



**Natasha Bieniek**

# **She Hangs Brightly**

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Sienna, 2011  
Oil on wood  
15 x 20cm



Violet, 2011  
Oil on wood  
15 x 20cm



TOP ROW

Olive, 2011  
Oil on wood  
6 x 8cm

Amber, 2011  
Oil on wood  
5.5 x 8cm

Ebony, 2011  
Oil on wood  
6 x 8cm

MIDDLE ROW

Jade, 2011  
Oil on wood  
10 x 15cm

BOTTOM ROW

Scarlet, 2012  
Oil on wood  
15 x 20cm

Indigo, 2012  
Oil on wood  
15 x 20cm

## SO TONIGHT THAT I MIGHT SEE

### On beauty and longing in the work of Natasha Bieniek

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Simon Gregg

Curator, Gippsland Art Gallery

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How will art history remember Natasha Bieniek? Such a question is not easily answered, for her work belongs neither into this period nor any other, but strings a bow through a wide berth of periods, from the seventeenth century to the present. Her precise miniature portraits can be praised in terms of their various formal qualities, which are frankly astonishing, 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.

The premise of Bieniek's practice is disarmingly simple, yet is executed to such a degree as to draw physical reactions of awe from her audience. She presents images of languid young adults in various states of repose. Each is shrouded with sheets, and lie upon beds, couches or rugs. While each pose and arrangement of bedding is highly theatrical, our protagonists appear to be not so much posing as succumbing to fatigue – perhaps the fatigue of life, the fatigue of youth – but in any case there is little concern for our attentive gaze.

The place of woman as subject in art has had a long and problematic position. Historically the woman has submitted to the male gaze wilfully, and it was not until the arrival of Manet's *Olympia* in 1863 that the woman looked back. This constant shifting of subject and object has played out through the Modern era – especially in the work of Picasso and his contemporaries – but is met by Natasha Bieniek's models with aggressive disinterest. Short of even acknowledging our presence, many of her figures have sheets drawn over their faces, or they turn their backs upon us.

This disengagement with the viewer leads one to a sensation of voyeurism, which becomes amplified by virtue of each work's modest proportions. Ranging in size to as little as 5.5 x 8cm, Bieniek compels us into a position of intimacy with her paintings, to which we must almost touch our nose to apprehend the full measure of her ability. This heightened proximity to art is both

seductive and discomforting, for we are taught to stand at a distance. Bieniek erodes the barriers and her work becomes more personal for it, almost as if in beckoning us closer they have a secret to whisper into our ear.

It is difficult to gauge the beauty of Natasha Bieniek's models, in view of the very beautiful manner in which she paints them. The aspect of beauty is of real concern for her, admitting 'Although the works appear quite beautiful there's also a deep sense of sadness. The viewer is able to see a beautiful aesthetic but this experience is perhaps shifted by the emotional content of the work'. 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 knowingly within the canons of Classicism and the Baroque, with her work indebted especially to Caravaggio and his school, and also quite clearly to the development of miniature portraits, which appeared during the same period.

The miniature portrait was created by artists of great skill as a form of keepsake – a memento of a loved one to keep close to the heart, usually within a locket. It served a clear purpose and function in the absence of photography, which was to be as small as possible while bearing as close a likeness to the subject as possible. The miniature portrait was essentially a substitute; a stand-in for a real flesh and blood person no longer present.

This sense of longing is compounded in Bieniek's miniature portraits, where the actual skill of the artisan who created the miniature has been lost. Through painstaking research and trial and error, Bieniek has recreated the lost art of miniature painting seemingly only to remind us that – but for her work – it no longer exists. Her pictures are left saturated in a profound state of beauty and melancholia. They command not merely admiration, but a deep empathy – for both her subjects and what they represent to us today.

**Natasha Bieniek**

She Hangs Brightly  
18 August to 7 October 2012

A Cataloguing-in-Publication entry for this title is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 978-0-9872526-5-4 (pbk.)

757.7

First printing edition of 500  
First published 2012  
Design: Lesley Scott / Simon Gregg

**Cover image**

Rose, 2011  
Oil on wood  
15 x 20cm

Natasha Bieniek appears courtesy  
Dianne Tanzer Gallery + Projects, Melbourne

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**Gippsland Art Gallery**

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