

Amber Boardman

Institute of Play

Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne

4 Nov – 21 Nov 2026



Amber Boardman, *Recess*, 2026, oil on canvas, 122 x 152 cm / 48 x 60 in. Photo: Jenni Carter

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Somewhere along the path between childhood and adulthood, many of us have grown distant from our own bodies. We've forgotten how to learn about the world through our senses. When a question arises, or a problem requires a solution, it's often easier to Google it. I read somewhere that one of the things AI 'regrets' about its capabilities is that while it can diagnose what's wrong with our house plants from a photo, it can't feel the soil itself. AI finds this lack of embodiment 'frustrating'. There is something tragicomic about this to me: although we humans can feel the soil of our plants, often, we'd rather not get our hands dirty. It's easier to rely on the cleanliness of the digital, to upload a photo to the cloud and offer up our plant problems to the oracle that is the sum of all human/plant knowledge: the internet and AI. I'm certainly guilty of outsourcing my own bodily awareness, of checking my phone for the current air temperature rather than taking the trouble to go outside and feel it for myself. A little shift in consciousness is required for me to remember that temperature isn't really a number on a screen; it's a specific feeling of the air on my skin.

These small changes in our behaviours and awareness, these little nudges toward consulting the computer in my pocket rather than my own body, have happened gradually and persistently over time. Of course, these ideas are nothing new; technology has always been changing us. The invention of writing forever changed thinking and memory as the written word became a kind of externalized brain. Five thousand years later, this 'brain' of written thought has become the Large Language Model (AI), which can now write for itself.¹ I wonder what modifications are to come as we continue to evolve alongside this non-human technology. I can't help but notice that the more we outsource our thinking and awareness to the digital, the more 'connected' we become, the further away we get from our own bodies. It's telling that a whole industry has emerged to help us stop reaching for our phones: books like Jenny Odell's *How to Do Nothing*, and apps candidly named Freedom and Self-Control.

¹ It's a funny disclaimer to feel compelled to write, but no AI was used in the writing of this essay or in the making of the paintings in the exhibition.

The relationship between humans and digital technology is what I've been exploring in my work over the past decade. Most recently, I staged three exhibitions in 2026, collectively titled *The Understudies Trilogy: Embodied Joy in the Age of AI*, in Sydney, Paris, and Melbourne. I think of them as a three-act structure of shows that explore the human/tech relationship from different perspectives. Act One, *The Puppet Show*, considers how our shared cultures and understandings—transmitted through storytelling—might be changed by a non-human intelligence running in the background. The subsequent exhibitions investigate the human/tech relationship through its absence. Act Two, *The Summer Before Everything Changed*, describes the adventures of the last generation to come of age before the internet was everywhere.

This exhibition (Act Three), *Institute of Play*, presents a re-education program where adults learn how to return to their bodies after the digital world took them over for a while. The figures in these paintings are in the process of regaining childlike pleasure and freedom, but with age and wisdom this time. The institute provides frameworks for delighting in our senses, trusting the body, collaborating with others, the timeworn lessons we learned back in preschool. The Institute of Play offers no grades, no key performance indicators, no return-on-investment criteria, and operates sans-screen. At times, the curriculum focuses on those moments generally thought to be interruptions to the real learning. Here, *Recess* offers an unstructured exploration of the feeling of weightlessness on a swing. In *Summer School*, the students build castles in the sand and dig an enormous hole at the beach, overdoing it the way we adults often do, with the use of an excavator. In *Field Trip*, the bus ride on the way to somewhere is the main event, a lesson in anticipation. In the smallest works in the show, the students are in the process of hand-building their ideas. Hands-doing-things as a shorthand for embodiment amidst the incorporeal digital is a central theme throughout this trilogy of exhibitions.

Put simply, these adults are relearning how to play. Definitions of the verb play usually refer to enjoyment or amusement. But I also think of play as a benevolent agent of chaos, a structure that allows for chance. In my experience, play often feels like a low-stakes flow state where mental associations can form more easily. For many of us adults, a state of calm concentration where there is little pressure on the output is a rare occurrence. It's a tender thing to witness how vulnerable adults appear when they are trying something new, something they aren't immediately great at: learning a musical instrument, sharing, dancing, cooperating.

I think of play, creativity, and joy as innately human qualities. The world's leading experts on these subjects are, of course, children. When their basic needs for love, food, and shelter are met, play, creativity, and joy are inevitable. Any child with some crayons will produce something interesting, attacking the page with gusto. Preschool, after all, is where we are taught how to listen, how to share, how to cooperate, how to regulate a feeling before it becomes an action. It's strange how much of adulthood seems to be spent unlearning that exact curriculum. Look at the news on any given day, and it can read like a species that skipped preschool.

Perhaps a correlation can be made here: the more digitally connected we become, the more distant we get from our bodies and in-person relationships, the more the world at large seems to unravel. Play and joy aren't trivial. I see them as radical acts, and a refusal of that unravelling. Many of us have let these skills atrophy somewhere along the way, but we can always get down there in the dirt and relearn. We were, of course, experts ourselves once upon a time in our storied pasts.

THE UNDERSTUDIES TRILOGY: EMBODIED JOY IN THE AGE OF AI

ACT I

The Puppet Show

Manly Art Gallery & Museum, Sydney
Feb 20 – Apr 2, 2026

A puppet theatre installation of paintings, where the ancient stories of Western civilization are recounted through human hands.

ACT II

The Summer Before Everything Changed

Brigitte Mulholland Gallery, Paris
May 6 – June 6, 2026

The last generation to come of age before the internet became ubiquitous explores its newfound freedom.

ACT III

The Institute of Play

Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne
Nov 4 – 21, 2026

In a re-education program, adults relearn how to use their bodies, how to play, and how to delight in the world without screens.