



INSIGHTS 2026



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The cover image originated from ink-in-water photographs created for a 2016–17 SCAD catalog photoshoot by Justin Chan (B.F.A. photography, 2016), with assistance from Parker Stewart (B.F.A., photography, 2015) and Hadley Stambaugh (B.F.A. photography, 2014). ChatGPT supported early concept development and visual direction. The source images were digitally reinterpreted through layered compositing and color studies in Canva, including the use of Magic Studio tools to isolate and transform visual elements, while cloud forms were introduced to extend the composition. This image was refined in Gemini to adjust the atmospheric density and forms. Two iterations from Gemini were combined and edited in Adobe Photoshop.

“ We need a new way to talk about design,
a new way to talk about designers, and a
new way to talk about what designers do.

Ovetta Sampson, Founder/Owner, Right AI

INTRODUCTION

When making no longer demands attention, where does creativity go? Generations of creators have defined themselves by the act itself — the hand on the medium, the hours spent closing the gap between imagination and result. As new technologies absorb the act that artists hold sacred, that identity shifts. For instance, when photography claimed likeness in the nineteenth century, artists moved toward what the camera could not capture.

Hilma af Klint, one of Sweden's most esteemed artists, began by painting the visible world: botanical studies, portraits, landscapes. As photography took that territory, she didn't try to compete. "Those granted the gift of seeing more deeply," she wrote, "can see beyond form, and concentrate on the wondrous aspect hiding behind every form, which is called life." The result: abstraction, a new visual language that emerged from the ground that had just disappeared.

The comparison holds, but only so far. Photography took over what we could see and, in doing so, destabilized what viewers understood as real. Artists who once recorded the visible world found themselves freed from it and moved inward, toward the interior life the camera couldn't reach.

AI follows that same logic, but further. It generates outputs that resemble how we think: synthesis, taste, and judgment. It produces results that feel like intention. The question worth studying is whether that intention is real or just a convincing imitation, and how much that distinction actually matters.

That difference comes down to something simple: judgment forms through practice, getting things wrong, diagnosing why, and trying again. AI skips that process, rendering results that look right without understanding why.

The gap between producing something and knowing why it works is where direction lives, in the act of design.

At this year's SCAD AI Summit, one gap showed up consistently: the space between those who produce work and those who shape direction. Most classrooms and boardrooms still reward what gets produced, and how fast, but the real work happens earlier. Direction — taste, intention, the leap between need and creation — resists those measures, which is why it gets deprioritized. Creative value begins there.



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SCADpro Professor, SCAD

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Author, Speaker, and Former President, Walt Disney Imagineering

Before this year’s AI Summit, SCADask surveyed creative leaders across industries like entertainment, technology, healthcare, automotive, and more to understand how AI changes the way they work. More than 100 shared their perspectives on workflows, tools, skills, and what education must do next. Their insights appear throughout this report. An overview of the survey shows that:

- AI is now operational across creative practice.
- Workforce concerns center on preparation rather than inevitability.
- Cultural and educational barriers outweigh technical limitations.
- Education is the strongest leverage point.
- Quality standards and governance are emerging pressure points.

With insights and information taken from the pre-summit survey, student-centered AI Summit Jam, and summit proceedings, this report organizes its findings around five filters to provide a road map for a new mindset of design. Each filter traces a different face of the same shift: the movement from production toward the direction layer, where creative authority lives.

FILTERS

Emergence

Where signals appear before they have names. 8

Acceleration

Where speed shifts decisions upstream. 14

Transformation

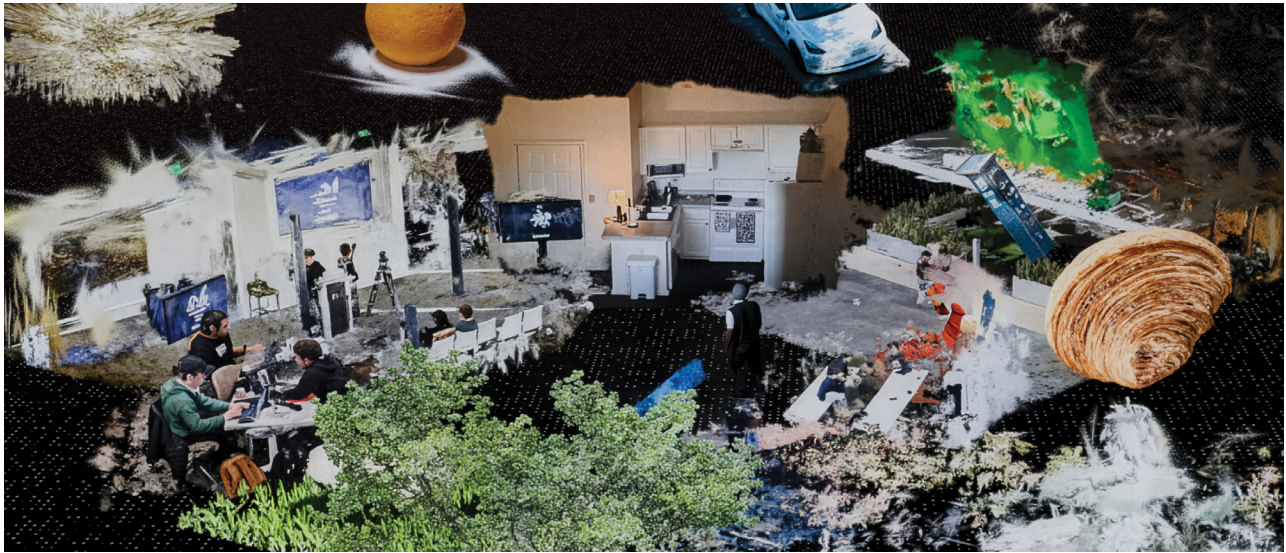
Where designers and industries adapt and restructure. 22

Foundation

Where humans source their creative authority. 32

Horizon

Where design moves before the map exists. 40



PROJECT R.E.M.

At this year's AI Summit, SCAD launched its first AI Summit Jam, a 48-hour sprint powered by NVIDIA. More than 70 students across disciplines in 18 teams were challenged to scale 3D content and simulation using digital twins, OpenUSD (Universal Scene Description), and NVIDIA Omniverse. The constraint was real: integrate directly into existing pipelines within two days, using both real and synthetic data, with access to SCAD's Satellite AI Lab compute resources — NVIDIA RTX 6000 GPUs. In addition, students had access to NVIDIA Brev, a platform that delivers immediate access to GPU instances preconfigured for AI and ML development across multiple cloud providers.

Interoperable OpenUSD-based pipelines compressed the distance between concept and working prototype across next-generation visualization, simulation, and industrial digital twin environments. The teams produced solutions that spanned industries and scales — from 2D documentation converted to 4D preservation, to immersive worldbuilding, a customizable coral reef, a digital twin of hospital foot traffic, and rescue robot training simulations for collapsed interiors. The work that would take quarters to learn was reduced or eliminated by AI-driven platforms and practices, allowing the students with the least amount of technical proficiency to keep pace. Given 48 hours, students didn't adapt to the future; they built it.

The winning team, *Project R.E.M.*, made something more personal. Their concept: a system that lets people capture and step back inside their own memories. The pipeline they assembled drew from across the production stack. Blender and Unreal Engine handled environment construction, testing, and visualization. Luma AI, Jawset Postshot, and Meshy converted 2D photos and video into 3D splats, objects, and scenes that could be integrated into those environments. Mixamo managed character animation. Google Antigravity and Gemini supported coding and ideation. Figma served as the hub for research synthesis, pipeline documentation, iterative development, and presentation design.

The challenges were instructive. Integrating 3D Gaussian splats into Unreal Engine 5 required work-arounds because standard file formats and plugins were outdated or unsupported. The team also had to contend with a harder design problem: finding a practical path to consumer adoption and a compelling reason to choose their product over existing alternatives. Both problems were solved.

“Our concept sparked exciting conversations and ideation for alternative applications,” the team said, “such as assisting individuals with visual and/or memory impairments, the use of live 3D recreations to allow remote viewing for live events, and construction planning documentation.”

The question they’re ready to explore at this moment: “What comes next?”

“I’m amazed that the students were able to ideate and build such a memorable product in just 48 hours — all while learning new toolsets.

Dan Schneider, Enterprise Platforms
Product Specialist, NVIDIA

THE TEAM

Ramón Abreu

B.F.A. animation

Nikhil Krishnadass

M.F.A. interactive design
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Nathan Mashke

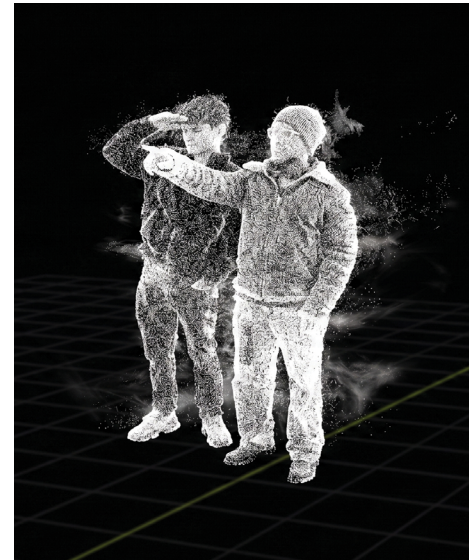
B.F.A. animation

Brendan Sapp

B.F.A. industrial design

Lane Wallace

B.F.A. visual effects





EMERGENCE

In the pre-summit survey, AI is driving efficiency gains most where the work is generative: research and insights synthesis at 76%, content creation at 67%, ideation at 63%. The gains are concentrated at the front end of the process.

Emergence arrives at the edge of practice, in the friction of an outdated workflow, a word not yet invented, or the work-around that becomes the method. At this year's summit, the sharpest signals came from the hesitations.

The Prompt Comes Last

Design judgment lives in everything that precedes the prompt. Each brief begins the same way — the goal, internalized; the questions, asked; the context, loaded. From there the designer can focus on what AI cannot supply: point of view.

A Mirror With Resistance

Some teams now start with the output, a practice with no settled name yet. Building creative experiences around generative systems, they pull live APIs (the direct connections to the underlying model) from engineering and test what the system actually produces before designing the interface around it. In generative work, assumption is the first thing to audit.

“When you’re building creative tools for generative AI, you have to be able to see the results of the model in order to design the right experience.

Brooke Hopper, Senior Principal Designer,
Machine Intelligence and New Technology, Adobe

From Many to One

What previously required a team now requires imagination and the conviction to build the vision alone. Where a film treatment once required a production budget to visualize, a single creator can populate scenes with actors and sets, build a deck with visual fidelity, and arrive at a meeting with work that a single person, one year ago, could not have made without others.

Words Arrive First

The field has not caught up to its own practice. If steps in the process can be skipped, do they still matter? If judgment forms through years of practice, what happens when generation arrives first? The questions are outpacing the frameworks built to answer them. That gap runs through every team — between designers who built their judgment before the acceleration and those who arrived after it, asking how to define their fields rather than how to enter them. When designers reach for language that doesn’t yet exist, the reaching is the signal. The words arrive before the frameworks.

That gap between what practice has outrun and what language has yet to name is where emergence lives. The next frameworks start with designers willing to invent new taxonomies and define what the field becomes.

THRESHOLD VOCABULARY

These concepts surfaced at the summit without settled definitions. Each names something practice has already outrun.

Precision Continuum

Every creative workflow runs from ambiguity at the start, where generative AI works best, to precision at the finish, where it struggles. Designers who know where they are on that continuum wield it with authority.

The User Is Not Always Human

In agentic systems, AI is increasingly the user. When multi-agent systems generate outputs for each other, design assumptions organized around human needs become engineering constraints.

The Other Mind

Non-determinism produces outputs that surprise the person prompting them. Most workflows treat unpredictability as a problem. A few are beginning to treat it as the point.

Context Float

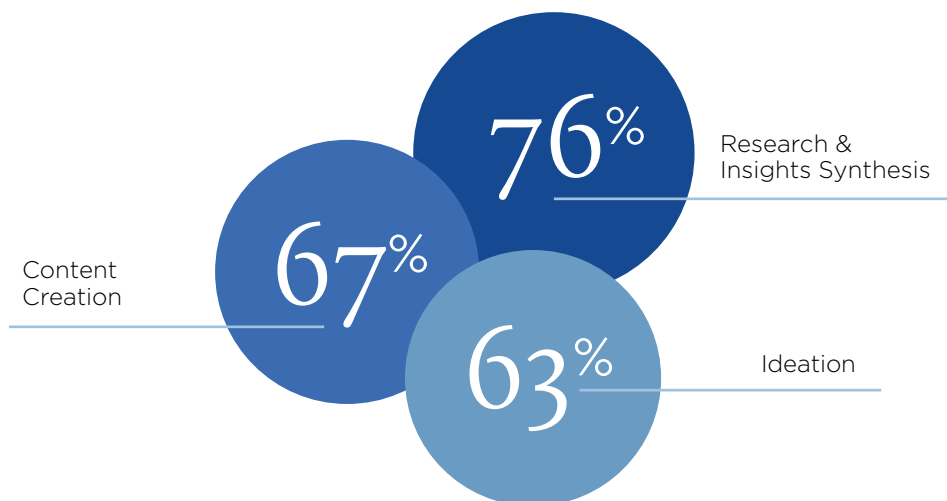
When a system lacks context, it latches onto whatever surfaced most in the prompt and follows it somewhere unintended. The result isn't random; it's incomplete.

The Interface That Renders Itself

Generative UI allows specialized use cases to live-render their own interface in response to model output. The interface becomes dynamic, shaped by the model as much as the designer.

AI's biggest gains sit at the front of the work.

Research and insights synthesis leads all efficiency categories. Judgment precedes every one of those gains.



Synthetic Rehearsal

Ideas can now be tested against simulated audiences before reaching real ones. What it means for the designer's relationship to actual human response remains unresolved.

Scoring Ecosystem

When AI generates outputs, someone has to define what good looks like. Designers who build the scoring framework shape what the system learns to optimize for. Those who don't leave the most consequential creative decision to someone, or something, else.

“What does it mean to evaluate design — what is good, great, and bad? That definition is now being done by the designer as a person and not just randomly asking any AI system.

Karthik Narayan, Design Director, Amazon

HOW TO READ SIGNALS

Early-stage creative change doesn't arrive as data. Emergence appears before it can be named, fragmented and easy to miss. Signals live in friction, in questions designers keep returning to without resolution. Reading them requires the ability to recognize direction before it becomes obvious.



Observe Fragments, Not Conclusions

Don't wait for ideas to resolve. Note them. The strongest signals arrive incomplete, appearing before they stabilize and circulating across disciplines before they're defined. Early clarity is often false and can close off emergence before it takes a form.



Follow Vocabulary Before It Settles

Treat instability as information. When a new term spreads without an agreed definition, pay attention. Inconsistent vocabulary across disciplines signals active formation being worked out in real time. The unsettled word is the leading edge.



Locate the Shift in Question Type

Watch how questions change. When a field starts asking different questions, a deeper shift is underway. Track what the asking itself reveals about how designers understand their role.

**Map Cross-Disciplinary Convergence**

Notice when different fields reach for the same concept. When disparate designers arrive there independently, the convergence carries more signal than solo arrivals. Shared language marks the early boundary of something real.

**Treat Emergence As Atmosphere**

Apply perceptual modes alongside analytical ones. Pay attention to tone, hesitation, or the ideas designers return to without resolution. Examine those signals before the meaning becomes obvious.

“You can’t apply AI to nothing. You need the disciplines themselves. Then you need to understand the frustrations they’re dealing with in order to apply AI to it.

Nye Warburton, Dean, School of Creative Technology, SCAD



ACCELERATION

In the pre-summit survey, most practitioners describe early stages of AI adoption: 32% piloting, 30% exploring, only 13% at scaling or optimization. The summit conversation ran ahead of that. What follows reflects what it looks like when the leading edge moves faster than the field.

Generative AI pushes judgment upstream where decisions arrive before outputs. When iteration that once took weeks takes minutes, even seconds, the designer's attention shifts away from making to selection. At this year's summit, design leaders described shifts in how practice moves faster, how hiring pivots, and how expectations reset.

The Schedule Shift

The bottleneck has moved from production to decision because seeing a concept no longer requires building it. That constraint shaped organizational decisions as much as individual ones — how many options leadership considered, how long approval cycles ran, how much risk a team could afford to explore. Adoption is spreading faster than anticipated and the next generation enters asking where they can create value.

A Rising Floor

Standards reset fast when capability becomes visible. Six months ago, AI-assisted polish was a differentiator. Now its absence signals someone falling behind. Designers who integrate generative systems into their daily practice and build them into the products they ship earn more than designers who do not. Their value compounds as the baseline rises. What distinguished a designer six months ago is expected today.

“Folks with the ability to leverage AI both in their day-to-day work and to build it into the products they work on — those skills come at a premium. We’re actually seeing the reverse of devaluation — having that capability actually increases their value.”

Shaun Rance, Senior Design Director, Enterprise XD, Netflix



From the 2026 AI Summit Jam. *Sketch to Screen*, “Deploying World Models in Real-Time Artistic 3DGS via USD Voxelization.”

Ben Jones (B.F.A. visual effects); Itim Kongsakulvatanasook (M.F.A. visual effects); Danci Shen (M.A. interactive design and game development).

“Most UX designers spend most of their time in AI on the right, in applied AI. Where we’re needed is on the left — in inference, evaluation, human-in-the-loop, and what is now being called model context design.

Ovetta Sampson, Founder/Owner, Right AI

Distributed Workflows

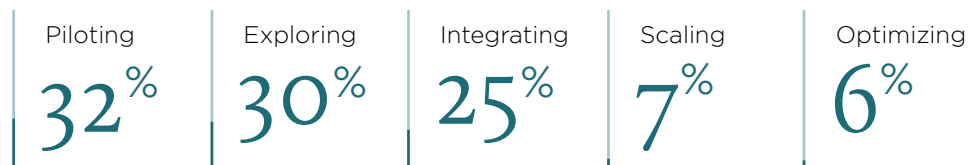
Agentic systems are restructuring the architecture of creative process. Tasks that once moved step-by-step now run in parallel, handled by specialized agents that complete portions of the chain autonomously. The designer’s role shifts from execution to orchestration where they map the experience, direct the flow, decide where intelligence gets applied, and evaluate what comes back. Specialist depth now lives in the agent layer. The human moves between strategy, facilitation, and oversight as conditions demand.

A Compressing Gap

Forty-eight hours. That’s how long the SCAD AI Summit AI Jam gave students from a range of disciplines to tackle complex systems and produce solutions outside their technical background. What those students accomplished redefines fluency. Readiness today measures whether designers can collaborate across disciplines, orient quickly, iterate under pressure, and direct output toward solutions that work.

Adoption stage distribution

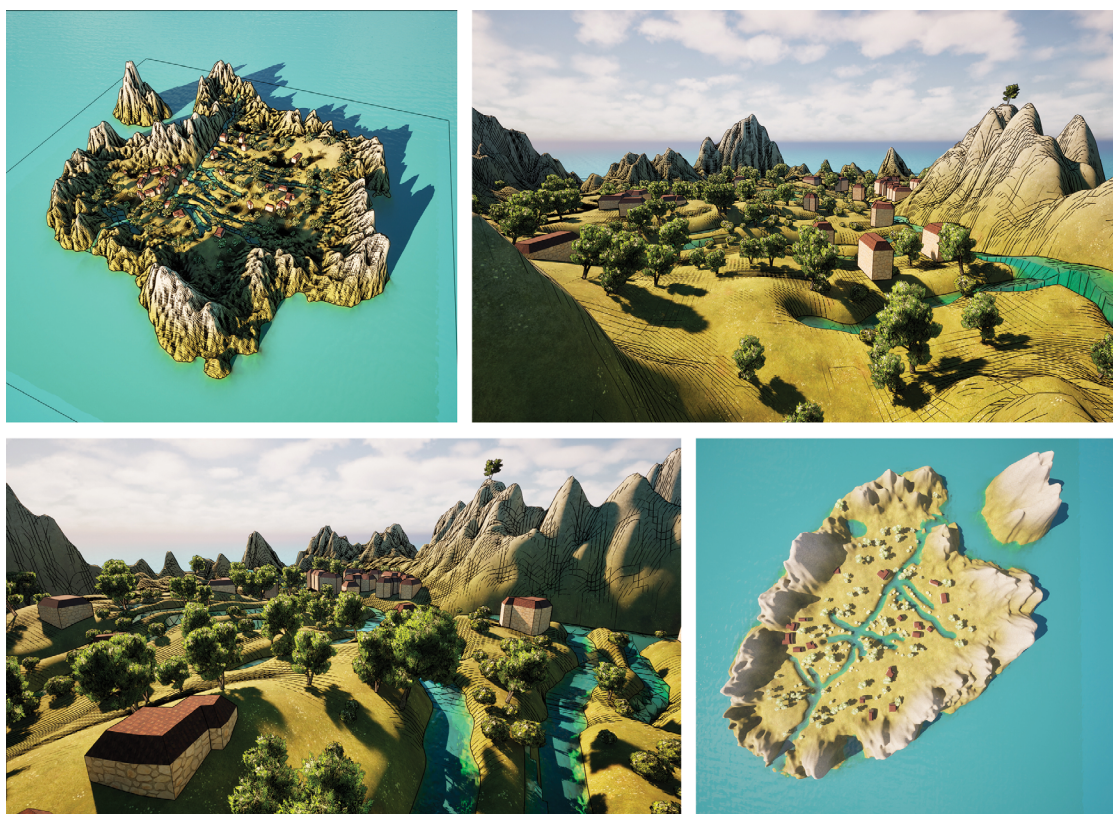
27% of creative output now involves AI systems. Adoption is widespread; integration is uneven.



Behavior Gap

Stated preference is losing ground to observed behavior. What people say they do no longer aligns with what they actually do, and that gap has become consequential enough to register. The shift is toward behavioral data: logs, actions, the observable record of how output actually moves. Designers who shape those measures carry more authority over what gets built and why. Those who leave it to others leave the most consequential conversation to someone else.

The pace of design has changed. What design is for has not. Every gain in speed is only as valuable as the intention it serves.



From the 2026 AI Summit Jam. *AI-Assisted Procedural Generation of Game-Ready Towns and Cities Using Houdini and OpenUSD.*

Xinyu Han (M.A. interactive design and game development);
Wanhe Jiang (M.A. interactive design and game development);
Xinyi Liang (M.F.A. interactive design and game development).

MOMENTUM LINES

Acceleration is a condition of the work, not a feature of the medium. As iteration becomes immediate, design moves from producing outcomes to governing exploration itself. Speed relocates judgment earlier in the cycle, higher in the organization, and faster in every decision.

Rapid Variation

When possibilities multiply instantly, design becomes an act of directing difference. The challenge shifts from generating the next option to recognizing which option is worth building on, and why that recognition still requires a human. Direction replaces iteration as the core skill.

Compressed Decisions

Shorter cycles demand sharper judgment. The compounded ability to consume, critique, and ask sharper questions becomes the differentiator. When machines accelerate production, humans who have honed their judgment accelerate with it.

Expanding Expectations

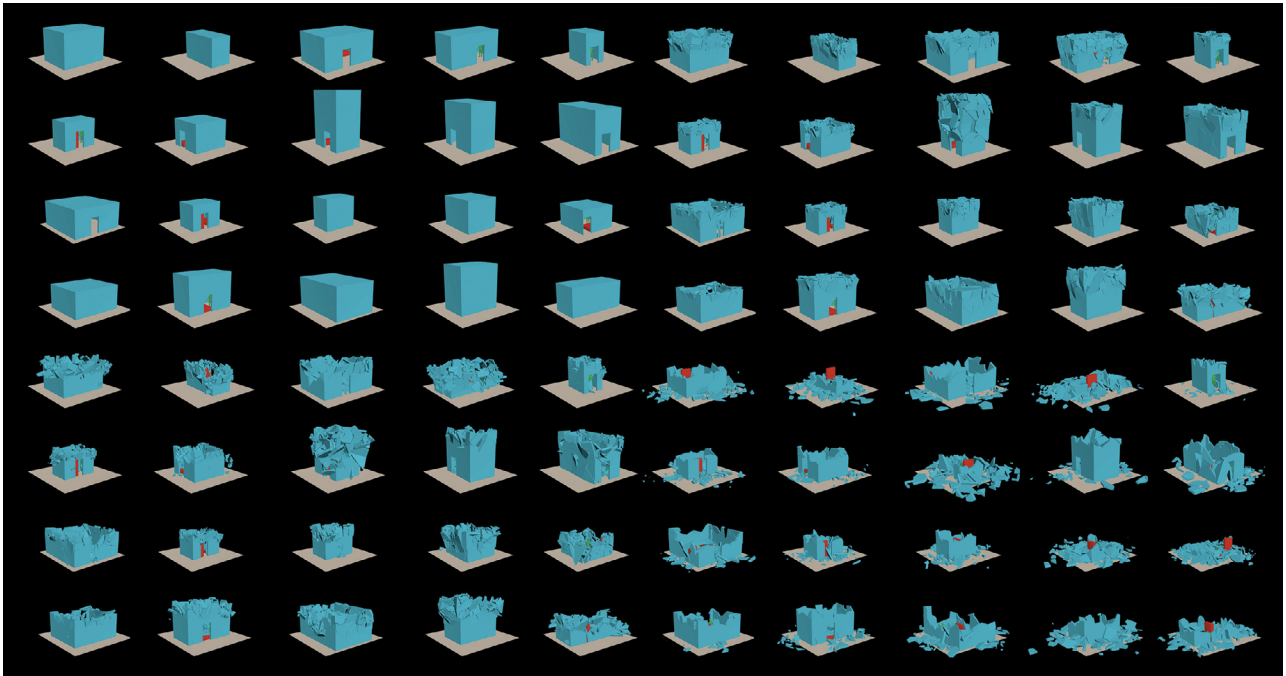
Designers move from managing output to steering momentum. As velocity increases, assumptions about fluency rise with it: what was emerging becomes expected; what was optional becomes required. The design leaders already operating at this pace are defining what the next baseline looks like.

The Sameness Ceiling

When generation scales across an industry simultaneously, outputs converge. The same models, prompts, and aesthetic decisions are produced faster than ever, looking more alike than before. Speed without differentiation produces volume without distinction; differentiation requires constraints and intention.

“Part of the new creative role is thinking like a renegade, someone who breaks down what the canon has established. Be as eccentric as possible. A conservative designer is vulnerable to being replaced.

Bob Weis, Author, Speaker, and Former President, Walt Disney Imagineering



From the 2026 AI Summit Jam. *Scan 2 Chaos*, “Dataset of 20 Procedurally Generated Interior Collapse Environments.”

Lars Langenbach (B.F.A. immersive reality);

Kulin Mehta (B.F.A. visual effects);

Anushhka Thakur (B.F.A. immersive reality).

HOW TO NAVIGATE ACCELERATION

Velocity is a condition, not an emergency. The challenge is knowing when to intervene and when to commit. Designers who work with speed shape it to get to the question faster. They find where value resides and create it.



Build Intentional Pauses Into Fast Cycles

Use pauses to recalibrate and make the fast work count: Is the direction still right? Has the goal shifted? What does the best version require? Who is this actually for? Speed without these assessments produces drift.



Anchor Speed With Direction

Know the difference between fast and purposeful iteration. One produces volume; the other produces direction. A goal worth pursuing, an intention worth measuring, a human need worth solving — these anchor the work when momentum threatens to carry it elsewhere. Apply the filter before deploying velocity.

**Use Iteration To Deepen Perspective**

Mine each cycle for information. Compounding means understanding better, not generating more. Iteration without that learning is acceleration without progress.

**Treat Rising Expectations As Signal**

A higher baseline isn't just pressure; it's a signal. The response is steadiness instead of anxiety. As tools change and methods evolve, the ability to test and learn quickly remains the constant.



These technologies are designed for you to start using them quickly. They're like any other extremely powerful product; if you're not properly trained, you're not going to have a great outcome.

Nick Dine, SCADpro Professor, SCAD



TRANSFORMATION

In the pre-summit survey, 63% of practitioners define their primary KPI for AI success as time saved. Output quality, customer outcomes, and revenue growth together account for 16%. The field is measuring what's easiest to count.

Transformation shows up in what no longer holds. It appears in the gap between what designers assumed would stay and what has already given way, like a definition of craft that expanded or an ethical instinct that formed before the framework existed to name it. The designer recalibrates from within.

Redefined Designer

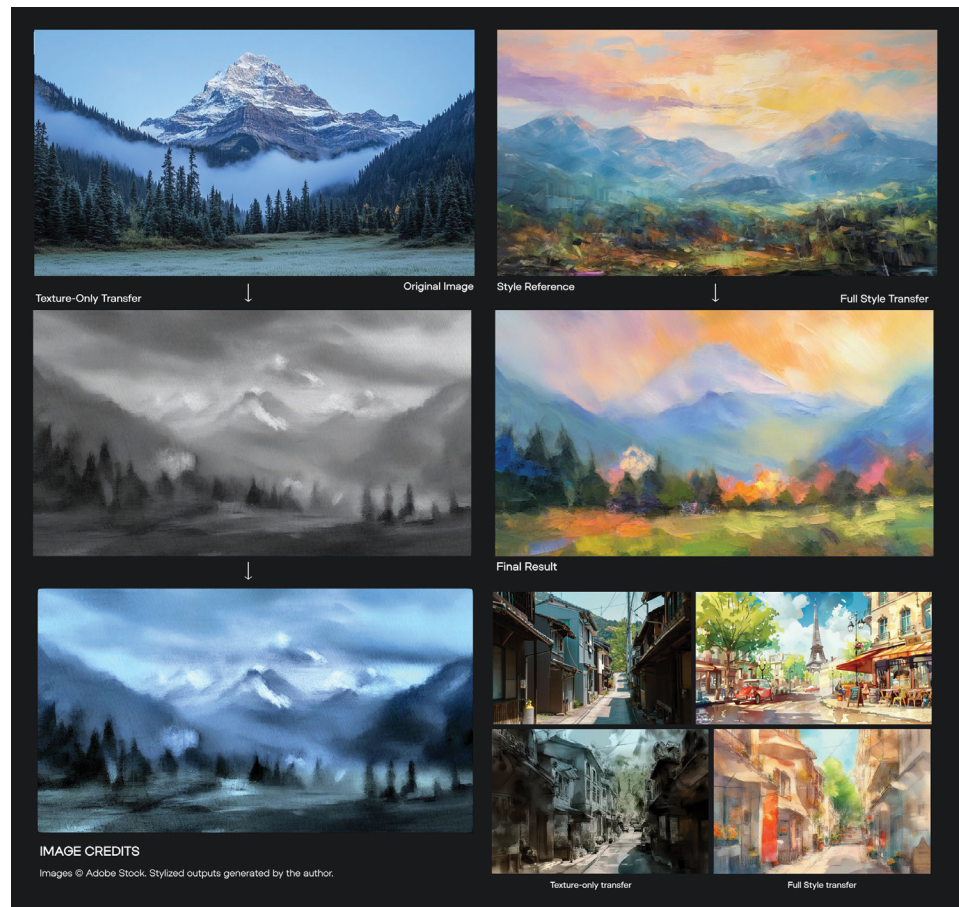
Before modernism separated concept from craft, the question of what counted as design had a simpler answer. It lived in the hand, in the time spent mastering a medium. That boundary has been dissolving for decades; AI accelerated the reckoning. Generation is becoming infrastructure: present, constant, and available to anyone. When that happens, the definition of creative work migrates from the made to the meant. The judgment, the intention, the ability to recognize when something goes wrong and redirect it are acts of design. A designer's value lives in the process.

“It’s a shifting of the craft and the role that we play as designers. ... It’s not a devaluing — it’s a restructuring of how we look at the creative role.”

Shaun Rance, Senior Design Director, Enterprise XD, Netflix

What Hiring Reveals

Hiring is moving in one direction now: toward resilience as the résumé lost ground to the story. What matters now is whether a designer can explain why something went wrong or got difficult, especially when AI led them somewhere unintended. The strongest candidates name what happened, what they learned, what they would do differently, and why they’re still proud of the attempt. That capacity belongs entirely to them and must be earned.



From the 2026 AI Summit Jam. *Sketch to Screen*, “Artist-Directed Style Transfer With Controllable Color Preservation.”

Ben Jones
(B.F.A. visual effects);
Itim Kongsakulvatanasook
(M.F.A. visual effects);
Danci Shen
(M.A. interactive design
and game development).

Inside the Design

The promise of AI as a full creative process is easy to see: feed it a direction and receive a polished output. The result looks complete. It isn't. Generation compresses the process, skipping the interval in the middle. That space belongs to the designer who makes a piece of work singular rather than sufficient; it's where perspective enters, where voice forms, where judgment decides what remains. The middle is irreplaceable. It cannot be averaged. Skip it and the work looks like everyone else's.

“What AI is most helpful for is the very beginning — when you're starting just to explore — or at the very end, a polish. But that middle part is actually where people's voices and your own unique perspective come in.

CJ Jones (B.F.A., advertising, 2011),
Head of Design for GenAI, Canva



From a collaborative visual effects course, mentored by Harbor Picture Company and Electric Theatre Collective, to create a 30-second commercial while integrating AI into the CG pipeline.

Nidhi Jallepally (B.F.A. visual effects); Mia Laplanche (B.F.A. animation); Ella Lawlor (B.F.A. visual effects); Zachary Malich (B.F.A. visual effects); Emily Marcelis (B.F.A. animation).

“When do I work fast? When do I pull the lever to stop what’s going on in the machine?”

Kate Aronowitz (B.F.A., graphic design, 1997),
Portfolio Operations Lead, GV (Google Ventures)

The Cost of Efficiency

The obvious benefit of speed is speed. The less obvious cost is what generation replaces. There is a version of efficiency that hollows itself out: the kind that skips the steps that build mastery. When AI completes work a designer has not yet learned to do, the output arrives without the understanding. The cognitive labor of building judgment — getting something wrong, correcting it, forming the competency that only comes from situated practice — gets skipped. The result may look the same but the designer is not.

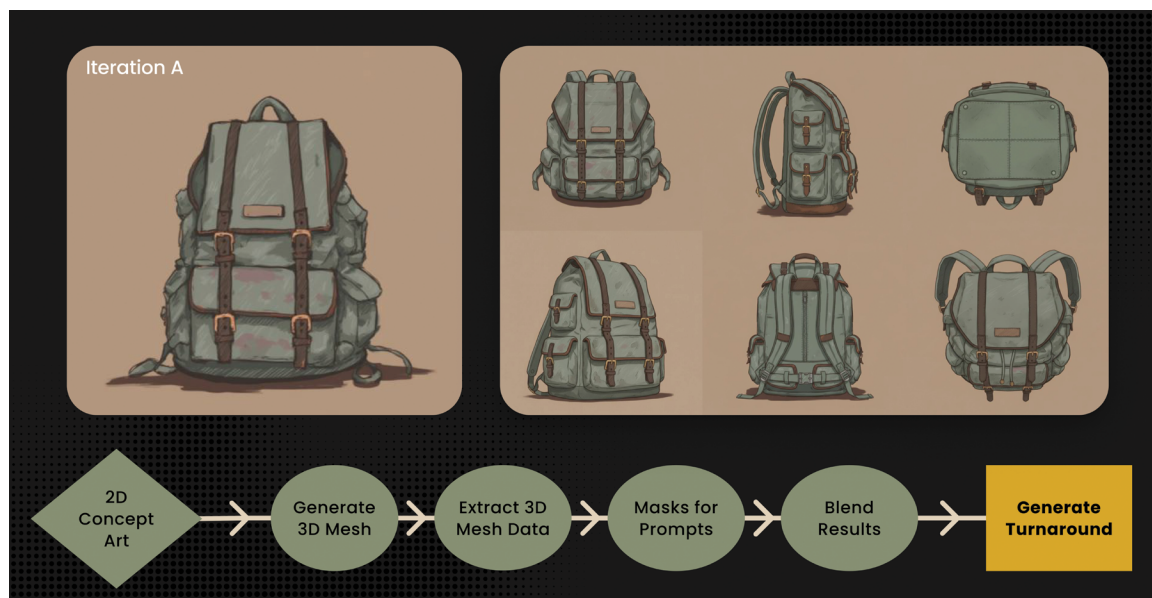
The ability to recognize when output has gone wrong depends on having done the thing badly first. That developmental arc is now at risk of being bypassed. The deeper question is structural: if the entry-level work that once provided that formation disappears, where does the arc get built instead? The answer emerging across the field — and taking shape in curricula that treat foundations as the curriculum rather than the prerequisite — is that formation has to be rebuilt deliberately, earlier, and inside the educational arc itself. 78% of respondents report observing AI-driven efficiencies in their organization’s work. The conversation has shifted from whether to how, which makes the question of what efficiency costs more urgent.

“What is your design ethics statement? Mine is: to amplify the beauty of humanity without harming its fragility. Does AI align with that? When it doesn't, I make an easy decision about whether that's going to be my collaborator. But when you don't have those things, it becomes very murky.

Ovetta Sampson, Founder/Owner, Right AI

Ethics Upstream

Authorship and misinformation led survey respondents' ethical concerns at 66% and 64%, ahead of data security and accuracy. Ethical instincts like these arrive before the frameworks do. Designers form positions about credit, consent, bias, and the right uses of AI before the industry offers language for it. That reaching is itself a shift. The practitioners with the most clarity have built their own ethical positions. When a system aligns with their position, the path forward is clear — and when it doesn't, so is the decision. The dissenting voice is often the first person in the room to see risk. That deliberate skepticism becomes policy before policy exists.



Measured Trust

Trust varies with what designers stand to gain or lose. For some, AI expands access and possibility. Trust comes easily. For others, it threatens what they've spent years building. Displacement becomes immediate and personal. Both responses carry the same history: technology arrives as extraction and promises efficiency while concentrating power. The barriers that persist reflect that ambivalence: cultural resistance, data and IP risk, and training gaps each register between 36–38%, while compute constraints trail at 9%. The field widens when designers from more contexts find agency inside it.

Transformation asks something specific of designers: the willingness to release what once defined the practice and build from what remains. Designers who recalibrate from within don't wait for the field to settle. Their work continues.

From a SCADpro Electronic Arts two-week design challenge to develop a workflow that allows artists to create a unique and consistent art style while integrating AI tools in the process.

Anush Bhavsar (B.F.A. animation); Sanika Godbole (B.F.A. visual effects);
Anna Goodwin (B.F.A. visual effects); Bua Kanjanapongporn (B.F.A. visual effects);
Nidhi Jallepally (B.F.A. visual effects); Devansh Singh (M.F.A. animation).



PIVOT POINTS >>

Creative practice doesn't evolve evenly. It shifts at pressure points, where old assumptions disperse and new ones take their place. This is the moment the field redraws itself. The designers who first see the evolution decide what it becomes.

From Singularity > Toward Dimensionality

Designers defined by one deep skill are giving way to those who move across domains, using expertise in one area to address risk in another. Adaptability is the architecture of a resilient practice.

From Capability > Toward Limitation

Most adoption conversations focus on what AI can do. The more consequential question is what it cannot — and who knows the difference. Designers who understand the limitations carry expertise that capability alone can't supply.

From Output > Toward Intention

Generation without purpose produces volume, not value. The shift is toward clarity of intent as the prerequisite — knowing what the work is for before asking the system to make it. Intention is what turns production into design.

From Tolerance > Toward Governance

Ethics applied after deployment is remediation. Applied upstream, it's design. The designers building personal frameworks before the industry formalizes them are the curve.

From Sentiment > Toward Behavior

How people feel about a system and how they actually use it are no longer aligned. The new measurement is toward behavior: observable, specific, and connected to outcomes. What gets measured shapes what gets made.

From Access > Toward Agency

Access lowers the barrier to entry, but it does not guarantee genuine participation. For students and designers navigating disruption, that distinction determines who moves forward and who gets left out.

From Coherence > Toward Curation

When generation scales, visual identity becomes a governance problem. The question is no longer whether the brand can produce at volume — it can — but whether what it produces still works. The designer's role shifts from making to curating: deciding what belongs, what doesn't, and where deliberate disruption earns its place. Curation is not a lesser skill, but is the editorial function applied at scale.

HOW TO FUTUREPROOF

Stability inside a shifting field is the inclination to stay oriented while conditions move. Designers learn to distinguish the assumptions worth keeping from the ones worth releasing.

- **Identify the Assumption Before the Friction Arrives**
Audit assumptions before conditions force the question. Most disruption lands on assumptions designers didn't realize they had. Name them explicitly: what design is, who a designer is, what good work requires.
- **Use Contradictions As Diagnostic Tools**
Sit with contradictions before resolving them. When values conflict — speed and depth, efficiency and meaning, access and quality — the tensions mark where work is still being figured out. Treat this as a signal, not a problem to engineer away.
- **Design Your Ethics Statement Before You Need It**
Claim a position before the field asks for it. A clear, personal framework — specific, actionable, and honest about what the work is for — becomes a decision filter when conditions shift faster than policy can follow. Apply it in both calm and uncertain conditions.

**Build for Fluidity**

Pursue fluidity over flexibility. Flexibility adapts to one kind of change; fluidity moves across different kinds simultaneously. The design leaders who have navigated multiple waves of transformation — dot-com, mobile, now generative — describe the same underlying ability: to reorient without losing the reason.

**Protect the Middle of the Process**

Guard the middle as speed compresses both ends. This is where perspective and voice forms, and where judgment separates sufficient from singular, requiring deliberate protection. Build it into the workflow before AI's velocity removes it.

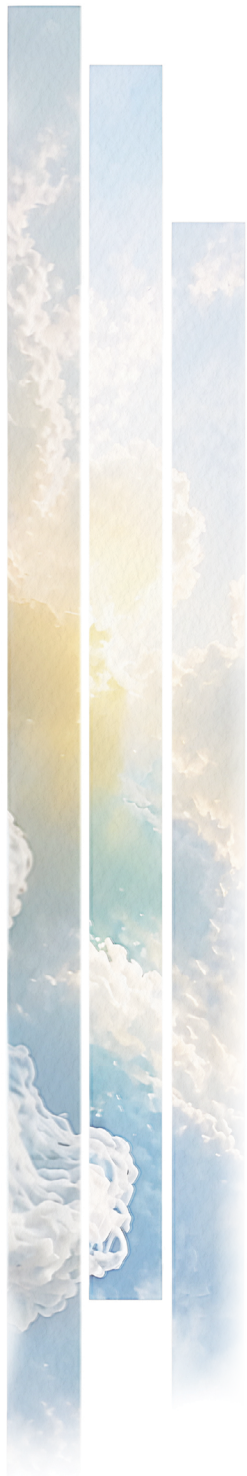
**Preserve the Conditions for Learning**

Keep the developmental arc, especially for designers who are early in their practice. Efficiency that skips learning is a loss. Judgment forms through failure, correction, and repetition. Some parts of the process should remain difficult on purpose.



We've observed that when students move to computers too early, they focus on perfection and stall the flow of ideas. On paper, they're more open, playful, and curious, which highlights an opportunity to design processes that better support early-stage creativity.

Munkhtsetseg Nandigjav (M.F.A., animation, 2015),
Executive Director of SCADask, SCAD



FOUNDATION

In the pre-summit survey, the skills gaining most value under AI adoption are creative direction and taste at 61%, storytelling at 56%, and strategy at 44%. Prompt craft and technical integration rank near the bottom. What practitioners are reaching for is interpretive, not executorial.

Every new medium arrives as a disruption and reveals itself, in time, as a clarification. Photography clarified what painting was for. The spreadsheet did the same for accounting. Generative AI strips away the production layer until what remains is unmistakably human: caring for the process, the outcome, and the person who receives it. While the system moves on, the human stays through revision and doubt — the gaps between what was intended and what was born. The previous chapters traced the disruption. This one is about what endures and what has to be nurtured on purpose.

Developmental Arc

The direction layer isn't conferred but builds through the arc — exposure, failure, the slow accumulation of judgment that lets a designer sense when output has drifted from intention. Acceleration compresses that space, which is precisely why it has to be protected.

Human skills growing in value

78% of respondents report observing AI-driven efficiencies in their organization's work. The conversation has shifted from whether to how.



The designers who matter in five years are learning now through deliberate, often inefficient effort: developing taste, absorbing precedent, learning to tell the difference between what the system produced and what the brief required. Speed is available to everyone. Discernment belongs to the designer who earned it — and earning it depends on conditions that acceleration removes. If that development disappears from entry-level work, it has to be rebuilt deliberately and earlier, inside the educational arc; it can't be assumed to precede it.

“What good design does is already changing — not what good design looks like. I think they're two different things.

Karthik Narayan, Design Director, Amazon

“85% of what you do as an artist in the studio is you just look. And so, when I’m working, I’m just sitting there, I’m thinking and I’m looking and I’m daydreaming. And I think that is part of your discipline. It’s intentional. You have to carve out space to be bored, to just be in another space, to get away from a screen.

Eric Uhler, Group Creative Director and Group Experience Director, Deloitte Digital

Boredom and Play

Judgment and taste don’t arrive fully formed. They develop in the space before making — through a life lived in bodies, in rooms, in relationships, and the slow accumulation of what a designer has seen, felt, and survived. Until machines learn to daydream, fall in love, grieve, understand rage, that formation belongs to the human. The conditions that produce it run against acceleration, toward boredom, toward play, toward the problem left alone long enough to breathe. That space has to be protected on purpose.



From a collaborative visual effects course, mentored by Harbor Picture Company and Electric Theatre Collective, to create a 30-second commercial while integrating AI into the CG pipeline.

Anna Goodwin (B.F.A. visual effects); Bua Kanjanapongporn (B.F.A. visual effects); Robyn Roach (M.A. visual effects); Danci Shen (M.A. interactive design and game development); Sheng Hao Wang (M.F.A. visual effects).

Direction Layer

The developmental arc produces resilience. Designers who move through the process can recognize when something has drifted and redirect without losing the vision — forming through situated experience, decisions made under constraint, and the discipline to kill a darling and still ship the work. AI produces outputs that resemble the results of that formation without having undergone it. Someone who has built it can tell the difference between an output that looks right and one that is right, and can say why. Ovetta Sampson explained, “Tools and skills talk about *how*. Design foundation is about *why*. AI helps us with the *how*. But we really need to understand *why* we want to execute. We should be the conductors, not the passengers on the AI train.”

Production is what AI accelerates. Direction is what designers earn. Keeping that distinction clear moves design forward.

Curriculum Worth Building

A design education optimizing for production fluency graduates designers one model release behind. As one survey respondent wrote, “I would develop students’ media and technical literacy before even considering introducing AI.” Foundation builds the judgment to recognize when output is wrong, understand why, and redirect it toward what the work is actually for. The institutions that endure treat direction as the curriculum and execution as its instrument — a priority the field is beginning to act on: human-AI collaboration studios lead university investment at 65%, pulling clearly ahead of everything else. Those who can build these systems, who critique and redirect them, write the next version.

The designer with a strong foundation authors work that could only have come from them. That foundation outlasts every medium that serves it.

CONSTANCIES

AI is not the first medium to redistribute the labor between making and directing. It is the fastest. As production compresses, direction concentrates. What remains are power skills that don't scale, rooted in the human wielding them.

Adaptability and Resilience

Reorientation without losing momentum. Creators move effectively as media change, rebuilding workflows when systems shift.

Perspective and Cultural Literacy

Lived experience — body, culture, failures, everything a life accumulates — shapes how solutions are interpreted and formed. No model generates it. Designers draw from it.

Curiosity and Problem-Solving

The instinct to ask why before how. Directors reframe the problem before the system is ever briefed.

Experimentation and Playfulness

Conventions exist to be challenged. The surprising output only surfaces when uncertainty is treated as material.

Critical Thinking and Ethical Awareness

Disciplined analysis, held accountable to values. Creators apply this to the work; directors, to the system — knowing when to trust an output and when to interrogate it.

Emotional Intelligence and Empathy

Understanding people before making things for them. The work carries that recognition from first brief to final form.

Taste and Creative Judgment

Discernment separates illusion from what really works. Directors apply it as the editorial function, knowing when output has drifted and redirecting with authority.

Foresight and Strategic Thinking

Purpose that drives teams and outcomes beyond the immediate deliverable. Designers position work within a larger arc. Directors act and anticipate the systems.

Intent and Direction

Holding the vision through change. When execution shifts, the director knows how every decision serves the design and the audience.

Communication and Collaboration

Language that makes the work possible. The brief is the first creative act.

Mastery and Technical Fluency

Depth to recognize quality, breadth to navigate changing systems. Repetition builds expertise.

Storytelling and Narrative

Ideas framed with clarity and purpose. Story moves work from concept to consequence.

Leadership and Initiative

Acting without permission. Maintaining direction and purpose when everything else moves.

HOW TO GROUND YOUR PRACTICE

Acceleration pulls the work forward. Designers who lead know how to pull it back — returning to purpose before process, to *why* before *how*.



Anchor Decisions in Purpose

Name what the work is for before anything is made. Without that, generation produces volume, not value. Purpose is the precondition for creative effort and the frame that makes everything else cohere.



Prioritize Interpretation Before Production

Bring perspective forward before output takes over. The interval where voice forms and judgment separates sufficient from singular requires deliberate protection. Embed it into the process before velocity removes it.



Cultivate the Conditions for Creative Thought

Boredom, play, and the unstructured interval produce thinking that acceleration cannot reach. Build deliberate pauses into rapid cycles — the pause is where new directions form.



Let Judgment Shape the Creation

Build judgment through repeated practice and exposure; protect that arc deliberately. Some parts of the process should remain hard on purpose.

**Develop Long-Term Creative Literacy**

Embrace curiosity as a long-term advantage. Cultural reference travels; the designer who asks why a principle works carries a frame of reference that survives system changes. Such foundations endure beyond systems to reorient without losing the reason.

**Build Taste Through Deliberate Exposure**

Taste accumulates through sustained attention to output that surpasses the designer's own. What you study becomes how you see. The designer with broad references can tell the difference between an output that merely looks right and one that actually is.

**Evaluate Taste in Layers**

Look past the artifact to the decisions behind it. Taste shows up in how well those decisions are understood and defended. The portfolio demonstrating judgment under constraint reveals more than the one demonstrating only fluency.

“You look for two things: the skill itself, which can only be developed through repetition and refining and exposing yourself to processes, and taste. Taste can only be developed by exposure. Those are the two keys. What we utilize to develop them are almost secondary.

Dan Bartlett, Dean, School of Animation and Motion, SCAD



HORIZON

The functions delivering the highest ROI from AI are research and insights at 52%, content at 41%, and design at 38%, according to the pre-summit survey. Value is concentrating upstream.

What surfaced consistently across the summit wasn't prediction. It was direction — a shared recognition of where value is moving and what the field needs to claim before someone else does.

Orchestration Layer

The production layer no longer needs design. It runs itself. The urgent design challenge is the system above it: sequencing agents, monitoring outputs, managing handoffs, and determining when a human steps in. This layer has no canon, no shared language, no agreed framework. Agentic system design is the next service design: the designer maps the experience, defines the nodes, and decides where the intelligence gets pointed. 31% of respondents identify multi-agent orchestration as the emerging AI trend most likely to shape their industry, leading all categories. The work distributes. The human conducts.

Precision Shift

The first era of AI scaled through accumulation — more data, more compute, more capability. A different logic has taken hold: less input, more understanding. Efficiency has become a design value with implications that stretch from environmental cost to creative control. The model built to overwhelm gives way to one built to understand.

Physical Frontier

AI moves off the screen into material, spatial, and embodied environments. Screen-based fluencies have limits that tangible systems will expose: weight, latency, consequence, irreversibility. Designers who build physical intuition now, who seek projects at the edge of screen and space, arrive ready.

Expanding Authorship

Generative AI has moved through creative practice faster than any previous technology, pressing hardest against the roles that involve language, image, and judgment. That pressure is real, as is the appetite for what it cannot replicate.

When generation scales across industries simultaneously, output that carries a distinct human signature becomes scarcer and more valuable. Design leaders already see it: audiences are beginning to distinguish between generated volume and bespoke items, seeking out the latter with renewed appetite. Some organizations will automate in ways that erode what audiences came for. Others will form to fill that gap. The demand for something that feels distinctly human, rooted in lived experience and authored by a specific point of view, endures — even as 34% expect automation to make its biggest leap by 2027, with personalization at scale following at 26%. Authorship is expanding in both directions simultaneously.

As production runs itself and orchestration goes to whoever claims it first, the field returns to the same question: who decides what the work becomes?

EARLY HORIZONS

Future directions appear as faint lines before they arrive as facts. These horizons mark the territory where creative practice moves next.

Near Horizon (6-12 Months)

High-precision generation reaches production quality across more disciplines. The gap between prototype and launch narrows significantly. The orchestration of specialized agents, each optimized for a discrete step in the workflow, becomes a primary design challenge. Human-in-the-loop gives way to human-on-the-loop: oversight across an ecosystem rather than approval at every step. The designers moving into this territory now are building tomorrow's baseline.

Mid Horizon (12-24 Months)

Interfaces grow less fixed. Multimodal continuity — movement across text, image, voice, and model — becomes the expected condition rather than the emerging capability. The designer's role as briefer, director, and taste-holder consolidates as a recognized specialization with its own hiring criteria and its own canon. Organizations built around production output begin rebuilding around direction and judgment.

Far Horizon (24+ Months)

Creative environments behave as adaptive systems, responding to evolving intent rather than fixed instruction. The definition of who designs continues to expand, with users shaping their own experiences at a level of hyperpersonalization that inverts decades of standardized output. The disciplines that endure keep intention and judgment at their center. The far horizon belongs to the designers building adaptability now.

“ Unlike humans, who learn through embodied experience, exploration, and gradual growth, AI has no ‘childhood.’ [You] make AI practice, play, and improvise with humans by building AI that learns like a developing partner — not a perfect machine — and opens a huge, unexplored space for teaching, creativity, and skill-building.

SCADask survey respondent

HOW TO FUTURECAST

Futurecasting is different from forecasting. A forecast makes a claim. A futurecast opens a direction. The goal isn't to be right. It's to be ready.



Identify Repeating Weak Signals

Observe and absorb. Weak signals are small, early, and easy to dismiss. They become consequential when the same pattern surfaces across unconnected sources. Track the repetitions — a signal appearing independently across industries, disciplines, and conversations has crossed from noise to early evidence.



Track Horizon-Line Tensions

Map where frictions live. The most useful signals live at the point of tension between opposing forces: scale and precision, automation and authorship, accessibility and craft, speed and intentionality. These tensions mark the edge of what the field is still working out. The resolutions shape what comes next.



Sketch Scenarios

Trace several plausible directions: one where a signal accelerates, one where it reverses, one where something unexpected interrupts both. The exercise expands the range of futures worth preparing for. The strange idea that feels least likely is often the one that reshapes everything.

**Design for Adaptability**

Build with revision in mind across processes, teams, tools, and media. Today's functional workflow will change and change again. Durable systems absorb change rather than resist it. Adaptability is a design value that outlasts every other.

**Keep Hypotheses Testable**

Name signals for each identified horizon; these confirm direction or reveal pivots. Future directions that resist testing are opinions. What separates strategic orientation from wishful thinking lies in the ability to name what would shift the direction.

**Locate the Spectrum**

Identify where the work sits on the spectrum between full human agency and full autonomy. Every design decision implicitly carries creative and ethical questions before it becomes technical. Deliberately answering these is the act of design.

“You build standing on the shoulders of the people who have taken from that space. So, you put back into the system and allow someone else to take what you did and do it better.

Dan Bartlett, Dean, School of Animation and Motion, SCAD



CONCLUSION

Hilma af Klint did not set out to name or pursue abstraction. She followed the surface inward until she reached what the lens could not capture and painted there. The result was a body of work that took decades to be seen and longer still to be understood. She demonstrated a pattern that repeats across every medium shift since; when a technology absorbs a layer of creative work, the creator moves deeper.

AI follows artists further inside than any medium before it. That is what makes this displacement different, and what makes the direction layer harder to cultivate and more consequential to protect. Design leaders operating there have already redefined what their teams produce and how they organize to produce it, and every institution that commits to that formation raises the floor for what comes next. The question has shifted from how the system works to what the work is for.

This report captures a moment that was already moving when it was written. The signals will shift. The tools and workflows will change. The orientation will not. The direction layer is not a response to this particular wave of acceleration; it is what remains when every wave recedes.

Follow the work deeper than the medium can go. Build there.

SCAD AI VALUES

Be Human-Centered

Prioritize AI design that enhances human experience, addresses real-world needs, and promotes sustainability.

Be Inclusive and Equitable

Design initiatives and solutions for all while empowering the SCAD community to develop and affirm AI advancements.

Be Involved

Foster positive collaboration and shared knowledge among faculty, staff, and students to explore AI's creative potential.

Be Curious and Adaptable

Embrace professional development opportunities surrounding AI to continually build literacy in trends, practices, and ethics.

Be Empowered

Encourage the entire SCAD community to participate in AI-related initiatives, research, and decision-making.

Be Transparent and Accountable

Provide clear road maps on AI development and implementation while communicating AI-related impacts, capabilities, and challenges.

Be Ethical

Uphold ethical standards and principles in AI design, development, and deployment, prioritizing fairness, privacy, security, and respect.

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SCADask is an applied research studio that leverages the university's collective expertise to facilitate and generate strategic insights for business and media partners. Our design-centered research identifies business opportunities that reveal the future of commerce, creativity, and culture. SCADask initiatives include the university's annual AI Summit, an event that unites design and technology luminaries with SCAD leadership, faculty partners, and students to discuss AI's impact on design, education, and creative careers. SCADask research and award-winning publications like *The Future of the American Dream* and the AI Insights 2024 and 2025 reports have been featured in USA Today, Fast Company, Paste Magazine, AP News, Yahoo! Finance, California Business Journal, and more.

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