

# Daniel Mudie Cunningham Curation, Creation, Criticism

Essays, Articles

## Tender Hooks on Mary Callaghan

Introduction for *Tender Hooks* screening at Wollongong Art Gallery, 31 August 2025

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Mary Callaghan, *Tender Hooks*, 1988  
Courtesy of Ronin Films

Mary Callaghan's *Tender Hooks* (1988), originally titled *Contact* during pre-production, is a fiercely energetic feature that explores the fragile dynamics between intimacy, dependency and self-determination. The film follows Rex (Nique Needles), a young man freshly released from prison, and Mitchell (Jo Kennedy), a woman negotiating her place in a gritty cityscape, as they forge a relationship that is emotionally charged and precarious. As Callaghan put it, the film examines when

“two people [are] leaning and they eventually collapse” – love functioning more like a habit or addiction than a source of stability. This dependency is not moralised but used as a catalyst: both characters must learn to stand on their own to move forward.

The thematic roots of *Tender Hooks* lie in *Greetings from Wollongong* (1982), the landmark docudrama that announced Callaghan’s distinctive blend of social observation and dry humour. That film captured the routines and frustrations of unemployed youth and, in its refusal to sentimentalise them, drew the ire of Wollongong’s Lord Mayor of the time, whose denunciation sparked national interest. “Adverse publicity is the best promotion I ever got,” Callaghan later said. Today, we call this the Streisand Effect.



Mary Callaghan, *Tender Hooks*, 1988  
Courtesy of Ronin Films

If *Greetings* was a dramatised doco, *Tender Hooks* marks her decisive move into feature fiction. Callaghan mixes the sharpness of social realism with an idiosyncratic fast-cut style informed by filmmaker heroes like Godard and Gleyzer. “It’s not softened by its style,” she insisted of the film’s look and feel, “it’s just heightened.” Sydney becomes an active presence: Kings Cross, Darlinghurst and Bondi are shown as restless sites of negotiation, desire and exhaustion.

At its centre is the shifting relationship between Rex and Mitchell. His charismatic impulsiveness and her emotional acuity generate an unstable, tender push-pull. “I don’t have anybody getting the up on anybody else,” Callaghan explained. What we witness is not revelation, but two people undergoing a provisional reckoning. The

film's impact also rests on the strength of its performances. Jo Kennedy, in particular, is luminous as Mitchell. Kennedy was an unmistakable star of 1980s Australian cinema (another case in point: Gillian Armstrong's 1982 film *Starstruck*). *Tender Hooks* reminds us how underrated Kennedy remains. Around her and Nique Needles' Rex, cameos such as Reg Mombassa's appearance as a street busker add jolts of eccentric colour to the film's already vibrant palette.

### Tender Hooks Trailer



Mary Callaghan, *Tender Hooks*, 1988 – Trailer  
Courtesy of Ronin Films

Wollongong Art Gallery's exhibition *Greetings from Wollongong* reframes *Tender Hooks* as part of a broader praxis grounded in collaboration, observation and anti-didactic feminist politics. From working with non-professional actors to seeking feedback from Long Bay inmates during filming — *Tender Hooks* was, in fact, the first ever narrative film granted permission to shoot inside Long Bay — Callaghan's process embodied the same ethics of respect and dialogue her films perform.

Ultimately, *Tender Hooks* is less concerned with genre than with attitude – the belief that subcultural and working-class stories can be formally inventive, that humour can coexist with despair, and that fiction gains its power by drawing out the complex emotional truths of lived experience. In closing our exhibition *Greetings from Wollongong* with this special screening of *Tender Hooks*, the Gallery honours Callaghan's singular voice and the enduring cultural value of independent, socially-conscious cinema.





Portrait of Mary Callaghan, 1988  
Courtesy of Ronin Films

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