Digital Art Collecting 101

Where to start

100 COLLECTORS

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How to Collect Digital Art

A practical guide for collectors who want to understand digital art with greater clarity

By 100 collectors
The network for digital art collectors.

Introduction

Digital art can feel difficult to approach at first.

Many collectors are curious about it, but quickly run into unfamiliar terms, new platforms, and a lot of noise. That confusion is normal.

It does not mean digital art is impossible to understand for the not-tech savvy persons. It means the field is still new, and often poorly explained.

At 100 collectors, we believe collecting becomes more meaningful when it is approached with curiosity, context, and conversation. You do not need to know everything before you begin. You need a clearer way in.

This guide is designed as that starting point. It offers a practical introduction to what digital art is, how it differs from blockchain (2) art and NFTs (8), what questions to ask before buying, and how to build confidence as a collector. The goal is not to make you more technical. The goal is to help you look more clearly, ask better questions, and feel more at ease navigating a field that rewards attention.

COLLECTING DIGITAL ART DOES NOT START WITH TECHNOLOGY.IT STARTS WITH CURIOSITY, CONTEXT, AND YOUR OWN WAY OF LOOKING AT NEW THINGS.

Margins (2024) by Daniel Canogar.

A minimal metal structure with LED panels embedded within its shelves, visible only as a soft pulsing light from within. The form references Donald Judd's geometry while the content is generative (5), always changing. Good choice if you want something that looks like sculpture first and digital second.

Courtesy of Daniel Canogar

1. What digital art is

Digital art refers to artworks created with digital tools, systems, or environments in a way that is essential to the work itself.

This is the key idea.

Digital art is not simply an image on a screen. It is not defined by whether it is sold online. And it is not the same thing as an NFT (8). What makes a work digital is that digital technology plays a central role in how the work is conceived, produced or experienced.

This can include video art, digital drawing and painting, digital photography, 3D and virtual sculpture, generative (5) and algorithmic art, AI-based practices, pixel art, interactive works, augmented and virtual reality works, net art, and glitch practices.

Some of these works stay fully digital. Others can take physical form through prints, sculpture, installation, or custom display formats. The support may change, but the artistic language remains digital.

A helpful question to ask is: would this work exist in the same way without digital tools, systems, or computation? If the answer is no, you are likely looking at digital art.

DIGITAL ART IS NOT A NICHE CATEGORY TO DECODE. IT IS PART OF THE ART OF OUR TIME.

Agoria (Sébastien Devaud) and Johan Lescure, Σ Lumina, 2024 Le Code d'Orsay, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Σ Lumina is an elaborate steel sculpture that, when light falls on it at precise intervals, casts a QR code as a shadow on the floor.

Visitors scan it, then blow into the microphone of their phone — and that breath, unique to each person, transforms a generative (5) digital work drawn from the Orsay's own collection.

The result can be minted (7) as an NFT (8) on the Tezos blockchain (2) and taken home. The physical sculpture, the shadow, the breath, the generative (5) output, and the blockchain record are all part of a single work.

Agoria's question throughout was: how do you make the digital sensible, present, felt — without putting thirty screens on the wall of a 19th century museum? Σ Lumina is his answer.

Courtesy of Agoria and Musée d'Orsay.

2. Why this medium matters

Every era produces artists who work with the dominant forces of their time: industry, urbanisation, mass media. Ours is no different. The dominant forces today are technological: software, networks, algorithms, machine processes, artificial intelligence, virtual space.

Digital artists are not simply using these tools. Many of them are interrogating them, breaking them, redirecting them, exposing what they do to our attention, our perception, and our sense of reality. A society without artists doing this work would be poorer in a very specific way: it would have no critical mirror held up to the technologies it has already absorbed into daily life, often without noticing.

This is what makes digital art more than a contemporary art category. It is a field where artistic practice and cultural relevance overlap. When an artist works with an algorithm, builds a generative (5) system, or intervenes in a machine process, they are asking questions about tools that most of us use constantly but rarely examine.

For collectors, this is worth considering. Acquiring digital art is not just a question of taste or format. It is a way of supporting a practice that keeps culture honest about the technologies shaping it.

A SOCIETY WITHOUT ARTISTS TRYING TO BREAK, MODIFY, AND REROUTE NEW TECHNOLOGIES WOULD BE QUITE WORRYING.

Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst, xhairymutantx, 2024
Commissioned for the Whitney Biennial 2024

For this work, Herndon and Dryhurst trained a custom text-to-image AI model (1) on deliberately distorted images of Holly Herndon herself — exaggerated, costumed, mutated versions of her public persona. Whatever prompt a user enters, the model pulls the output toward this altered character.

The new images are then stored on the Whitney's website, feeding back into the wider internet and potentially into the training data of future AI models.

The work raises a precise question: in a world where institutional websites are treated as trusted sources by AI systems, what does it mean to deliberately corrupt your own image at the source? The training data, the model, and its output are all considered part of a single artwork.

Image credit: Holly Herndon and Mathew Dryhurst, xhairymutantx Embedding Study 1, 2024. Thermal dye diffusion transfer prints, 47 × 71 in. (119 × 180 cm). Collection of the artists

3. Digital art, blockchain art, and NFTs: understanding the difference (1/2)

This is where most confusion begins, and where a few clear distinctions go a long way.

Digital art is the broad category. It encompasses any artistic practice where digital technology is essential to the work, regardless of how that work is sold, stored, or owned. A video work from 1975, a generative (5) algorithm running in a browser, and an AI-assisted painting from this year can all be digital art. Most digital art has nothing to do with blockchain (2) .

Blockchain art, sometimes also called crypto art, is a subset of digital art where ownership or provenance is recorded on a blockchain, a decentralised public ledger (6). This became widely known through NFTs (8), but the ideas behind it predate them. What blockchain introduced was a way of establishing verifiable scarcity and ownership for digital works, which had previously been difficult because digital files can be copied without limit.

NFTs or non-fungible tokens are the mechanism through which this ownership is recorded. An NFT is not the artwork itself. The token is a record on a blockchain that points to a file and documents who owns it. That distinction matters. The NFT is closer to a certificate of ownership than to the artwork it represents.

Generative art (5), where an algorithm produces the work, often with a different output each time, has existed long before blockchain. Artists like Vera Molnár and Manfred Mohr were writing generative code in the 1960s. What blockchain introduced was a way of creating verifiable scarcity around algorithmic outputs: platforms such as Art Blocks allow collectors to collect a unique output from an algorithm, with ownership recorded via NFT. What the blockchain records is ownership of a specific output, not necessarily the code that produced it.

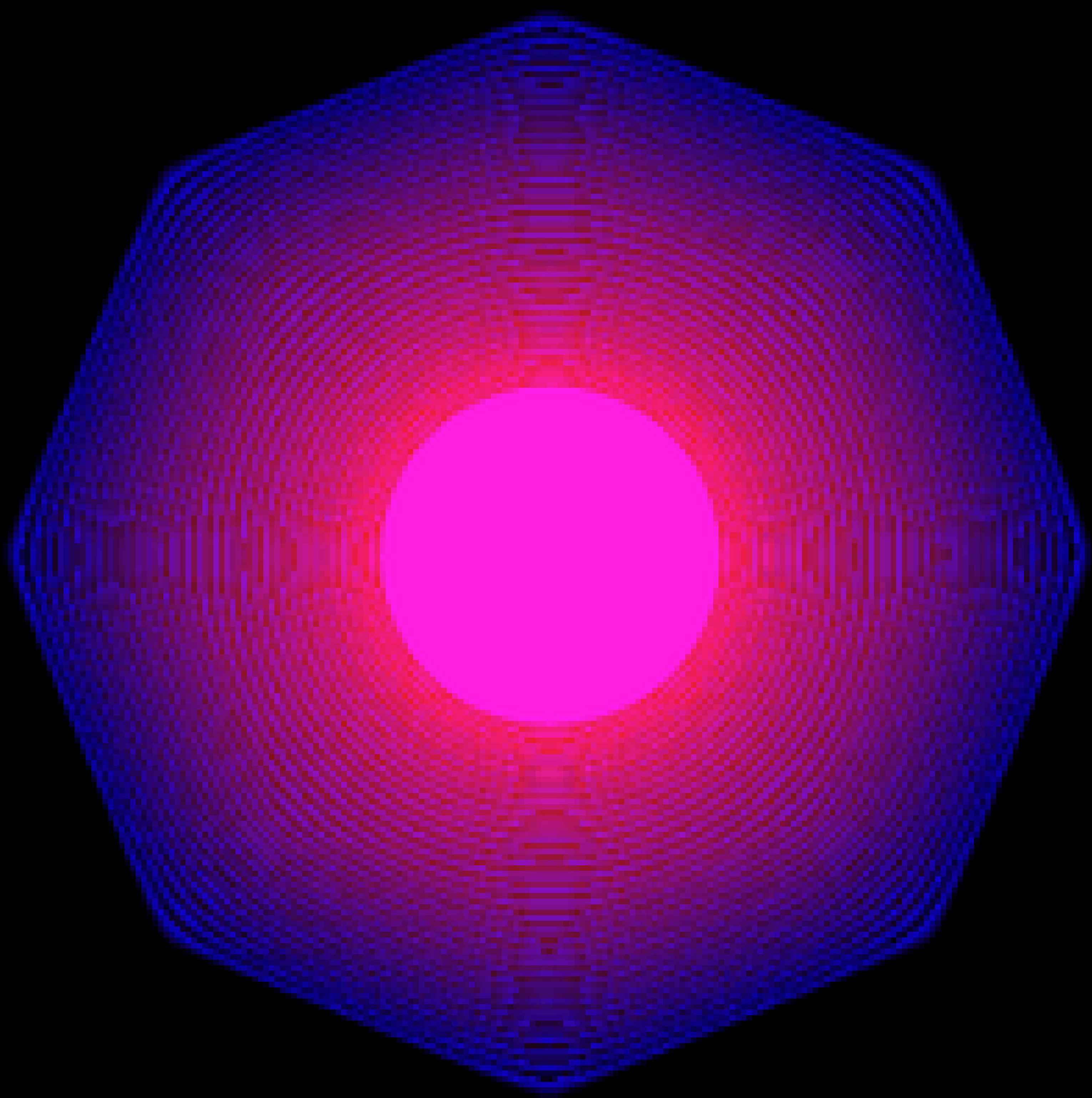
3. Digital art, blockchain art, and NFTs: understanding the difference (2/2)

On-chain art goes one step further. Here, the artwork itself (its code, its logic, its visual output) is stored directly on the blockchain (2), rather than simply being referenced by it. This makes the work fully decentralised.

A simple way to think about it:

- All on-chain art is blockchain art. Not all blockchain art is on-chain.
- Generative art (5) can exist entirely outside blockchain. When it intersects with NFTs (8), that is a distribution and ownership mechanism, not a definition of the medium.
- All blockchain art involves NFTs or similar ownership mechanisms. Not all NFTs are art.
- Digital art is the widest category. Blockchain art is one part of it.

These distinctions are not just technical. They affect how a work is stored, how it can be transferred, and what you are actually acquiring as a collector.



Kevin McCoy, Quantum (2014)
The first NFT ever minted (7) — on Namecoin, before Ethereum (4) existed.

A pulsing octagon. Historically grounding for the blockchain (2) section, and a good reminder that the ideas behind NFTs (8) predate the hype considerably.

Quantum. Credit: Kevin McCoy

4. What NFTs do – and what they do not guarantee

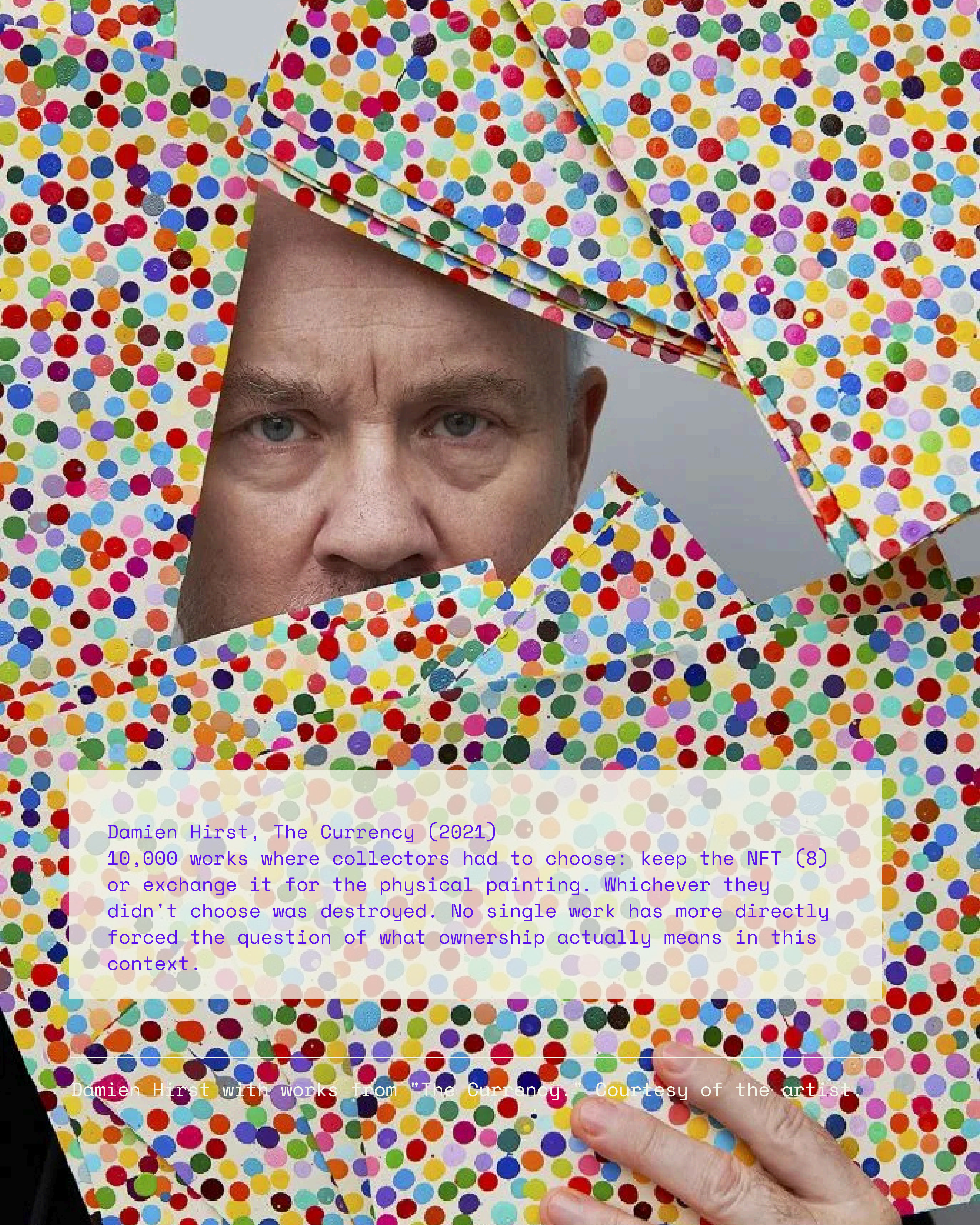
NFTs (8) made it possible to identify a specific work or edition, track ownership over time, and transfer that ownership between collectors in a verifiable way. For digital art, this solved a real problem.

An NFT can help with: identifying a unique work or an edition, proving ownership, tracking provenance, enabling transfer between collectors, and defining artist royalties.

But an NFT does not guarantee artistic quality, cultural relevance, or the long-term preservation of the artwork file. In many cases, the NFT points to a media file stored somewhere else, such as on a centralised server, on decentralised storage systems such as or Arweave, or on a hardware device. If that storage fails or disappears when a platform shuts down, the NFT may remain on the blockchain (2) while the work it pointed to is gone.

This is why collectors should always separate two questions: what is the artwork, and how is ownership recorded? Sometimes the artwork is closely embedded in the NFT structure, as with on-chain works. More often, the NFT is a pointer to media stored elsewhere. Understanding that difference is part of collecting with clarity.

AN NFT RECORDS OWNERSHIP. IT DOES NOT PRESERVE THE WORK.



Damien Hirst, The Currency (2021)
10,000 works where collectors had to choose: keep the NFT (8) or exchange it for the physical painting. Whichever they didn't choose was destroyed. No single work has more directly forced the question of what ownership actually means in this context.

Damien Hirst with works from "The Currency." Courtesy of the artist.

5. What you are actually buying

This is one of the most important questions a collector can ask. Depending on the work, you may be acquiring a unique digital artwork, an editioned work, an NFT (8) linked to a digital file, a fully on-chain generative (5)work, a work with both digital and physical elements, or a work that evolves or changes over time.

A good acquisition should make the following clear: what the artwork consists of, what the edition size is, how ownership is documented, where the media file lives and how it is preserved, how the work should be displayed, what rights are included, and what documentation you should keep.

These are not very different questions from physical art collecting. They are the digital equivalent of asking about edition, provenance, installation, or condition. The vocabulary is new. The rigour required is the same.

A STRONG ACQUISITION SHOULD FEEL CLEAR, NOT OPAQUE.

6. Questions to ask before collecting

You do not need to become a technical expert before acquiring digital art. But you should know what to ask.

What exactly is the work? Is it a still image, a video, a generative (5) output, a code-based work, an on-chain piece, or a tokenised certificate linked to a physical work?

How is ownership recorded? Is the work associated with an NFT (8)? If yes, on which blockchain (2)? If not, how is ownership documented by the gallery, artist, or platform?

Where does the artwork live? Is the file stored on a decentralised system such as IPFS (3) or Arweave, directly on the blockchain (2), on a private server, or on a physical device? This matters significantly for long-term preservation.

What comes with the purchase? Do you receive a file, a certificate, a display guide, installation instructions, or a physical component?

What rights do you have? In most cases, ownership does not include copyright or commercial use rights. Make sure this is clearly stated.

How should the work be displayed? Ask the artist, gallery, or platform how the work is meant to be experienced. Display is often part of the meaning of the piece.

BEFORE BUYING, MAKE SURE YOU CAN ANSWER: WHAT IS IT, WHERE DOES IT LIVE, HOW DO I PROVE OWNERSHIP, AND HOW CAN I LIVE WITH IT?

Sarah Friend, Lifeforms (2020)
A work that must be passed on to another wallet within a year or it dies — permanently. Every question in this section becomes urgent with this piece: what are your rights, what are your responsibilities, what happens to the file, what does ownership actually obligate you to do?

Sarah Friends, Lifeforms, courtesy of the artist

7. A simple to begin

You do not need to begin with complete certainty, or even with a purchase. For many collectors, what comes first is attention: noticing what draws you in, returning to certain works or artists, and beginning to understand why.

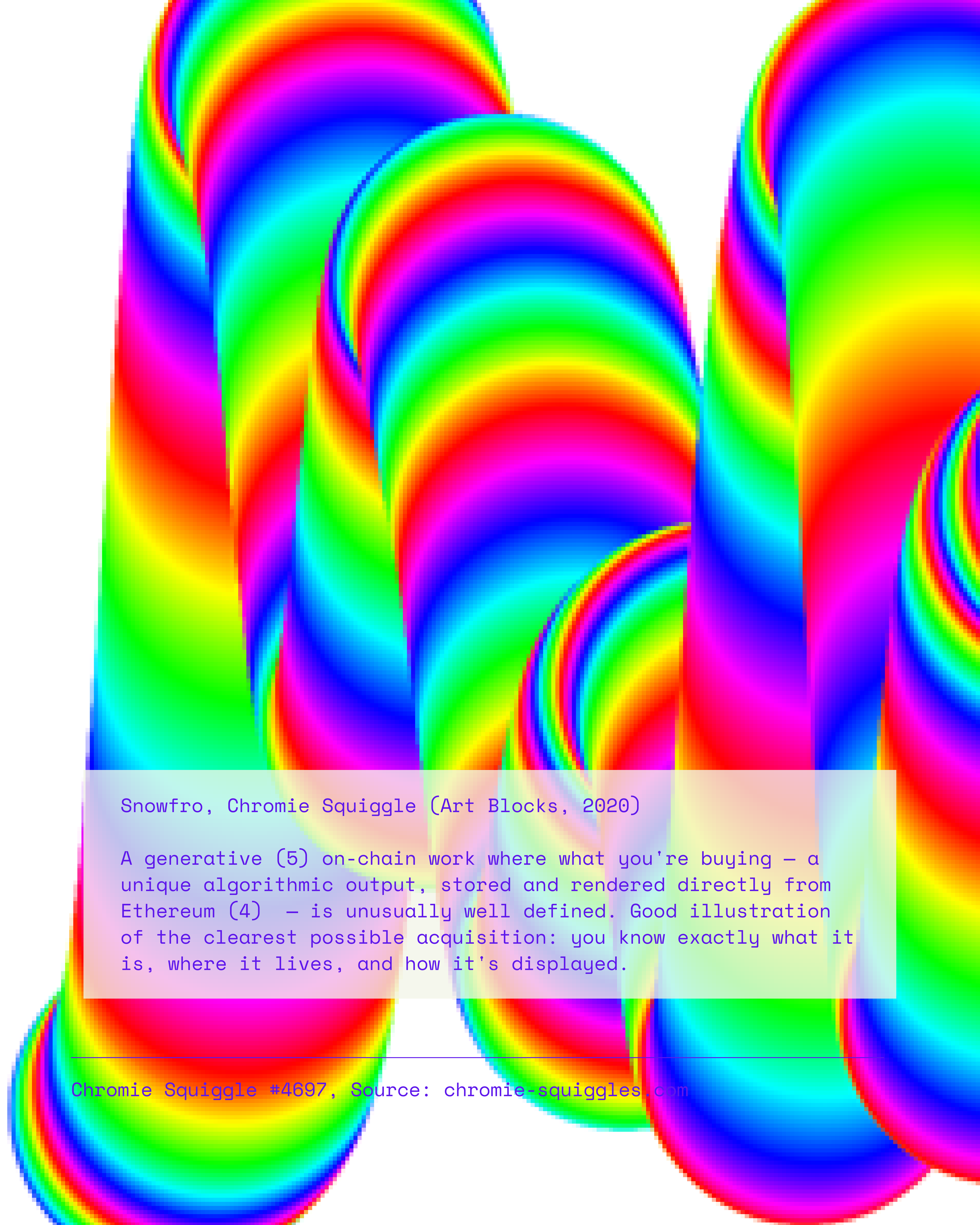
Start with curiosity. Notice what genuinely catches your attention, without pressure to categorise or understand it.

Train your eyes. Look often, compare works, and spend time with artists and exhibitions, both online and in person.

Build context. Learn how artists work, how works circulate, and how digital art fits into a wider cultural conversation. The more you understand the field, the more confident your quest becomes.
Ask practical questions. Clarify what you are buying, how ownership works, and how the artwork will live with you over time. There is no stupid question.

Move with intention. Acquire works when interest, understanding, and confidence begin to align.

YOU DO NOT NEED COMPLETE CERTAINTY TO BEGIN. YOU NEED CURIOSITY, CONTEXT, AND A TRUSTED WAY TO KEEP LEARNING.



Snowfro, Chromie Squiggle (Art Blocks, 2020)

A generative (5) on-chain work where what you're buying — a unique algorithmic output, stored and rendered directly from Ethereum (4) — is unusually well defined. Good illustration of the clearest possible acquisition: you know exactly what it is, where it lives, and how it's displayed.

Chromie Squiggle #4697, Source: chromie-squiggles.com

AI Model (1)
An AI model is a computational system trained on large datasets to recognize patterns, generate outputs, or make predictions. In the context of digital art, AI models can be used as creative tools, producing images, text, or other media based on prompts or input data. Rather than executing a fixed set of instructions, the model learns from examples, allowing artists to explore new forms of authorship, collaboration, and generative processes.

Blockchain (2)
A blockchain is a distributed ledger (or database) that can securely store information digitally. Notably, blockchains store data across distributed devices (nodes) of a worldwide computer network. In other words, a decentralized server stores and manages the information, instead of a single centralized server. The technology facilitates an immutable and transparent record of information, which is always accessible to the public. For this reason, blockchains are popular for their use in cryptocurrency and NFT systems.

Decentralized Storage (IPFS and Arweave) (3)
Storage that allows creators to upload the digital files attached to their NFT through nodes of a peer-to-peer network. This is a preferred solution to centralized storage solutions, like Google or Amazon Web Services, that can at any moment remove the work. Examples are and Arweave.

Ethereum (4)
An open-source, decentralized blockchain with smart contract functionality. Ethereum is the second-largest blockchain besides Bitcoin.

Generative Art (5)
With some NFTs, the art is completely determined by on chain elements; such as a transaction hash. To explain, each NFT's traits will differ, just like an ID number or a barcode would differ. Therefore, this results in randomly generated, or generative art NFTs.

Ledger (6)
A ledger is a record-keeping system that tracks transactions or data over time. In the context of blockchain technology, a ledger is distributed across a network of computers, ensuring that all participants share the same, synchronized record. Each transaction is securely recorded and cannot be altered once validated, creating a transparent and tamper-resistant history. Blockchains are often referred to as distributed ledgers because they remove the need for a central authority to maintain and verify records.

Mint (7)
When an artist mints an NFT, it means that their digital art is uploaded to the blockchain. It comes from the time when metal coins were minted and added into circulation. The term has been reappropriated by the cryptocurrency industry for tokens, including non fungible tokens (NFTs). For crypto art, "minting an NFT" is a synonym for "creating an NFT".

NFTs (Non Fungible Tokens) (8)
A non fungible token is defined in opposition to fungible tokens that are all interchangeable, such as currencies or stocks. NFTs are unique identifiers that are recorded on the blockchain with the history of transactions and owners and point to a digital file stored in a decentralized network. It acts as a digital certificate of authenticity.

100 COLLECTORS

100 collectors is the global network where collectors learn, connect, and engage with digital art. It was created to make collecting feel less solitary, less opaque, and more connected to the artists and ideas shaping the field today.

Members join for many reasons: greater clarity, conversations with artists, shared discovery, collective exploration, and the chance to engage with digital art in a way that feels meaningful and enjoyable.

Through curated content, artist conversations, private events, and a community of fellow collectors, 100 collectors helps make the experience of collecting more accessible, connected, and engaging.

Want to keep exploring?

COME IN

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www.100collectors.art