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THE PUPPET SHOW

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Installation view, *The Puppet Show*, Manly Art Gallery & Museum, 2026. Photo: Felicity Jenkins

Behind the Curtain

Amber Boardman

Human culture is built on shared fictions, stories so widely believed that they become the foundations of societies. As Yuval Noah Harari notes in *Sapiens*¹, we cooperate on massive scales because we agree to believe in things that do not physically exist: gods, money, property, justice, nation-states, corporations. These complex imagined systems allow us to live inside narratives that shape how the world works. Storytelling, in this sense, is not entertainment but infrastructure: the cognitive glue that binds us together.

Storytelling is also one of humanity's oldest technologies. Long before the theatre or the screen, humans gathered in the dark around firelight, telling tales that explained our fears and desires. Over time, the campfire became the amphitheatre, the cinema, the television, the computer, the smartphone. All that narrative ingenuity is now reconstituted as the Large Language Model (Chat GPT being the most famous example). As the curtain rises on a new era increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, *The Puppet Show* explores what becomes of human culture as AI takes the stage.

For stories to function, some scaffolding is often required. Framing devices that separate one world of ideas from another can happen through language; “once upon a time,” or “a strange thing happened to me yesterday...” are some familiar openers. Spatial cues can signal a site for narrative through a raised stage or red velvet curtains. Despite these storyworld separations, a good story draws us in, transports us into another viewpoint, expands our inner life, influences our humanness and possibly even amends the fictions that drive civilisation.

The Puppet Show uses the visual grammar of theatre to stage ancient motifs in a contemporary, and uncanny, context. By using room-sized vinyl prints, the gallery becomes a full-scale theatre with a stage, box seats and red velvet curtains. In front of this illusionistic backdrop, three real paintings sit atop weathered metal poles like performers poised before an audience, or puppets awaiting activation. These paintings become a 'play within the play' with their puppet-theatre depictions of mythic scenes: wanderings in the desert, an oracle on the mountain, battling a giant. Yet the illusion is intentionally precarious. Peeking through openings in the printed curtains are stacks of AI servers instead of the usual ropes, pulleys, and backstage technicians of traditional theatre. Here, the 'backstage' has become the 'backend' and is no longer run by humans. On the adjacent walls, two paintings sit within carved box seats, shaped like opera-house balconies; the woodworked flourishes resemble the housing of electronic components and motherboard circuitry rather than the traditional ornaments of baroque architecture. The whole environment flickers between warm analogue nostalgia and computational infrastructure.

Despite its interrogation of AI and simulated storytelling, *The Puppet Show* is built from traditional means and without AI input. The paintings are rendered in oil on canvas. The theatre environment (printed onto seventeen metres of vinyl) was modelled by hand in Maya, a 3D software program. Every brushstroke, every detail comes from the hands and eyes of the artist. These works explore futuristic technologies through one of the oldest artistic methods we have. Oil paint slows things down and asks the viewer to linger for a moment in a medium whose own history stretches back centuries. It reminds us that human hands still shape meaning, even as machines begin to simulate it.

Across the exhibition, certain motifs recur: the box, the curtain and the puppet. The white box can be read in multiple ways. It can resemble the sealed architecture of a data centre, where information moves invisibly through racks and servers. But it could also be a puppet-theatre box turned on its side, revealing an opening for the puppeteer to slip their hands into. In both interpretations, the box becomes a site of hidden agency and influence. In *Pulling Back the Curtain*, a sequence of four small paintings unfolds like a film strip. Hands pull a heaped red velvet curtain off a white box to reveal a hidden hole. This could be an attempt to peer into the mechanisms that are running things in the background, or a moment when something inside could escape. These paintings form a storyboard about the permeable boundaries between control and loss of agency. A similar tension animates *Dauids and Goliaths*, where hands and puppets engage in a jiu-jitsu struggle. The question of leverage, who holds it and for how long, becomes a metaphor for our shifting relationship with the technologies we create. Are we still the puppeteers? Or have the systems we built begun to direct our thoughts and movements sufficiently that we no longer fully recognise the tugging of the strings?

The Puppet Show resides in the thresholds between human and machine. It asks what happens when the central engine of our species, human stories, becomes something machines can produce at scale, without hesitation or fatigue. If shared fictions have always guided our civilisations, what new fictions will emerge from these non-human authors? What new myths? What new operating systems? And what becomes of human creativity when so much of the heavy cognitive lifting, the innovation and artistry, can be done by AI? Behind the curtain is something alien. In front of it, something ancient performs. The viewer stands in the middle, caught between eras imbued with all our human fears and desires about an unimaginable future. *The Puppet Show* invites us to step onto the stage of that uncertainty as we wait for the act that follows.

¹ Harari, Y. N. (2015). *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind*. HarperCollins Publishers.