



# NATURAL MAGNETISM

Attuned to the natural world, Natasha Bieniek relays the minutia of the outdoors in her paintings.

Writer Jo Higgins takes a closer look.

Portrait by Kirstin Gollings.





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It would seem, for **Natasha Bieniek** at least, that from little things big things do indeed grow because the Melbourne-based painter's exquisitely detailed miniatures have been receiving some significant attention lately. In July last year Bieniek's Polaroid-sized landscape painting *Biophilia* won the prestigious Wynne Prize. Several months later in September, her self-portrait *Sahara* received the \$30,000 Portia Geach Memorial Award. This year she has been a finalist in no less than the *Fleurieu Art Prize* for her landscape *Kumiko* and the Archibald Prize, for her captivating portrait of Wendy Whiteley.

Bieniek is well-known as a portraitist but her latest exhibition, *Bloombox* at Jan Murphy Gallery in Brisbane, continues her exploration of those ideas she first encountered while painting the *Biophilia* series last year. In particular, she is drawn to biologist Edward Wilson's suggestion that our tendency to affiliate with nature is an inherent and deeply rooted part of our biology. Says Bieniek, "I've been thinking a lot about how we relate to nature within an urban or inner-city context. I've noticed that we seem to instinctively compensate for a lack of window or view by introducing plants into otherwise sterile environments. We also very rarely question why we bring flowers into a hospital, pay more for hotels that overlook water and universally have a preference towards natural landscapes over cityscapes for example. I find this seemingly innate attraction to nature intriguing and I'm interested in exploring the role of nature in an otherwise industrialised and technologically advanced society."

For the last two years Bieniek has been exploring the gardens close to Melbourne's CBD, in part to escape the noise and chaos that surrounds her studio in Southbank, as multiple high-rise developments emerge

around her. "I like the fact that within minutes my physical surroundings can shift so rapidly. It can be quite an immersive experience."

For this series of ten paintings, Bieniek sought out a range of environments that reflected great biodiversity, interesting foliage and textures and a range of colours and tones. Most feature water, which Bieniek believes creates a sense of calm, and as a process, each painting tended to inform the next. "If I've created a work that contains a lot of muted tones, which is typically not beautiful, the next painting might have more brightness and electricity to it. My intention is depict a wide range of environments that encompass diverse sentiments and moods."

Bieniek's labour intensive, densely detailed, delicate paintings are composed from hundreds of photographs taken over several hours, following the sun through the gardens. They are then meticulously painted onto squares of dibond aluminium with thin layers of oil paint. "Although my work is traditional in technique, I have a strong correlation with modern working methods. I don't necessarily see photography or computers as the opponents of painting, but rather vehicles to enhance painting and keep it moving forward." These seamless shifts between technology and tradition, chaos and calm reflect Bieniek's fascination with the complex interplay between people and nature. "I'm interested in the notion that a stronger connection with nature could enable us to further thrive as a species and foster a more satisfying existence." Her tiny masterpieces offer a small and intimate glimpse at what might be possible.

» NATASHA BIENIEK WILL BE EXHIBITING AT JAN MURPHY GALLERY IN BRISBANE FROM 1 - 26 NOVEMBER. SHE IS ALSO REPRESENTED BY THIS IS NO FANTASY + DIANNE TANZER GALLERY, MELBOURNE.





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**JAN MURPHY**  
Director, Jan Murphy Gallery

Shortly after **Natasha Bieniek** commenced exhibiting here, it was apparent that her highly detailed miniature oil paintings held a wide appeal to viewers and collectors. It is hard not to be drawn into the intricate world that she so painstakingly creates. Her diminutively sized paintings have found their way into a variety of homes and spaces, and we have found that her work suits a wide range of domestic and public contexts. She often spends up to a month perfecting a single painting and is thereby only able to produce a small number of works per year. At present her works range between \$10,000 and \$15,000, with the size of her works rarely going beyond 10 x 15cm.

"Bieniek is an artist whose technical skill and commitment positions her as an extremely dedicated artist, one whose earlier practice explored self-portraiture and who now finds inspiration in understanding humanity's connection to nature. Bieniek deftly brings the historical miniature oil painting technique into the 21st century,

producing her paintings on dibond, a coated aluminium surface, more often used for architectural and industrial purposes. The materiality of her works, their sleek shiny object like allure, sees her deliberately reference the ubiquitous technology of modern life, giving rise to her interest in the concerns facing humans living in urban and digitally influenced environments. Bieniek's recent landscape works are a respite for the senses, offering the serenity that gardens and a connection to nature can impart; perhaps this is a sentiment that resonates strongly with viewers seeking to contemplate the society in which they belong."

"We are excited to be presenting her latest series of miniature landscape paintings at Jan Murphy Gallery in November. Her considerable recent achievements have meant that this body of work is highly anticipated and we have collectors eagerly awaiting their arrival at the gallery."

*Ashley Crawford*

1. // *Natasha Bieniek, Kumiko*, 2016.  
Oil on dibond, 9 x 14cm.

2. // *Natasha Bieniek, Wilma*, 2016.  
Oil on dibond, 9 x 14cm.

3. // *Natasha Bieniek, Aldo*, 2016.  
Oil on dibond, 9 x 14cm.

4. // *Natasha Bieniek, Blanche*, 2016.  
Oil on dibond, 9 x 14cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND JAN MURPHY GALLERY

5. // *Natasha Bieniek, Wendy Whitely*,  
2016. Oil on wood, 13.5 x 18.5cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND THIS IS NO FANTASY +  
DIANNE TANZER GALLERY, MELBOURNE

“BIENIEK DEFTLY BRINGS THE  
HISTORICAL MINIATURE OIL PAINTING  
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JAN MURPHY



**DIANNE TANZER**  
**Co-Director, THIS IS NO FANTASY**  
**+ Dianne Tanzer Gallery**

Natasha Bieniek first came to the gallery's attention in 2010 and had her first solo exhibition with us the following year. I have a particular love of 1600s and 1700s painting so it was a given that I was attracted to her highly rendered and meticulously painted work.

Bieniek seemed destined to achieve her dream after being awarded the Nino Sanciolo Art Prize in 2006, a scholarship allowing her to study traditional painting techniques at the Accademia d'Arte in Florence.

In her practice she draws on and reworks traditional painting styles linking older traditions of 16th century miniature painting with the endlessness and excesses of today's social media selfies, and presents them in a new and contemporary way. These tiny works have the power to draw viewers in and hold them spellbound. This is taking representation to the extreme.

Her early work was concerned with the tradition of miniature portrait painting but more recently the figures have been placed in constructed environments and now explore the relationship between humans and the natural world. She draws on scientific research to reflect on the positive impact of nature on humans. Her latest works explore the notion of the garden as a sanctuary and a site for reflection and contemplation in contemporary culture.

The full-time painter will often spend many weeks or even months completing a single miniature painting. Bieniek's new works are small treasures, very detailed and dense with lush surfaces and rich, saturated colours. A number of the works are painted on dibond, an industrial surface that seems at odds with works that are so steeped in the cannon of art history, yet again adding tension to the dichotomy that is inherent in her work.

*Ashley Crawford*

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DIANNE TANZER



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6. // Natasha Bieniek, Warnambool Art Gallery Commission, (Warnambool Botanic Gardens), 2015. Oil on dibond, 9 x 9cm.

7. // Natasha Bieniek holding her work *Genevieve*, oil on dibond, 9 x 9 cm, Sydney Contemporary 2015.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND THIS IS NO FANTASY + DIANNE TANZER GALLERY, MELBOURNE.

**SIMON GREGG**  
Curator, Gippsland Art Gallery

"How will art history remember **Natasha Bieniek**? Such a question is not easily answered, for her work belongs neither to this period nor any other, but strings a bow through the 17th Century to the present. Her precise miniature portraits, which are frankly astonishing, can be praised in terms of their various formal qualities however it is the strange presence of her enigmatic works that will ensure that regardless of the form it takes, their place in the art history of our time will be assured.

It is difficult to gauge the beauty of Natasha Bieniek models, in view of the very beautiful manner in which she paints them. While many of her models' poses are natural and are not contrived by the artist, there are a number that deliberately reference classical figures. Bieniek works deliberately within the canons of Classicism and the Baroque, with her work indebted especially to Italian painter **Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio** and his school, and also quite clearly to the development of miniature portraits which appeared during the same period."

Ashley Crawford