



The Puppet Show

Amber Boardman

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Manly Art Gallery & Museum

20 February – 5 April 2026

All images courtesy of the artist, Chalk Horse Gallery, Sydney, Sandler Hudson Gallery, Atlanta, and Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne

The artist would like to acknowledge that this project is supported by the NSW Government through Create NSW.

Cover image detail:

Consulting the Oracle 2025, oil on canvas, 98 x 122cm



Behind the Curtain

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 a massive scale 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 more than entertainment, it's 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 the fate 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 story-world separations, a good story draws us in, transports us into another viewpoint, expands our inner life, influences our humanness and reshapes the fictions that drive our collective realities.

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

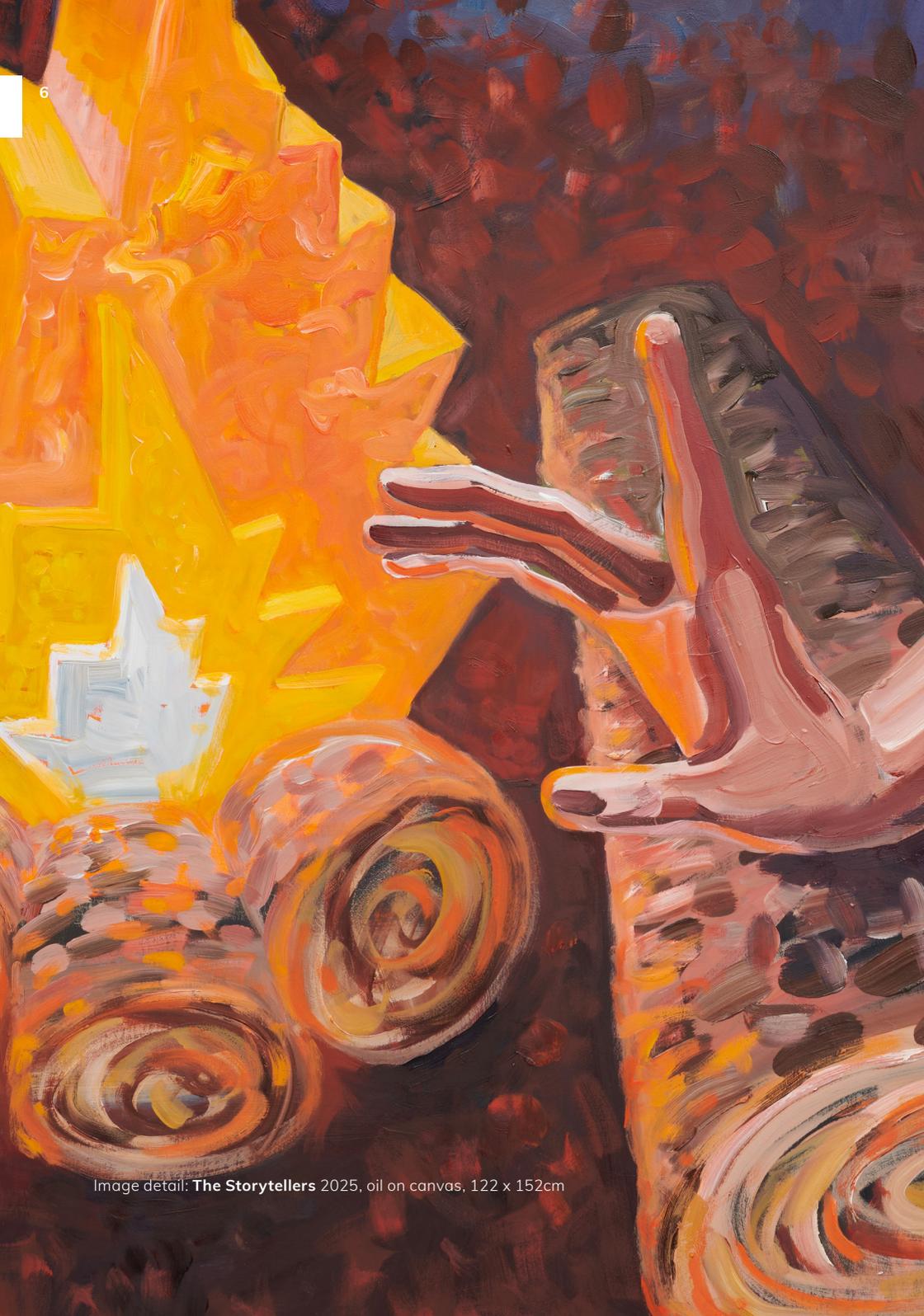


Image detail: **The Storytellers** 2025, oil on canvas, 122 x 152cm

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 17 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?



Installation view: **Salt Pillar Pageant** 2025, oil on canvas, 98 x 122cm

The *Puppet Show* resides in the threshold 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. In the middle, the viewer is caught between eras imbued with all our human fears and desires about an uncharted future. The *Puppet Show* invites us to step onto the stage of uncertainty as we wait for the act that follows.

Amber Boardman

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



Installation view (clockwise from left): **Davids and Goliaths** 2025, oil on canvas, 98 x 122cm // **Consulting the Oracle** 2025, oil on canvas, 98 x 122cm // **The Storytellers** 2025, oil on canvas, 122 x 152cm // **Wandering in the Desert** 2025, oil on panel, 98 x 122cm // **Salt Pillar Pageant** 2025, oil on canvas, 98 x 122cm



Installation and detail view: **Davids and Goliaths** 2025, oil on canvas, 98 x 122cm



Installation view: **Behind the Curtain** 2025, oil on canvas, 71 x 91cm



Installation view (clockwise from left): **The Gloves** 2025, oil on canvas, 50 x 60cm // **Pandora's Box** 2025, oil on panel, 50 x 60cm // **Gloves are Off** 2025, oil on canvas, 50 x 50cm



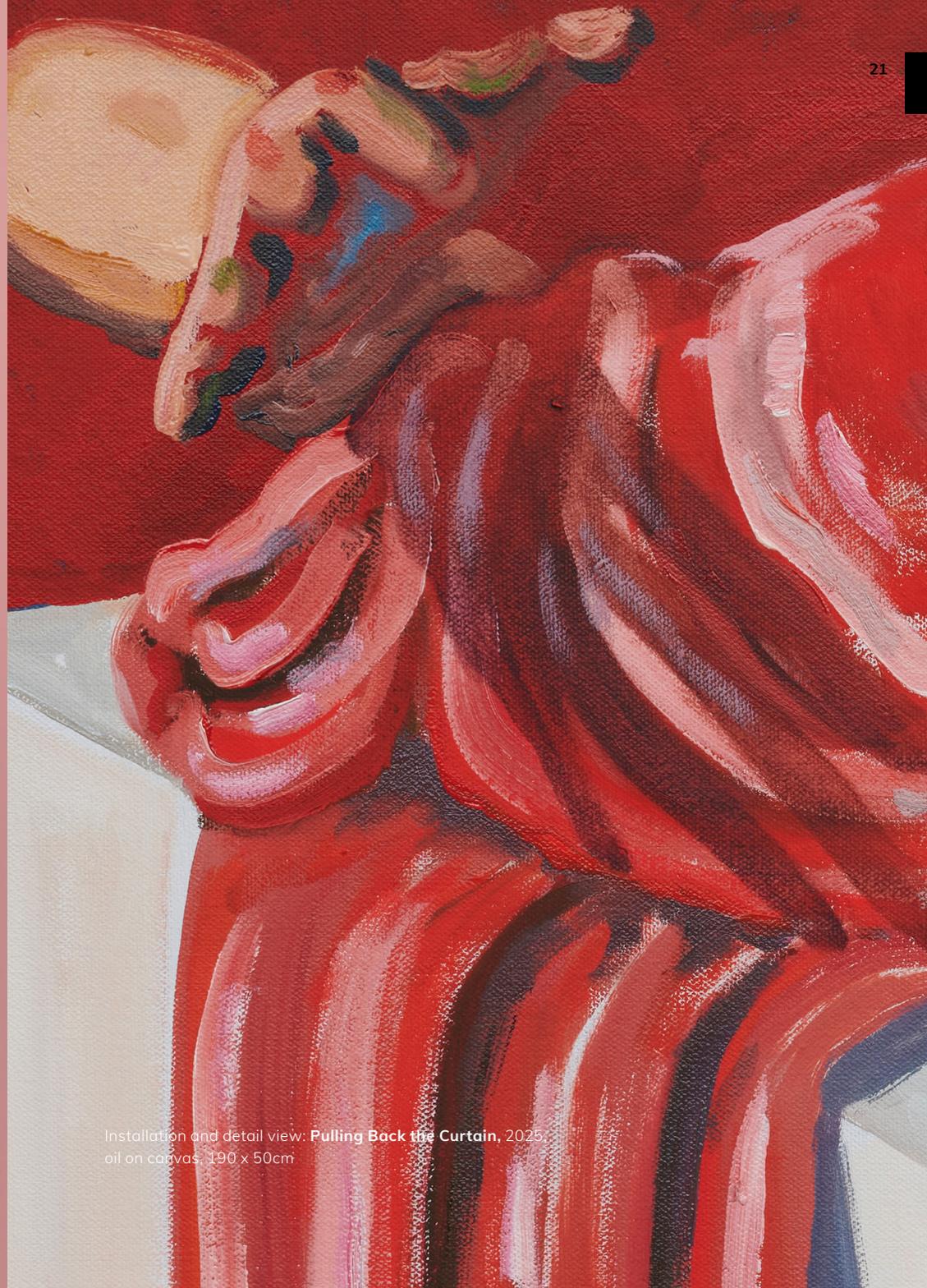
Installation and detail view: **Wandering in the Desert** 2025, oil on canvas, 98 x 122cm





Installation and detail view: **Consulting the Oracle**
 2025, oil on canvas, 98 x 122cm





Installation and detail view: **Pulling Back the Curtain**, 2025
oil on canvas, 190 x 50cm



List of exhibition works

Behind the Curtain, 2025
oil on canvas
71.1 x 91.4 cm

Consulting the Oracle, 2025
oil on canvas
97.8 x 121.9 cm

Davids and Goliaths, 2025
oil on canvas
97.8 x 121.9 cm

Gloves are Off, 2025
oil on canvas
50 x 50 cm

Pandora's Box, 2025
oil on panel
50 x 60 cm

Pulling Back the Curtain, 2025
oil on canvas
190 x 50 cm

Salt Pillar Pageant, 2025
oil on canvas
97.8 x 121.9 cm

The Storytellers, 2025
oil on canvas
121.9 x 152.4 cm

The Gloves, 2025
oil on panel
50 x 60 cm

Wandering in the Desert, 2025
oil on canvas
97.8 x 121.9 cm

Artist biography

Amber Boardman is an American-born, Sydney-based artist whose work explores how digital life shapes crowd behaviours and shared beliefs. Boardman's exhibitions of paintings function as linked anthropological studies. Working in series, she constructs each exhibition as an unfolding sequence of scenes, where every canvas operates like a sentence within a longer story about how humans adapt and mythologise themselves in digital space.

Amber Boardman's 20+year history of exhibiting her work internationally includes shows in arts institutions in New York, Miami, London, Paris, Rome, Amsterdam, Atlanta, Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Notable exhibitions include a forthcoming exhibition at Brigitte Mulholland, Paris, BAM's Next Wave Festival in New York, Postmasters Gallery in Rome, and the Archibald, Mosman and Geelong Prizes in Australia.

Over the last two decades, she has been committed to fostering the creative talent of artists.

Boardman holds a PhD in Fine Art and has been an invited speaker at universities, art galleries and museums since 2011. She has lectured in art and animation at leading universities in the US and Australia. Boardman has founded shared studio/exhibition spaces in both Brooklyn NY and Sydney Australia and continues to facilitate the exchange of ideas between artists internationally with her artist mentoring events.

Her works are held in private and public collections including Artbank and The City of Sydney and UNSW in Australia, and the High Museum of Art, The Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, the University of Kentucky Art Museum in America. Her work has appeared in publications including Artforum, Hyperallergic, Juxtapoz, Memo Review, Artist Profile, Art Collector, and ArtMaze Magazine.

Her work is represented by Chalk Horse in Sydney, Sophie Gannon Gallery in Melbourne, and Sandler Hudson Gallery in Atlanta.

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ISBN: 978-0-9756131-6-0



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