

# IAN WILLIAMS

GAMEPIECE



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MOORE CONTEMPORARY



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25th March - 22nd April 2023

Ian Williams has held several solo exhibitions and participated in over twenty-five group exhibitions since graduating with First Class Honours from Curtin University in 2018, and an earlier Advanced Diploma at Central Institute of Technology in 2011. He has been acknowledged with numerous student and industry awards and his work is in the collections of Artbank, Curtin University, University of Western Australia, Central Institute of Technology, Town of Victoria Park and significant private collections. He is currently a lecturer in painting at Curtin University. This is Williams' first solo exhibition with MOORE CONTEMPORARY.





Above: *Dressed to Kill*, 2023. Oil on wood panel, 30 x 45cm.

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## Ian Williams: Soft Reality Dynamics

Francis Russell

*Still life is unimpressed by the categories of soul, consciousness, achievement, grandeur, or the unique. The human subject that it proposes and assumes is a bodily, material entity on a par with anything else in the material field. It is severed from value, greatness, and singularity. This is the first of still life's enduring insults to the humanist subject.*

Norman Bryson

*Humans have always lived in a hybrid environment surrounded by artificial and natural objects. The artificial and the natural are not two separate realms, nor are artificial objects simply instruments with which to conquer the natural; instead, they constitute a dynamic system that conditions human experience and existence. And precisely because the artificial is constantly developing toward greater concretization, it demands constant reflection on its singular historical condition.*

Yuk Hui

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### Does the Commodity Paint the Commodity as Commodity?

Within much orthodox economic thought, the primary problem faced by human societies is understood in terms of negotiating the necessity of growth and the brute fact of scarcity. On this view, the productive capitalist subject is the bourgeois ascetic who understands the virtue of thrift, and who precisely calculates their saving, spending, and investment such that they can expand their enterprises. Against such a figure, however, we have the less accepted view of the productive capitalist subject as the excessive consumer whose lavishness and appetite spur on production, investment, and growth. On the one hand, Dickens' Thomas Gradgrind—"a man of realities. A man of facts and calculations"—and on the other hand WWE's Rick Flair—"the Rolex wearing, diamond ring wearing, kiss stealing (WOO!) wheeling dealing, limousine riding, jet flying, son of a gun".<sup>2</sup> Although the former figure is perhaps still more dominant and visible in contemporary neoliberal societies—as evinced by the frequent injunction for individuals and families to inhibit spending on unnecessary luxuries if they want to get ahead in life, as when billionaire Gina Rinehart advised Australians to spend less time "drinking, or smoking and socializing, and more time working"<sup>3</sup>—the latter figure appears strategically, and especially during moments of crisis such as the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, or during the COVID-19 pandemic—think of George W. Bush declaring the USA "open for business" in the aftermath of the attacks on the Twin Towers.<sup>4</sup>

Understandably, such tensions within our conception of the productive—and thereby ethical—subject of capitalism can be found in art, and especially those artforms that emerged through capitalism's ur-phase. For example, the scholarship around Dutch still life paintings often finds itself caught between these explanatory narratives when attempting to account for the centrality of objects—and especially what we would now refer to as luxury commodities—within the visual culture of pre-industrial merchant capitalism. As Elizabeth Alice Honig argues, much art history looks to explain the dominance of objects in proto-capitalist visual culture with reference to both the expanding value of commodities in social life—a value that the then-recently commodified practice of painting benefited from by depicting commodities—and the discomfort that such commodification would cause given the increasingly dominant Protestant culture of asceticism.<sup>5</sup> As Honig puts it, such a discussion "binds the production of one cultural form—still life painting—to two major viewpoints about the formation of capitalist society", thereby reframing still life painting in terms of the question "is capitalism Protestantly ascetic and driven by investment in production, or is it based on greedy consumer demand for luxury commodities?"<sup>6</sup> Or, following the argument of Jan de Vries, we could posit that the still life painting of the Dutch Golden Age embodied a tension between "theory and practice, discourse and human behaviour" insofar as "what people thought about luxury and the practice of luxury consumption became two different things".<sup>7</sup>

We can see this tension embodied perhaps most viscerally in what is arguably the progenitive painting of the still life genre, Pieter Aertsen's 1551 work *A Meat Stall with the Holy Family Giving Alms*. As Charlotte Houghton has observed, this painting has given rise to various conflicting interpretations, with some historians and critics viewing it as kind of proto-*vanitas* with a clear moralising tone, whereas others have viewed it as having an "unabashedly festive, even Rabelaisian" quality.<sup>8</sup> Arguably, then, the still life's emphasis on both the organic and inorganic, luxury and decay, and desire and death, situates the genre at the intersection of the danger and possibility proffered by a newly emerging capitalism, through which life would come to be almost entirely dominated by capital as "dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks".<sup>9</sup>



Above: *Superhype*, 2022. Oil on canvas, 120 x 180cm.





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## Real Abstraction

If we accept that a key part of the still life's critical function has been to make visible this tension between a society that values asceticism and humble piety, but engages increasingly in practices of consumption, we can ask how still life could today play a similar critical role. On face value, it is difficult to imagine how the genre of still life could function as a form of cultural critique, especially since the tensions embodied by previous periods of painting seem to have more or less resolved in the now sheer ubiquity of commodity exchange as an underlying logic of social life. This is perhaps most evident in the still life-inspired photography of Jon Rafman, and more specifically in his 2015 series *You Are Standing in an Open Field* which depicts a series of PC keyboards amidst the detritus of slovenly computer—and presumably internet—use. Clearly inspired by early 2000s imageboard photos of PC setups that exhibited cigarette butts, beer and soft drink cans, antacids, and takeaway food containers, Rafman's images ironically celebrate a rejection of the pretence that consumerism and respectability can be balanced—an attitude sometimes referred to in online circles as “based”, a term that is not etymologically derived from the word debased, but can nevertheless refer to an affirmation of debasement. As such, while they are visually powerful, Rafman's still life images seem alleviated of tension, and instead align themselves fully with an ironic embrace of what is ugly, stupid, and disappointing about online culture.

There is potentially another tension that contemporary still life image production could embody, however, one that was marginally present with the Dutch Golden Age, but has become more apparent and urgent since at least the twentieth-century. While the tension between the corruptive and productive powers of commodification struggles to maintain purchase in contemporary art, the tension between reality and artificiality is arguably much more potent. Put differently, as Dutch still life painting emerged out of a society aspiring to protestant values but engaging increasingly in market practices, today's neoliberal societies aspire to realness—whether understood in terms of scientific objectivity or existential authenticity—but primarily engage in practices of unreality and fragmentation. Arguably it is through this tension that contemporary still life works can most compellingly intervene into contemporary culture, as is evinced by Ian Williams' works in *Gamepiece*. Not only are there compositional resonances between the works in *Gamepiece* and canonical still life paintings like Aertsen's *A Meat Stall*—insofar as Aertsen sausages and dismembered carcasses hover in an eerie suspension not unlike the floating geometry of Williams' digitally-inspired paintings—but Williams, like Aertsen, provides images that cannot be neatly placed within either a secular or religious register, or a playful or cautionary tone.

Williams' paintings draw inspiration from the kinds of 3D-rendered objects that are the building blocks of all manner of virtual realities and game environments. Colourless and devoid of

preestablished forms or functions, a painterly rendering of these objects cannot be unfaithful or unnaturalistic. Despite this, Williams' paintings seem to have a reverence for the digital objects depicted. On the one hand, these paintings lack the sense of excitement or hyperactivity that one might assume would run parallel with an embrace of the mutability of digital design. On the other hand, Williams' work lacks any sense of moral judgement or regret in the face of the increasing encroachment of digital images into our lives. Against both of these impulses—that of the digital enthusiast or the digital exorcist— and despite the insubstantial and unreal character of the objects painted, Williams' practice suggests a desire to sit patiently with these objects, and perhaps in a spirit of quietism. It would be cheap to refer to Williams' as a kind of Morandi for the Metaverse, but there is nevertheless something to this counter-factual (what if Morandi had lived long enough to encounter Blender?) insofar as Williams' project involves the attempt to accurately and authentically depict objects that exist only to be transformed.

If Williams' paintings do engage with the question of the cultural impact of luxury as one of the conventional preoccupations of the still life genre, they feel better suited to a discussion of contemporary luxury culture's connection to anxieties around reality and deception. Indeed, social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram have incentivised an entire industry around the simulation of wealth and status—a fact that, adding to a sense of confusion and unreality, is often discussed by many of the proponents of such faux-luxurious lifestyles. For instance, the infamous Tate brothers—known for railing against *The Matrix*, which, borrowed from the popular Wachowski sisters' film series, is their term for the dishonest and exploitative character of contemporary life—have spoken out against “fake influencers” who travel to cities like Dubai in order to stage photographs and videos outside of expensive hotels and next to luxury cars they cannot afford. Moreover, these accusations of status simulation are made despite the fact that the Tate brothers have themselves been criticised for exaggerating their levels of wealth.<sup>10</sup> NFTs, deepfake videos, troll farms, and the scamlike character of online advertising numbers—what, following Tim Hwang, we could call the Subprime Attention Economy—all speak to digital mediated socialites that are continually threatened by a desire for authenticity and recognition that runs up against social practices that privilege performativity and duplicity.<sup>11</sup> Comparable to an earlier period of still life art that utilised the motif of the spill to symbolise the dangers and pleasures of abundance—with such paintings commonly showing the viewer that “goblets have over-turned and spilled, crumbs lie scattered on the table”—Williams' paintings depict objects in a *state of ricochet* as if to embody the speed and disorientation of digital content.





Above: *Paper Tigers*, 2023. Oil on wood panel, 27 x 40cm.

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### Coda

If we once posed the question of whether capitalism emerges out of economic and cultural practices of asceticism or hedonism, we should perhaps ask today whether capitalism ideologically sustains itself by way of maintaining a homogenous reality—i.e., Mark Fisher’s capitalist realism—or the production of micro-realities inhospitable to experiences and practices of solidarity and reciprocity—i.e., Andreas Reckwitz’s society of singularities.<sup>12</sup> Regardless of which problematic one emphasizes, the crises of neoliberal societies—whether it is described in terms of late-capitalism, surveillance capitalism, or neo-feudalism—raises questions around the possibility of maintaining those institutions traditionally tasked with producing something like consensus reality—such as religious institutions, universities, and news media. The technological conditions for, and the political and economic stakes of image production certainly has to be contended with when asking these questions. Put differently, as crisis-prone neoliberal societies come to rely further on image production and circulation to socially organise themselves, our desires for authenticity and reality and our pragmatic need to disseminate ourselves across various platforms and idioms will produce tensions that require an artistic response. Indeed, if it was once true that painting—and especially naturalistic painting—has to contend with the displacements caused by mechanical image production, today one could argue that our ability to maintain a coherent notion of reality has to contend with the saturation of dynamic and plastic image production. Put differently, if we used to ask what becomes of painting after photography, today we should ask what becomes of reality after painting. ■

*Francis Russell is a lecturer in the faculty of humanities at Curtin University, Western Australia. His research primarily focuses on madness, alienation, and neoliberal culture. Alongside Ben Rich he is the co-director of the Curtin Extremism Research Network.*

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## References

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<sup>3</sup> Joshua Berlinger, "World's Richest Woman Tells Jealous People To Drink Less And Work More", *Business Insider*, 30 August 2012, via: <https://www.businessinsider.com/gina-rinehart-tells-people-to-drink-less-work-more-2012-8>

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<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Alice Honig, "Making Sense of Things: On the Motives of Dutch Still Life", *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 34, 1998, p. 168-169

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169

<sup>7</sup> Jan de Vries, "Luxury and Calvinism/Luxury and Capitalism: Supply and Demand for Luxury Goods in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic", *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery*, 57, 1999, p. 75

<sup>8</sup> Charlotte Houghton, "This Was Tomorrow: Pieter Aertsen's 'Meat Stall' as Contemporary Art", *The Art Bulletin*, 86.2, 2004, p. 277

<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1*, 1990 [1867], Penguin Books p. 342

<sup>10</sup> "Tristan Tate Exposes Fake Dubai Influencers For Weak Mindset and gives Motivation quote" via YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/EiPpBJMLLV8>

<sup>11</sup> Tim Hwang, *Subprime Attention Crisis: Advertising and the Time Bomb at the Heart of the Internet*, 2020, MacMillan

<sup>12</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, 2009, Zero Books; Andreas Reckwitz, *Society of Singularities*, 2020, Polity Books





