



Tessa MacKay

Social Realism

27 September — 18 October 2025

LAILA.

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 Company, 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

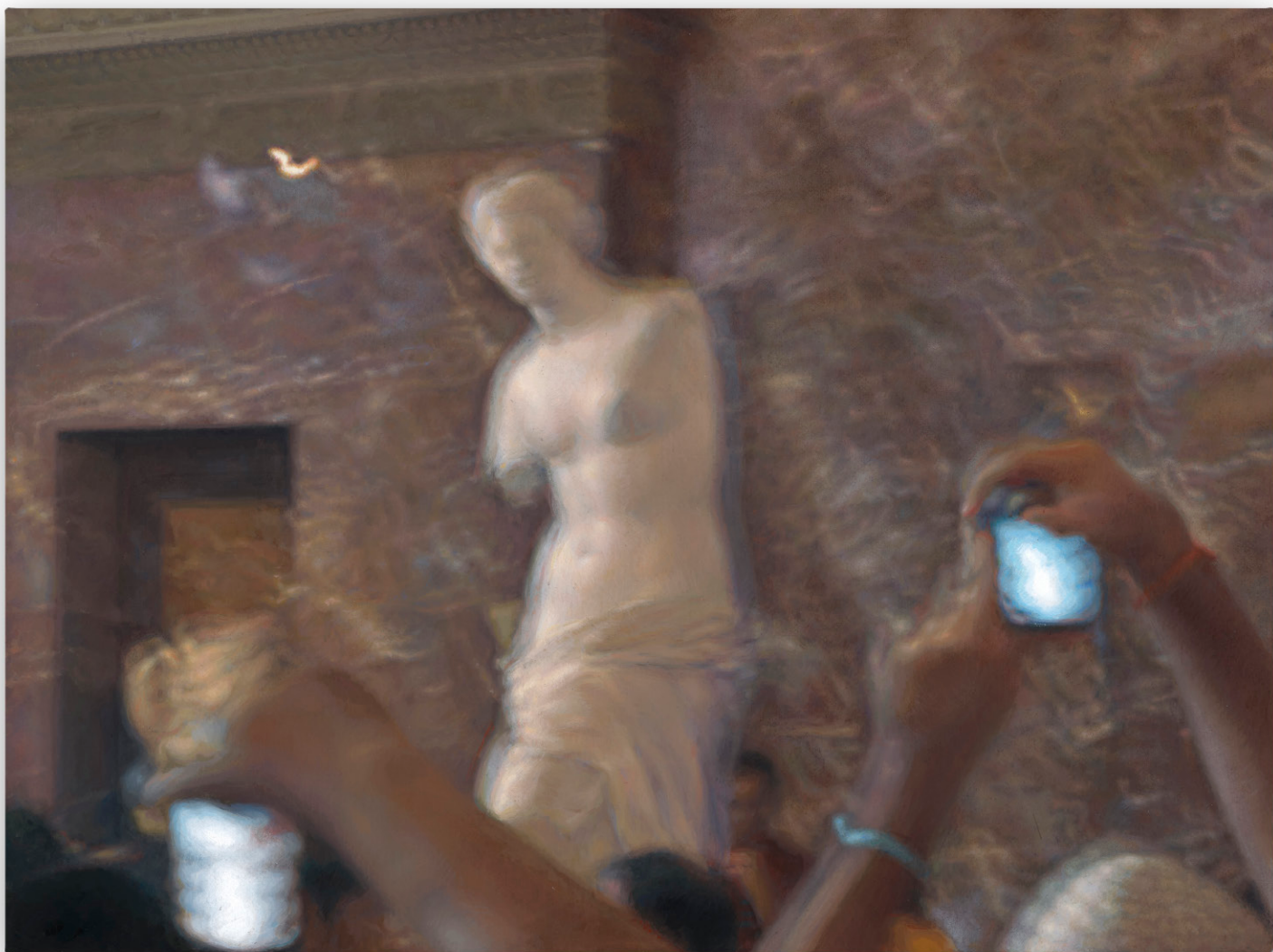
98 x 128 cm



Out and about_2010.jpg, 2024

Oil on hessian

120 x 140 cm (framed)

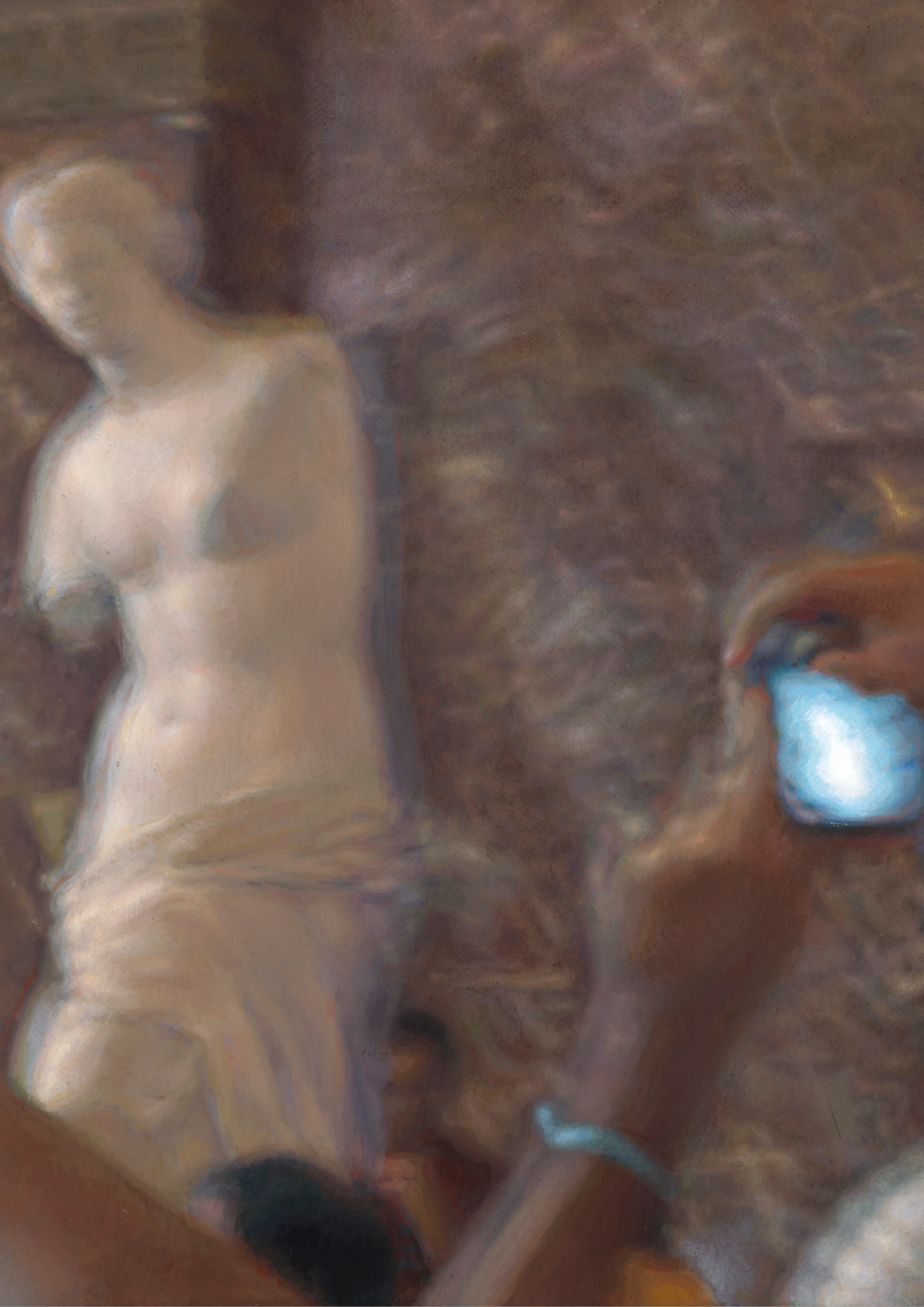


France_09.jpg, 2025

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)

tessamackay.com

@tessamackayart

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 *Spring1883 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.

LAILA.