to you?

Amir "Mondoir" Soleymani: As we move toward digitally created and stored artworks, we must bridge the two realms in order to create the experience for viewers in the real world. Phygitals alleviate the burden of comprehension for those who are not yet immersed in the digital world by providing them with a tangible object that corresponds to a digital asset. They will be crucial in promoting the adoption of digital art.

Mara Firetti: Phygital art offers new opportunities for audience engagement and participation. Viewers can often interact with the artwork through touch, movement, or even through their smartphones or other devices. This interactive and immersive nature of phygital art can create unique and dynamic experiences, blurring the boundaries between the observer and the artwork itself.



Firetti Contemporary

An animated NFT of "Virtually Fragile," by British artist Josh Rowell, on display at the "Breaking Boundaries" exhibition at Firetti Contemporary in 2022.

What barriers are there to phygital art becoming more mainstream?

Pablo del Val: The speed at which technology is advancing means the devices you need to visualize it become obsolete very quickly. Updating the device, and the costs of doing this, has been one of the main barriers to more mainstream adoption.

Mara Firetti: Physical art holds a unique and enduring place in human culture and will continue to be cherished for its tangible qualities and the emotional connection it can evoke, while phygital art may require a level of familiarity and comfort with technology. Not all viewers may be accustomed to interacting with digital elements or understand the underlying concepts, which can affect their engagement and appreciation of phygital art.



Mondoir Gallery

Amir "Mondoir" Soleymani, with NFT works on display at the Mondoir Art Gallery.

Do you think phygital is the future of art?

Amir "Mondoir" Soleymani: No. Phygital is here to create an experience. It makes it easier to understand and interact. The future is digital art.

Mara Firetti: The rise of technology and the development of sophisticated methods in phygital art will undoubtedly expand the horizons of artistic expression and create new possibilities for artists and audiences alike but it will never replace physical art entirely.

Pablo del Val: Personally, I'm quite old school – and my view is that nothing will substitute what humans create with their hands ... but we can't deny that technology is advancing so fast that sooner or later it will become the main tool for artists. As long as it comes from the mind and the soul of humanity, anything is possible and we should not be closed to it.