

Tessa MacKay

Social Realism



A Nostalgia for the Future Richard King

When Tessa MacKay first got in touch to suggest that we meet for a coffee and a chat, I did what everybody does these days and immediately fed her name into Google. What I discovered were some remarkable paintings, but also — and less remarkably — a creation entitled 'Tessa MacKay' whose talents, successes, ambitions and interests had been (to some extent) curated in the 'experience machine' that is the Worldwide Web. To say this is in no way to imply any shallowness or showiness on Tessa's part. It is simply to point to the situation that all of us now find ourselves in: of being our own publishers, of having our own avatars, of assembling our own identities. This is our reality. It's where we are.

The paintings comprising *Social Realism* take us back to a less self-conscious time in the development of the digital technologies that today dominate our waking lives. The images are drawn exclusively from Facebook's servers in the late 2000s, when early social-media platforms collided with digital photography, resulting in a sudden efflorescence of image-sharing on the major platforms. By today's standards, the images are clumsy and naïve, but it is precisely this that gives them their power. They seem to me to talk to a time of promise and possibility. They are the sweaty saturnalia before the official parade.

For those of us on the 'material Left', the late noughties were an exciting time, not least because of the intersection of a certain style of activism and social-media platforms. In the heady years between the global debt crisis and the rise of right-wing populism, we witnessed revolutions in the Levant and the Maghreb, the Spanish Indignados and the Occupy movement. All of these developments were characterised by a 'horizontal' politics inseparable from the rise of social media: indeed, we spoke of Twitter Revolutions, Facebook Revolutions and the like. More exciting still, these technologies promised to upend the usual business models: because data can be stored and shared for free (or as close to free as makes no difference), it is not consistent — or so we theorised — with the priorities of the profiteers. Some of us even spoke of *post*-capitalism. Despairing statements to the effect that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than of neoliberalism gave way to a new sense of future potential.

In their fleshy humanity and compositional crudity, the images of *Social Realism* (or the images of which they are one small sample) are adjacent to this political moment. Rendered and retouched in oils, they speak to a time before our lives were sucked into the reputational economy of likes, retweets and followers — a time before the mask of social media began to eat the face beneath. It is no coincidence (though it may be unintended) that nearly all of them show young adults *at play*: even that exquisite coastal still life is pregnant with the promise of joyful sociability. No one in these paintings has an 'Instagram face'; no one is signalling wealth or virtue. The images are a record of (embodied) conviviality.

If Social Realism invites our nostalgia, however, it is also in a critical relationship to that phenomenon. Tessa has come to this subject honestly, which is to say on her own artistic terms. As one of Australia's finest photorealists, she has earned both the Archibald Packing Room Prize and the indifference of an art establishment in thrall to modish notions of value and a too-theoretical approach to new work. But in persisting with that derided tradition, and in discovering its limitations as she goes, she now takes *photography itself* as her theme, singling out one catalytic moment in the evolution of that revolutionary technology for intelligent and meticulous attention. What constitutes an image worth painting? What is the artistic and social role of the painter in a time of ubiquitous image-making? These are the questions *Social Realism* asks, and invites us to contemplate for ourselves.

The late Mark Fisher used to say that we were nostalgic for a time when a different world seemed possible — that we were, in effect, nostalgic for the future. Notwithstanding that the nostalgia apps are probably all over it by now, exploiting these feelings for algorithmic gain, I think there is an important place for an art that investigates such sentiments, and in doing so helps us to resist the fatalism that characterises mainstream debate about new and emerging technologies in general. At any rate, that is what I get from these paintings: a sense of what we might have had, and could have still, if we rouse ourselves: a more convivial dispensation; a technics in the service of human dreams, as opposed to one destructive of them.

Richard King
Fremantle/Walyalup, 2025

Richard King is an author and critic based in Fremantle, WA. He is the author of *On Offence: The Politics of Indignation* (Scribe Publishing, 2013), *Here Be Monsters: Is Technology Reducing Our Humanity?* (Monash University Publishing, 2023) and *Brave New Wild: Can Technology Save the Planet?* (Monash University Publishing, 2025). He can be found at his website bloodycrossroads.com.



Tessa MacKay (b.1991) is an Australian/New Zealand artist based in Fremantle (Walyalup), Western Australia. As a young person with dyslexia and non-attentive ADHD, MacKay's early academic difficulties led her to painting as a refuge; to centre and express herself non-verbally. Later in life, MacKay developed an affinity for large-scale photorealism and hyperrealism portraiture painting. Overwhelmed by the dizzying intellectualism of the conceptual art world, these ultra technical works – often meters in length and requiring a year or more to complete – allowed MacKay to lose herself in the act of painting, taking on a devotional commitment. Over a five year period, MacKay honed a high proficiency in photorealism and hyperrealism, which culminated with her winning the 2019 Archibald Packing Room Prize and a 2022 Retrospective exhibit.

Yet, increasingly aware of the capital 'A' art world's dismissal of photorealism and hyperrealism as technical flourishes devoid of intrigue and meaning, MacKay grew determined to bring these styles — what had become her entire practice — into more conceptual territory. MacKay's return to university as a mature-age student engendered a critical reflection on the origins of photorealism and hyperrealism; adjoining styles birthed from and reliant on photography. Since its infancy, photo/hyperrealistic painting has courted criticism; prioritising slavish copying over originality whereby the artist's hand is 'subordinate to a laborious system for translating data.' British writer, curator and artist, David Campany, has remarked that "Photorealism is both an expansion and a collapse of painting" in part due to its reliance on technology.

In this spirit, MacKay grew wary of her admittedly unconscious tendency to seek out 'high value' photographic source imagery as the basis for her paintings, as if only these 'worthy' images could justify the ungodly hours it takes to render the immense detail demanded by photorealism and hyperrealism styles. In response to this metric of labour and its often homogenised aesthetic, MacKay has gradually turned her practice in on itself to interrogate; what constitutes an image worth painting?

In an open-ended and on-going exploration of this question, MacKay's painting practice has expanded, now blending photorealism with formalist elements from Classical Realism, 17th-century Dutch Golden Age painters, and 18th-century Neo Impressionists to transpose 'low value' digital images. Via this renewed technical approach and complete inversion towards source imagery, MacKay's works have evolved to index step-changes in digital image making and sharing technologies, highlighting their influence on the role of painters and societal perceptions of value in images, in both problematising and affirming ways.



Social Realism periodises a finite chapter where early digital photography collided with the birth of social networks, specifically Facebook, from the mid-to-late 2000s. With the novel ability to tag people in images, this nascent era is typified by users who would upload — with careless abandon — swathes of un-curated 'low value' images; unthinkable relative to contemporary uses of social media, geared towards image perfection, commodification and hyper-curated personal branding.

As a series of paintings, this on-going project draws upon low-value images from Facebook's public and private archive — a mix of strangers and friends — that are suitably unremarkable, often accidental, and with little to no compositional merit. Of crucial intent, these paintings transpose the source image's crude digital aesthetic or 'malfunctions' as baked in by the technical limitations of early consumer-level digital photography (flip-phone cameras and compact digital cameras) synonymous with this era; low light noise, lens aberrations, red eye, highlight clipping, low resolution and server compression.

This finite era of naive user-driven image sharing, turbo charged by 'tagging' as a new social communications utility, represents an epoch that forever altered how we represent ourselves and attribute value to images, particularly images of people. Today, awash with ubiquitously perfect imagery and high digital literacy as the new norm, millions of these 2000s low-value images remain amassed on Facebook's servers, forgotten and with no application. As a compelled re-contextualisation of figurative painting techniques and materiality, *Social Realism* highlights the archival nature of these disposable images, to reveal something peculiarly authentic and unretrievable.



Gladiators, vikings, and all sorts....jpg, 2025

Oil on duck cotton 122 x 162 cm Sold





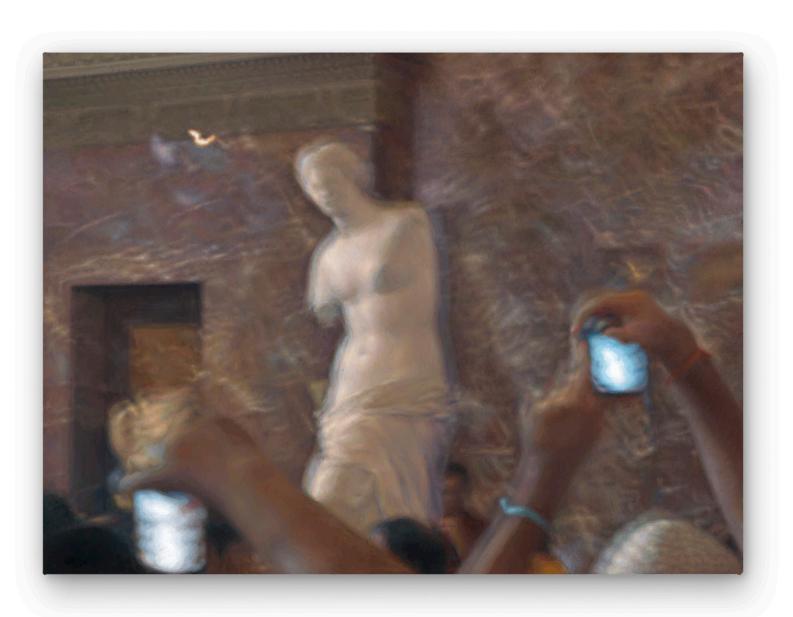
Science Ball 24/9/10 By Andy, 2025

Oil on canvas 98 x 128 cm



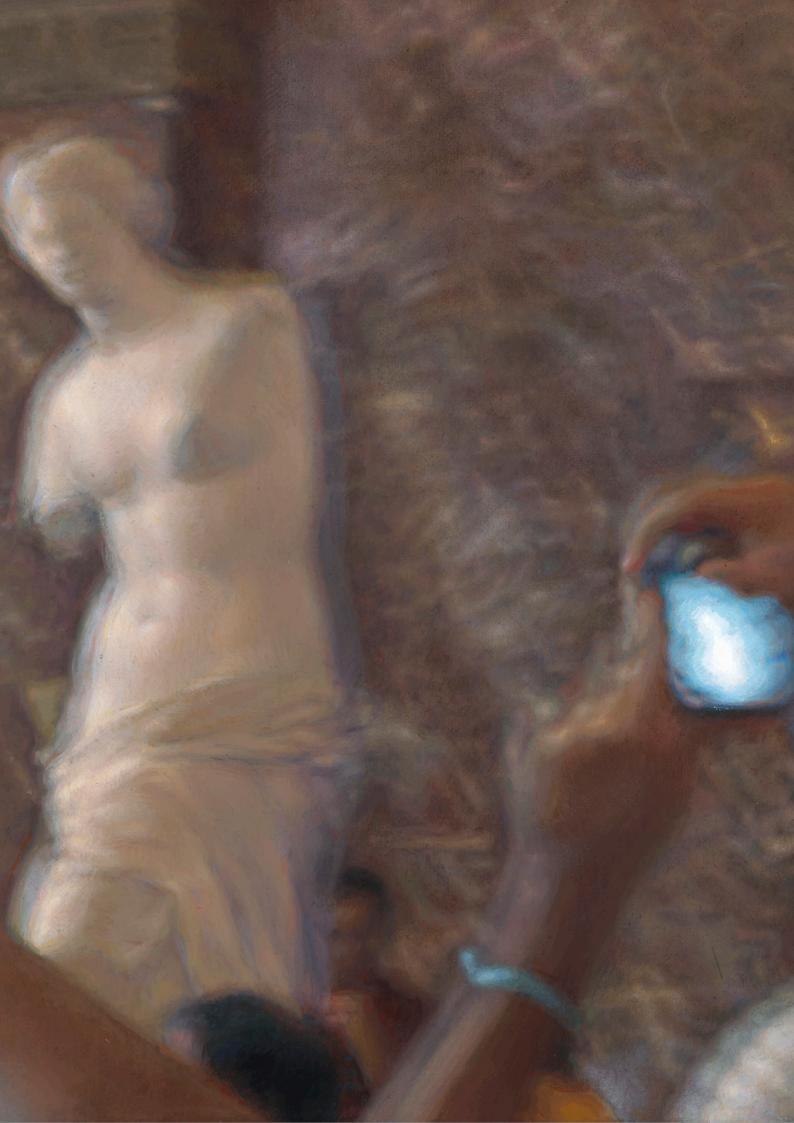
Out and about_2010.jpg, 2024

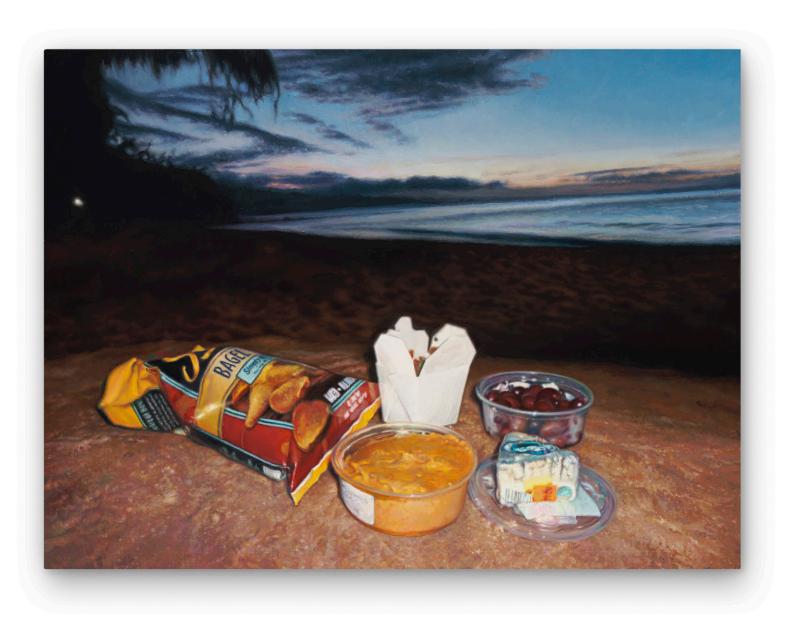
Oil on hessian 120 x 140 cm (framed)



France_09.jpg, 2025

Oil on linen 29.5 x 39 cm Sold



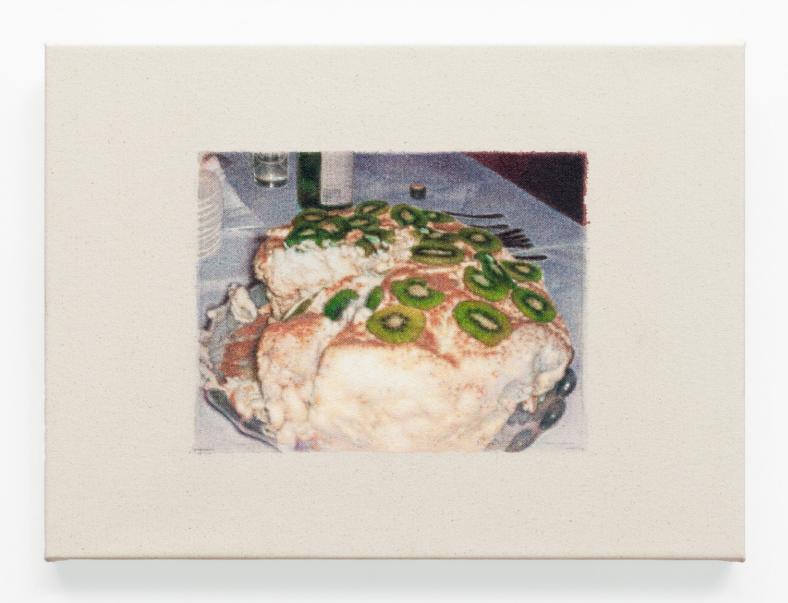


Final sunset on the beach... bye holiday!.jpg, 2025

Oil on paper 40 x 50 cm Sold







GF @ Leftbank and Parklife!, 2025

Oil and gouache on duck cotton 36.5 x 49.5 cm



Yas's Planing BBQ and Lei's Party, 2025

Oil on duck cotton 100 x 130 cm







Lords of WIN_2011.jpg, 2024

Oil on aluminium honeycomb board 120 x 160 cm





Spongey's House, 2024

Oil on board 30.5 x 40.5 cm





Cover Photos, 2024

Oil and pastel on canvas 121.5 x 213 cm

TESSA MACKAY

b. 1991, Perth, Western Australia (Australian/New Zealand)

Education

2026 BA Fine Arts (MA Painting), Kingston Art College, London (Exchange program)

2008–2025 BA Fine Arts (Painting), Curtin University (WA)

2007–2008 Claremont School of Art (WA)

Select Exhibitions

- 2025 Minor Attractions Art Fair, The Mandrake Hotel, London (UK)
- 2025 Lawson Flats (duo exhibition with Jacob Kotzee), Perth (WA)
- 2025 Social Realism (solo exhibition), LAILA, Marrickville (NSW)
- 2025 Spring 1883 Art Fair, The Hotel Windsor, Melbourne (VIC)
- 2025 Wynne Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales (NSW), Orange Regional Gallery (NSW), Port Macquarie Glasshouse (NSW), Ngununggula Southern Highlands Regional Gallery (NSW), Grafton Regional Gallery (NSW)
- 2024 National Emerging Art Prize, Sydney (NSW)
- 2024 Mandorla, Holmes à Court Gallery, West Perth (WA)
- 2022 Retrospective (solo exhibition), PS Art Space, Fremantle (WA)
- 2019 Archibald Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales (NSW), Coffs Harbour Regional Gallery (NSW), Bathurst Regional Gallery (NSW), Bank Art Museum Moree (NSW), Gosford Regional Gallery (NSW), Muswellbrook Regional Arts Centre (NSW), Tarra Warra Museum of Art (VIC)
- 2018 The Percivals, Townsville (QLD)
- 2016 Portia Geach Memorial Award, Sydney (NSW)
- 2016 Mosman Art Prize, Mosman (NSW)
- 2016 Black Swan, Art Gallery of Western Australia (WA)
- 2016 The Percivals, Townsville (QLD)
- 2015 Cossack Art Awards, Cossack (WA)
- 2014 Black Swan, Art Gallery of Western Australia (WA)
- 2014 Sunshine Coast National Art Prize, Caloundra (QLD)
- 2012 Young Guns, Linton and Kay Contemporary, Subiaco (WA)
- 2011 Desert Seed (solo), Linton and Kay Contemporary, Subiaco (WA)
- 2010 To The Core (solo), Linton and Kay Contemporary, Subiaco (WA)

Select Commissions & Collections

- 2025 Gladiators, Vikings, and all Sorts....jpg, Guan Ho & Hawke, (NZ)
- 2025 France_09.jpg, R. Glindemann (WA)
- 2025 Final Sunset on the Beach...Bye Holiday!.jpg, J. Lam-Po-Tang (NSW)
- 2025 Everywhere Man, M.H. Bombara (WA)
- 2024 The Curtin University Art Collection, John Curtin Gallery, Bently (WA)
- 2024 Private commission, Creasy Collections (WA)
- 2023 Warders Hotel (block 2), 32 pc collection, Prendiville Group (WA)

- 2022 Kira Abricossova Bousloff OAM, Gifted to the West Australian Ballet, The Landsmith Collection (WA)
- 2020 Warders Hotel & Emily Taylor Restaurant, 28 pc collection, Matthew Crawford Architect, Prendiville Group (WA)
- 2020 Through the Looking Glass, K.C Burton (WA)

Awards & Grants

- 2025 DLGSC Culture and the Arts, Arts Short Notice Activity Program Funding (WA)
- 2025 Australian Cultural Fund (AUS)
- 2024 Highly Commended, Mandorla (WA)
- 2019 Packing Room Prize, Archibald (NSW)
- 2018 Peoples Choice, The Percivals (QLD)
- 2015 Emerging Artist, Cossack Art Award (WA)
- 2014 People's Choice, Sunshine Coast National Art Prize (QLD)

Residencies

- 2025 Quick Response Residency, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, Perth (WA)
- 2022 The Mark, Artist in Residence, The State Buildings, Perth (WA)

Press & Publications

- 2025 The Trailblazers, Howard Eaton, Ed.M & Antoinette Commins, Tellwell Publishing (AU, B.C, CA)
- 2024 About Face, Amber Creswell Bell, Thames & Hudson (UK, AUS)
- 2024 *Mandorla*, Artist talk alongside Ross Potter, Sam Bloor, Sarah Elson and Erin Coates, Holmes à Court Gallery (WA)
- 2022 The Mark, Artist talk alongside Katie West and Annika Kristensen, The State Buildings (WA)
- 2022 The Mark, Artist talk alongside Ali Bodycoat, The State Buildings (WA)
- 2022 Retrospective, Sheila Foundation Artist Talk, PS Art Space (WA)
- 2022 Art & Soul, Sunday Times Magazine, Ben O'Shea (WA)
- 2020 At Home With Tessa MacKay, Emma Pegrum, Fabric Quarterly
- 2019 Late Night Conversations, Artist Talk alongside Jude Rae and Zan Rowe, Art Gallery of New South Wales (NSW)
- 2017 The Archibald First Strokes, Arts documentary series alongside Nicholas Harding, Yvette Coppersmith, Nick Stathopoulos, George Gittoes, Tim Storrier, Jason Phu and Wendy Sharpe, Mint Pictures (NSW)

All enquiries info@laila.sydney

Level 1/158 Edinburgh Rd Marrickville, Sydney Australia

12-5 Friday, Saturday & by appointment.

