

# ART & EVENTS

WHAT'S NEW, NOTEWORTHY AND ENTICING IN THE CULTURAL WORLD

Artist Natasha Bieniek holds *Keepsake* (2011), a 10cm by 15cm oil on wood (shown here for the first time), an example of her 16th-century miniature style portraits, reimagined for the modern world.

## SMALL WONDER

*Melbourne artist Natasha Bieniek dusts off the 16th-century miniature portrait for a social media-obsessed modern world.*

AS A FORM of long distance introduction, it could be said that the miniature portrait still serves the same social function it did in the 16th century. Think about it next time you scroll down the face-filled news feed of your social network page (the digital equivalent of the horse-back courier covering endless miles to deliver pictorial introduction to a potential suitor). The entreaty to engage is still served by little portraits, only now the delivery is so fast and ephemeral you need a Facebook to facilitate it.

"A couple of years ago, I started looking at 16th-century miniatures and began painting on that scale," says Natasha Bieniek, the 27-year-old, Melbourne-based artist with bragging rights to consecutive short-listings in the Archibald Prize (2011 and 2012) and the competition's smallest entry – a matchbox-sized (four by five centimetres) self-portrait painted in part with a pin. "I was trying to push the boundaries of representational painting – to force a greater physical intimacy with the work." >



On the sill of Bieniek's Melbourne studio is her 6cm by 8cm *Ebony* (2012) and a collection of tiny paintbrushes. Her smallest brush is "20 times smaller than zero". The artist's 12.5 by 10cm oil and perspex on zinc, self-portrait *Fluoroscuro*, right, was selected for the 2012 Archibald Prize. *Violet* (2011), inset, is from the *She Hangs Brightly* series. Below: Bieniek with *Indigo* (2012), a 15cm by 20cm oil on wood.



< "As so much modern imagery is in miniature, it felt right to drag the tradition of the tiny portrayal into the contemporary realm."

Intrinsic to the young artist's contemporising of the 16th-century calling card is photography – ironically the medium that made miniature painting redundant. Her portraiture begins with a digital camera capture of her subject (usually female in the full flush of youth) reclining in a 'comfortable' home context that is directionally lit by incandescent yellow or evenly bathed in daylight blue. "I then use Photoshop as my sketchbook," she says, detailing hours spent in the very modern art practice of digitally replacing and repositioning the attributes of an image until something not altogether real is ready for re-creation in oil paint on the glass-smooth surface of a small magnolia wood block that she has been sanding back for days. "For example, this hand here doesn't actually belong to this person. It is something that I added in."

Bieniek points to the heart-clutching hand of *Violet* – a Madonna-whore confusion of mini skirt and modesty swathe of blue silk – whose lolling head and shut eyelids insinuate ecstasy or perhaps extreme pain. "I really like to keep it open to interpretation," says the fresh-faced ingénue, who contra-positioned herself with open mouthed yearning and up-yours provocation, à la Caravaggio's Baroque masterpiece *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*, in a self-portrait short-listed for the 2012 Archibald prize. "I make a bit of a suggestion about something and then it's up to you to finish the story."

Since her sell-out *Petit Genre* show at Dianne Tanzer gallery in 2011, Bieniek has replaced the Baroque lashings of red, the single light source and the direct-to-viewer gaze of pretty women with the more impartial icy blues, soft cycloramas and hidden faces of her new *She Hangs Brightly* series. But still Bieniek keeps sucking you in for a scan of the detail – an experience made all the more peep-hole 'pervy' by engulfing timber frames. "You almost have to breathe on the portraits to perceive them accurately," she says of the new works, laughably considered 'extra large' for their 15 by 20-centimetre dimensions. "Seen in this proximity, painted details and techniques become more apparent... the scale contributes to the fragility of the painting's content." It also makes comment on a contemporary art culture that seems intent on aggrandising new media and diminishing the relevancy of painting. "But really, in this Facebook era of 'the self' as sacred cow, what's so special about little portraits?" I hear you say. Facebook is the quick-post fiction of self disclosure; painted portraiture is the time-loaded truth of private opinion. ANNEMARIE KIELY  
*She Hangs Brightly*, Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale Vic, 18 August–7 October, and Dianne Tanzer Gallery + Projects, Fitzroy Vic, 20 October–17 November.