



Have you ever gone into some prestigious art museum, walked around for a while, then stopped somewhere in the classical section, just a few short metres away from a masterpiece and thought, ‘eh, needs more cats’? What a coincidence. Fortunately, Australian painter **Vanessa Stockard**’s work fills this exact (completely unacceptable) gap in the art market. Today, Vanessa weighs in on some of life’s most important questions – Why would you call an artist ‘dangerous’? How do you get an emotion out of your brain and onto a canvas? Where do all of those lost socks go, and what do we do with the stray ones?

First things first. What was your relationship with art like as a child?

My relationship with art was very tight when I was little – as a very young child, I would spend hours drawing every day. I mixed that with learning the piano when I was three, so between the two forms, basically, I just wanted to be creative.

Did you engage with many works or spaces that people tend to associate with the ‘proper’ sense of the word – portrait galleries, theatre, opera, etc.?

I grew up in a small country town in Australia, and so it wasn't very cosmopolitan. However, both my grandmother and mother were painters, so I grew up looking at a lot of books about art. When I was older, I would visit the art galleries in the city whenever I could.



On a more personal note, you've mentioned envying the younger you's imagination – a feeling that artists, scientists, and philosophers have commiserated over for years. Why do you think this happens, is there some horrible creature that deals exclusively in stolen imagination and socks?

I think the loss of imagination has a lot to do with the schooling systems, the compartmentalizing aspect of learning subjects as singular entities. Once your brain learns how to think that way, it stops the meandering natural way the creative mind behaves. I believe that the young creative mind sleeps in a castle made of lost socks.

There are certain disciplines that we typically associate with painting – still life, portraiture, landscapes. Aside from that, you've also studied gilding and carving. What sparked your interest in the craft initially and how has learning it influenced your work?

Learning about traditional techniques of professional and quality presentation of artworks became a serious interest, and I am quite obsessed with framing in general. I respect the time and the skill involved in creating beautiful frames not only to protect the work, but also to add to its beauty.

Before becoming a successful painter, you've also dabbled in composing and even some chemistry. Looking back, would you recommend venturing out into unfamiliar mediums and subjects?

Life will lead you where it will, I just couldn't find my job in the real world. I could work, sure, but I couldn't find my fit. I certainly couldn't find something that could make me feel satisfied. I tried a few things, but in the end, it was making pictures that kept me interested.



Amongst the more unusual expressions of artistic praise, you've been dubbed as 'one of the most dangerous artists on the Australian, and by extension, international scene'. What do you think makes an artist 'dangerous'?

Dubbed as 'one of the most dangerous artists', I can safely say, was someone taking a bit of a lend. What makes me dangerous is going into public with my fashion sense and/or reverse parking.

Moving away from painting and into painting for a moment, the director of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, Céline Sciamma, has argued that it might be time to retire the concept of 'the muse'. Why do you think this issue had to be 'filtered' through a film about portraiture to enter the more mainstream conversation? And does the artist really need the muse?

Does the artist need a muse? I don't feel that to be true in my daily endeavour. However, when the muse does appear – as they inevitably do –, it is like a drug, your creative drive is explosive. It feels like a form of vampirism, where you are feeding off the energy of another person. I think muses pass, and when the time comes around, another one will appear. When you have sucked the life out of them...Who wants to be my next muse?

Speaking of working with others, where did Kevin and your other signature characters come from initially, and how have they evolved over time?

I've always had a thing for cats. I love and hate them for different reasons and I find them endlessly entertaining. I grew up with a black Manx cat who was, shall we say, 'pretty scratchy' and, well, I guess she stuck with me. She lived a long life and I loved her regardless. I've met cats along the way that have made a big impression on me. Obviously, the mangey black Persian I dubbed 'Satan' started a journey several years ago, and eventually, I saw an old sock in the studio and thought... That's a kitten! It wasn't. But that wasn't important. That's a kitten and its name is Kevin. Logical.



Kevin, in particular, has become famous for popping in and out of various classical paintings. How do you choose where he should show up next?

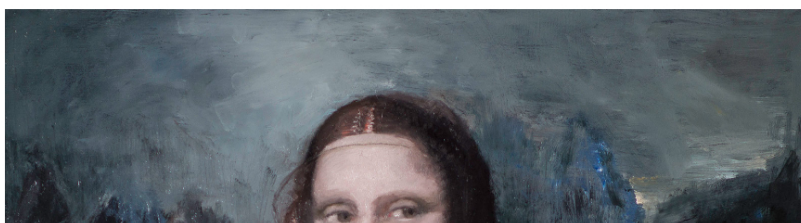
I choose where he should show up next as an excuse for which painting I want to ad homage to, validating my drive to copy the masters. Yes, it is cheeky, but it also is a way to remind us all of how incredible these artists were – no photos, no projectors, just time-honoured skill and dedication.

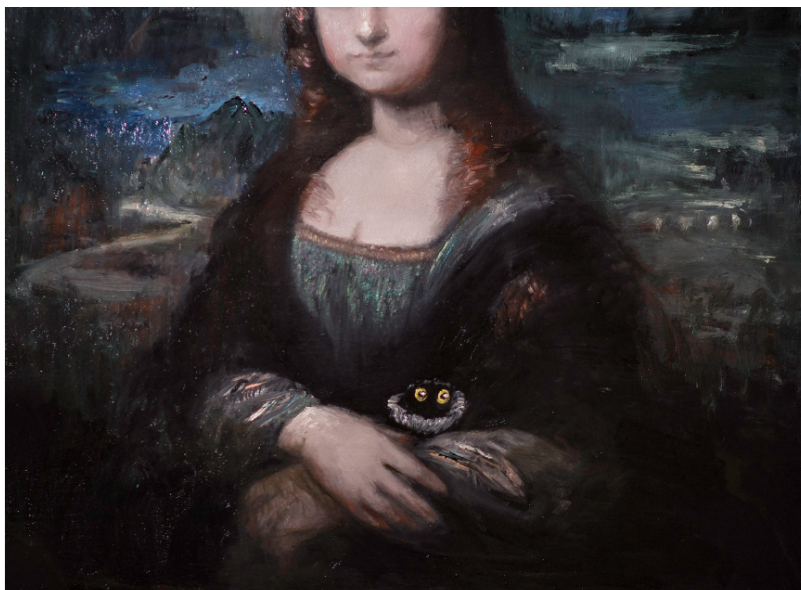
Coming back to more human partners, you've recently collaborated with the fashion brand Paul & Joe. What was the creative dialogue between you, Paul, and Joe like?

The collaboration between Paul and Joe was superbly exciting for me, and incredibly ironic. Most of my life I have made people gasp with my fashion errors, and I just felt, Kevin is just so weird anyway, why wouldn't this make total sense? To be involved in an operation like theirs was very humbling and I'm really proud of how they managed to put things together so beautifully.

Another fellow artist, Salvador Dalí, infamously stated that he was too smart to be a truly great painter. Would you agree that there's a certain conflict between intellect and intuition that great artists often face? Or is this just a humble brag?

Well, I am not going to have that problem, am I? Though I feel for me, I need to be almost mentally asleep – as in unaware of what's going on around me – to do decent work. I like to paint from the back of my brain and see what's rambling around in there. Sometimes it isn't much, but often there is problem-solving I need to do, and it's in this space where a good painting can emerge. One that has enough layers of meaning.





There's comparison and there's competition. You've noted that art competitions are great because they force artists to try something new, try harder, try again. How do you develop a healthy spirit of competition in a domain such as art?

Competitions are often really depressing. I mean, I can't tell you how many rejection letters I've been given over the years. I could wallpaper my studio with them. The thought of being hung in the good ones is validating, in a good way, so it is worth the risk. The incentive to work harder is always a good one.

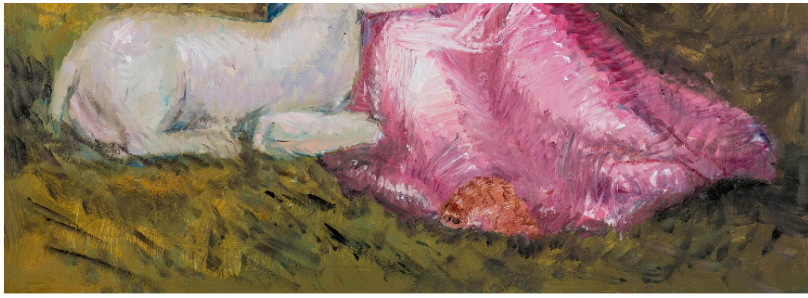
Let's not forget the everyday. You've talked about art as a method of processing various life experiences, elements of the world around us, and even the little things that slip into our minds subconsciously. How do you extract this from your brain and get it onto the canvas?

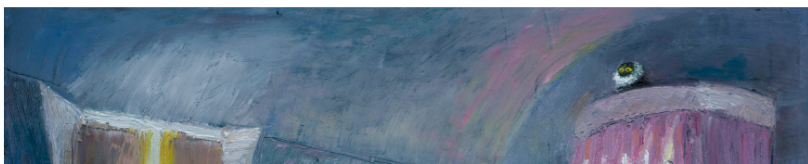
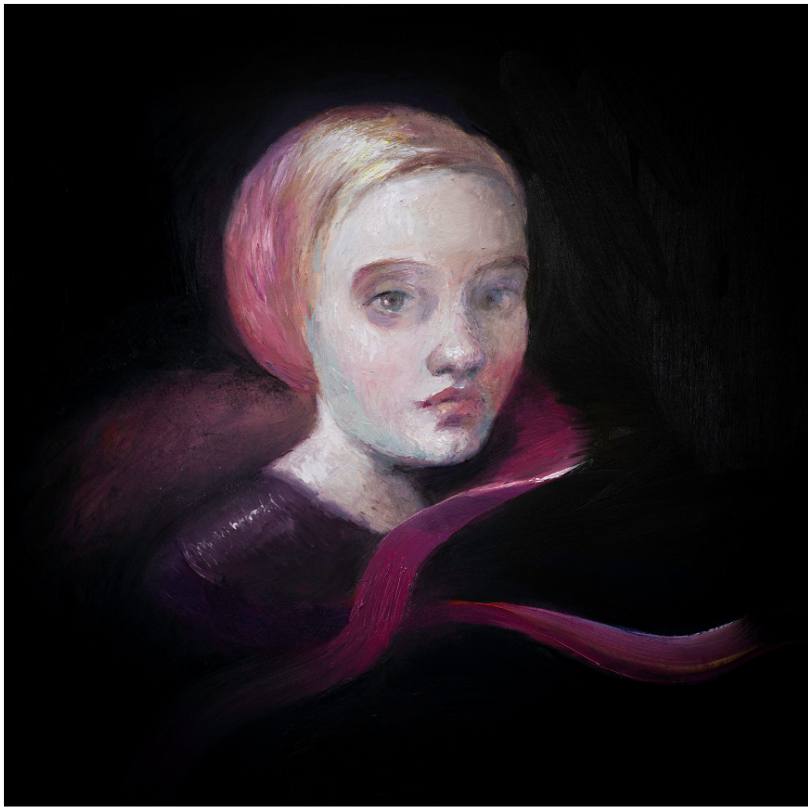
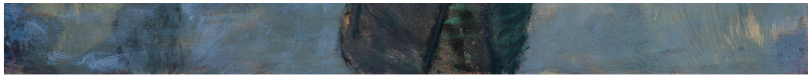
I just get started. If I don't have a plan for the day, I will just mess around with colours, turn the boards upside down and on their side, see if I can see anything. After a while, you fall into a trance, and then, the painting reveals itself. You basically form a mash-up of the symbols and ideas you have worked with all your life. After a few hours, you can see what you've been trying to say but couldn't find the words behind the emotion. The subconscious is like the deep web – it's chock-full of random information. Painting can bring some of that information together to create personal stories.

Finally, the million-dollar question – any plans for the nearest future?

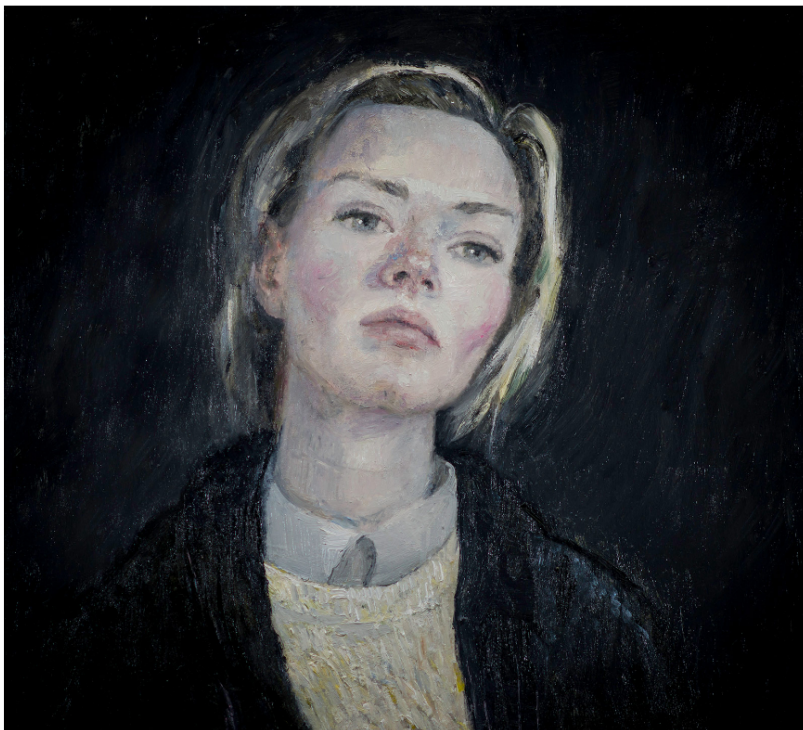
Covid-19 made a big plan for my nearest future, that being null and void. I will just keep on doing my thing and something will happen.

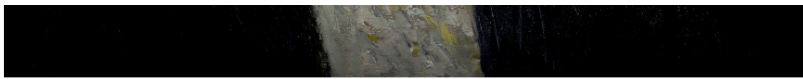












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