

Megan Hales 2026

DOG DAYS AND RESORT TOWNS

By Oliver Watts

Entering Hales' tightly packed studio I was able, almost immediately, to understand the mis-en-scene in a plastic vision of pink and teal. Indeed so bright and clean were the colours that we entered into a discussion about the various pinks, and the different shades that Hales had had to add to her colour palette for this series, including madder lake and various crimsons.

This suite of paintings represents her clearest vision to date, set in what appears to be a semi-suburban, beachside resort town. Australia has most of its regional centres on the coast so this is familiar territory. The sun-baking girl, the coconut oil, the bright light, all represent the beach house, its smells and leisurely holidays. I was sure I could make out the coconut scent in the air (personally a smell I relate to Redleaf Beach of Sydney Harbour). The ice-cream van and the tiny country town cinema added an atmospheric backdrop as peripheral players.

There is a lounging and fluid, or dripping feeling in these paintings. The term *Dog Days*, the title of the exhibition, suggests this ennui and stagnation under the precondition of hot summer days. It is interesting that Hales has used a term that relates to the Northern Hemisphere summer. In my slight Australian accent, there is something very familiar to an Australian audience in these paintings. There is a tropical heat, humid and a little wet; there is the sound of birds calling and the very real rustle of insects. This is the reality of the Australian summer holiday.

Once in Angourie, a beach town in far north New South Wales, I read a whole book, lying on a sofa, not knowing that there was a carpet python underneath the cushion sharing my experience. Even back in the city of Sydney, the city in which Hales works, there was recently a number of shark attacks at popular swimming spots. The Antipodean imagination, that might seem very other in the Northern Hemisphere, hits a little different in Australia. Our Oz-core Horrors, the gothic sensibility of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, our *Mad Max* dystopias are definitely part of our Eurocentric bias and legacy towards the idea of the Antipodes as dangerous and infernal. It is a bias of post-coloniality that is certainly now being questioned in the Southern Hemisphere. On the other hand Hales paintings shows that these realities are not mere metaphors.

The paintings have on one hand an excessive, chaotic energy that is an analogue of our times, hypercoloured and hyperreal. Although the surface is clean and controlled, beneath the smooth sheen of things we are hit by a set of images representing a society on the edge. We are immediately put on notice.

MEDIUM RARE AND MEDIA MONSTERS

It seems to me that much television and cinema of late has expressed a similar energy: surreal, gothic horror but set somehow in our own time. Like *Euphoria* or even the nineties *Romeo and Juliet*, we are all sound and fury, not signifying nothing necessarily but a sense of chaos and uncertainty. In *Medium Rare*, the classic sunbather is reimagined for a *Euphoria* world setting the scene of retreat for the rest of the show. As the title suggests the reclining nude is thought of as flesh on the solar barbie (barbecue). Like a Lynchian film, a scuttle of flies and buzz of mosquitos draws us in, breaking the silence. Indeed many of the paintings bring us down low into the material of things, sometimes literally under the table.

The hyperreal skin is seductive and slow, as sweat runs in drips down the smooth surface. The bikini top is untied so that the obvious tan lines are not made worse. It is a common image but here in its over proximity, in extreme close up, it is made a little strange. The birds, known to swoop in summer in Sydney, stand like voyeurs. There is a lot of beauty in this picture: the beautiful hair, the expertly rendered straw hat; but there is also some menace.

The central characters are women in much of Hales work. The subjects are drawn directly from Hales' friends but they are all archetypes as well as individuals. In *Now Hiring*, there is the idea that someone has left their dull nine to five and the toxic environment of the office to escape. It works in the exhibition like a flash back. Here the slow drip is a vindictive drip into the boss' coffee. What has their narcissistic boss done to finally make our protagonist snap?

Like a horror film the violence is only implied outside the frame. In many of these images we feel instinctively that the villainous person is male, the perhaps lecherous ice-cream van owner, "Cowboy", the voyeur or the boss. Even the monopolistic monopoly man becomes a stand in for superegoic power in capitalism. Phallic allusions double the feeling from pink bones to fleshy lipstick. Indeed it is only in *Closer* that the monstrous figure becomes real in the mirror behind the protagonist as we in pantomime style hear ourselves shout. "Look out!!"

Surrealism is not the only register in which these paintings work. Surrealism was always the synthesis between the real and the dream, and worked well in realistic mediums from photography to the realist paintings of Dali. Hales works between the real and the unreal, and moves easily through a number of stylistic registers: realism, surrealism, hyperrealism, but then also symbolism and even plays on traditional iconography. The works are there to be slowly deciphered over time like cryptic clues.

But say in *Closer* again the reality of the dirt under the nails, the slight indentation in the lipstick stick, the wetness of the boars tongue, all this adds to the real, surreal horror. The boar, the image of a shark, the spider, in the hands of the surrealists these were wondrous beasts, in the Australian rural context, and in Hales paintings, even if they are a shark sticker, the monsters become fleshy, real and abject.

CAPITALISM, CAMP AND COLLECTING

The Castle is a microcosm of suburban status anxiety in a miniature infantilised package. A perfectly symmetrical composition, almost like an altar piece, it has a very unexpected point of view, from low within a dog kennel. The sunny backdrop is one of perfect calm with reeds quietly swaying in the breeze. Light radiates through small holes in the roof doubling the effect of divine light.

This setup only throws into relief the baseness of the dog's life. It is a life of pure desire and acquisition: the Christian Louboutin red stiletto heel, the favourite stick, a chewed once tennis ball. The meaty strips on the pretty smooth bone create an almost phallic shape across the centre of the picture plane. What all these canine objects suggest are the people outside the frame; they are also their ex-acquisitions. The children's images show that the small kids have tried the house on for size at one point.

But we are drawn into the details as if we too are shopping on an *Amazon* catalogue. Each object is lovingly and skilfully painted. Painting is, at the heart of things, a short hand. You can't in the end paint every hair on the head. What strikes me in Hales work though, even in the pantheon of painters, is the exactitude of the short hand. There is no cheat sheet for these weird and wonderful textures.

The many details show a careful and deliberate experimentation and study. Through photographs and real models Hales works hard to account for her objects: the almost elephant like skin of the inside of the kennel rings so true (why do so many plastic items have this faux natural finish?); the dry pulling of the old ball with its blend of wool and synthetic fibres like nylon; and the smooth translucency of fresh bone.

The skill and time Hales puts into this exploration of texture in paint is admirable, obsessive and to some extent reverent. In the nineteenth century the Naturalist style showed a similar attention to detail in an effort to show respect to God's plan. John Ruskin in his *Modern Painters* (1843) argued attention to meticulous natural detail revealed a divine truth. Painterly attention to clouds, geological and botanical details were seen as a painter's prayer.

When this impetus is turned onto the truth of capitalism and its stuff, Hales becomes the naïve and believing figure of the camp connoisseur. This contemporary aesthete, with a love of the everyday commodity, designates Susan Sontag's definition of camp.

I have a particular interest in the twill sandshoe in *The Castle*. When I first went to see the paintings the shoes were too clean for Hales. If you study each surface carefully you may marvel at what tiny brushes must have been used. Every part of the canvas is like the intensity of a miniature. The realism for example on the twill weave of the tennis shoe was already there but the question was: How would dirt accrue? I noted that my shoe was a good model. Megan took a series of photos as if she was a scientist on an other planet. Real objects are strewn around the studio too for extra and final reference: the kennel, the fur, the high heels. So you get this combination of both the photographic and the life model.

Watching Hales work in her studio filled with images and the real found objects I think of the Renaissance workshops, or Dutch studios and their vanitas models. Like a surrealist too or symbolist, all of things in her studio are like a surreal found object, *objets trouvés*. The objects are found in the real world but imbued with a magical energy by Hales. The work equivocates between Pop art celebration and campness and the tradition of the vanitas.

Weekender although a similar theme brings the world of acquisition and property into the superegoic belief system of monopolistic capital. The game is afoot, the wine is spilt, the pieces helter skelter. Again we are placed low almost under the table cloth. It is as if we as viewers are trying to get a handle on the game from the bottom up. In the end with all the different planes and angles of the composition we are shown to fail, the temple is falling.

From a genre point of view this painting is also a vanitas but it also talks to table game paintings like Chardin's immersive games, Georges de la Tour's cheats or Cezanne's statuesque card players. These works are about winners and losers, cheats and marks, bluffing and the real deal. In *Weekender*, we are reminded that on holiday, the game of *Monopoly* very rarely goes well.

The game itself was apocryphally created as a game to warn against the excesses of monopoly in the 1920s. As Thomas Piketty has recently highlighted we would have to go back to 1927 to find an era as inequitable as ours. *Monopoly*, once a game that seemed to celebrate acquisition and winning returns, as in this painting, as a warning of the excess and the fall.

UNDERCUTTING CRITIQUE AND THE CONTEMPORARY

There is another aspect to the level of detail that Hales is able to achieve and that is that every centimetre is charged with meaning. This means that she is able to undercut and shift her own works to equivocate, and to have multiple meanings, within the same frame. Most importantly they all seem to have a mechanism of presenting something earnestly and clearly but then critiquing the thing that she has just represented. It is this openness, uncertainty and critique that in the end marks out this work as contemporary.

The works have a strong compositional voice, often with a large or central motif. But then very quickly our eyes are moved around the picture. Beside the immediate strong cinematic hit, the paintings unfold for the viewer in a myriad of ways through hidden symbols and tiny clues. They are paintings that definitely have to be experienced in the flesh to have this effect of moving in and out of the work. The paintings are a physical workout for the eyes.

In *Enjoy the Show*, we are struck by a photorealist work that seems a classic trope: glass, Americana and glowing neons on metal. So realistic is that toasty yellow colour of the popped corn that you feel you can smell the buttery salty snack. The cinema is a loaded place of first dates and teenage hijinks. There is the anxious wait outside the often single screen cinema as the previous audience saunters out. Then there's the frantic and never fully convincing clean.

As you come closer to the surface of the painting like a van Eyck painting little details become important. Is it a primal part of the brain that so quickly allows us to see the life size cockroach? Again to a European sensibility this cockroach might seem huge but it is a common sight in Sydney. Nevertheless the cockroach scuttling away makes you question the hygiene of all the food (the whole beautiful celebration in the painting). The hair on the legs of the insect are so real as to be icky. Like many painters before her, Hales really conjures up the ancient magic where the image *becomes* the thing in front of you.

In a direct take on the Antipodean critique Hales inserts an Arnolfini Marriage size portrait of herself, on the scrunched up *Jaws* poster at the base of the machine. A 0000 brush was certainly used to paint that face. Again this little point redirects the whole meaning of the painting.

It is the little detail, like a cockroach coming from the popcorn machine, or the spilt wine, or a type of large horsefly (the classic Australian interloper but also perhaps a Socratic gadfly) that undermines the primary thrust of the images. All of the images in this exhibition have that interplay and it is up to the viewer to find their own way between the various meanings.

SKINS, PLASTIC TEXTURES AND COCONUT OIL

Finally it would be remiss to not talk about the abject seduction in these paintings. This is perhaps the most latent and surreal element but it is again a little hidden away. If we return to the painting *100's & 1000's* which is what Australians call the colourful sprinkles on ice cream cones, we are placed face to face with the Mr Whippy Van. With the number plate, "Cowboy" and the Ken Doll placed on the bumper, this work is a direct take on masculinity, and toxic traits. The large sign "Supersoft" is a not so subtle dig on the tumescent member.

The ice cream van man is the mini-entrepreneur *par excellence*, the self starter, own boss. It is always an amazing trivia fact that Margaret Thatcher herself was on the team of biochemists that came up with the Mr Whippy soft serve. The "ice cream" is not made of milk and is the perfect symbol for the artificiality of late-capitalist

offerings. The business can not be performing too well though as the truck is clearly for sale, dirty and rusted.

Like the surrealists before her Hales plays with binaries in many of her works: masculine/feminine, hard/soft, beauty/ugliness, nature/artifice, real skins and furs and plastic simulations. The abject pierces the perfect surfaces of the paintings from sweat on the skin, to drool, to sinewy meat and fur.

This is another semiotic method of undercutting the iconographic language of the paintings with something more real and visceral. There is no doubt that hair, fur and skin, veins, teeth and tongues, all conjure up an undercurrent of sexual desire and release. The coconut oil on the skin, the feel of lipstick on the lips, there is strong tactility in many of these paintings.

The section of the gazes is also a binary. On one hand we transfer to the very strong female protagonists, and a transference to Hales own careful visual analysis. On the other hand the masculine villains sit outside the frame. We too, the viewers, seem implicated into a game of the male gaze. In the paintings only the crow and the boar have eyes to gaze upon their female protagonist. There is a quiet but intense violence in these paintings. The paintings seduce with a sense of surface beauty but continually darker currents are brought forth to the surface and a play of domination and submission.

LOVES AND ANXIETIES

Like many of her works to date Hales compresses our world into a condensed version of tight metaphors and miniatures. The animal imagery doubles some of the more beastly natures of humankind. There is as always too an uncomfortable conflation of fantasy and the real, artifice and nature, that unsettles the viewer slightly and sets us searching for new answers.

It seems to me unlike some previous shows this exhibition is more intimate and personal. The politics of our day including precarious work, the strictures of suburban normality, monopolistic capital and the subtle violence of gender performance, are all present. However there is an overwhelming proximity to these paintings. We are brought right up close into the foreground of the paintings. We are almost sucked into these paintings like a whirl pool.

In that instance it is hard to find a disinterested point of critique on the paintings. Instead we must go with the flow, dive deep into the paintings and move about until we find our own exits. Then we are almost thrust out again safe on land looking at the beautiful surface of a painting in front of us.

The works have strength because they come out of the stuff that is within Megan Hales' studio and her life around her. They are lovingly crafted and carefully communicated to the viewer slowly through the traditional medium of oil paint. Even the brushes Hales uses are not special or out of the ordinary, but she is able to wield them to produce unbelievable illusions. Some of the brushes are more like cosmetic brushes than sable specialist brushes. Painting away, minute to minute, Hales allows us an insight into her loves and anxieties.