Sarah Munro completed her doctorate in Fine Auckland's Art Collection in 2003, Socket painting, sculpture, photography and digital work between two and three dimensions and Otago the following year. Frances Hodgkins Fellow at the University of school of Fine Arts in 2005 and was the Arts at The University of Auckland's Elam foam with a fibreglass shell. 2500 x 2000 x 250mm Sarah Munro, Socket 2003. Oil paint digitally printed onto shaped polyester with a fibreglass shell. 2500 x 2000 x 250mm

Sarah Munro successfully embraces many of these diverse facets of Munro's art practice. The subject is a painted portrait of the artist's half-brother, yet the materials and techniques employed by Munro leave Socket as an art object that lies far from the traditional notion of what constitutes a portrait. The shaped support of the work is constructed from finely shaped blocks of polyester foam overlaid with fibreglass that Munro applies by hand. The surface is then painstakingly ground back, puttiéd and sanded until it reaches a smooth, lustrous perfection. The painted representation of the subject's face is applied to the shaped ground in a similarly technical but time-consuming manner with the assistance of a digital painting machine. Programmed by Munro, it applies archival grade oil paint in a delicate mist in accordance with a digital image taken by the artist that has been uploaded to a connected computer.

The use of a machine to essentially “paint” the portrait belies the time, patience, experimentation and instinct required on the part of the artist as there are often large discrepancies between the colours shown on the computer screen and those that are then dispersed over the physical object. Munro also has to take into account the transformative effects of the portrait being manipulated from a two-dimensional digital image into a three-dimensional object as the painting machine is programmed to apply paint onto a flat surface, when in reality, in Munro’s work, it is spraying paint onto a solid, curved form.

As a result of the painting process and the materials, Socket possesses a seductively sleek surface that obscures the presence of the artist’s hand and goes some way to denying the labour-intensive process required for its construction. Material choice also means that the work engages with its environment as its glossy luminosity reflects and refracts light.

In addition to the number of seemingly contradictory elements in Munro’s art practice is the sheer physical presence of the work, for although Socket hangs on the wall like a traditional painting, it is in fact a three-dimensional object whose convex form swells out from the wall and extends into the viewer’s space. Stretching more than two metres horizontally and 2.5 metres vertically, the expansive scale of Munro’s work transforms the portrait into a veritable environment that engulfs the viewer. It is not only the sheer scale of the piece that is somewhat disturbing and disorientating but also the displacement of the figure’s left eye. Painted onto a smaller piece of foam, the left eye and a portion of brow are left to swim in a spatial cavity that extends beyond the parameters of the face. Adding to this feeling of disjunction is the close cropping of the face into an ovoid that shows little of the figure’s hair or ears and thus adds a facet of the abstract to what is ostensibly a figurative work.

Jemma Field

Australia

William Blandowski was an artist, explorer and natural scientist who led a notable scientific expedition to the Murray River in 1857. Australia is the first publication in English of his illustrated encyclopaedia of Aboriginal life, edited by Associate Professor Harry Allen from the Department of Anthropology (with Mark Dugay-Grist, Brook Andrew, Luise Hercus and Thomas A. Darragh) and published by Aboriginal Studies Press.

The story of this book’s survival for over 150 years in European archives is as remarkable as the story of Blandowski’s life. William (Wilhelm von) Blandowski cut a remarkable figure in mid-nineteenth century Victoria, Australia. He was the first curator of Melbourne Museum, a founding member of the Royal Society of Victoria and the leader of a notable scientific expedition to the Murray River in 1857.

His aim was to produce an illustrated encyclopaedia of Australian natural history and Aboriginal life. Circumstances, partly of his own causing, meant that he became Australia’s most forgotten explorer.

He left Melbourne in 1859 with his reputation in tatters, taking with him priceless sketches and collections. While he had these worked into publishable plates by the zoological artist, Gustav Mutzel, he could not afford full colour publication. In desperation, Blandowski photographed these plates, using the collodion process, and created a mock-up version of his encyclopaedia.

Blandowski later died in obscurity in his native Silesian city of Gliwice. Working from archives in Melbourne, Berlin and Cambridge, Harry Allen brought together the various parts of Blandowski’s original work to recreate Blandowski’s unique vision of how art and science might be conveyed to the public through illustrations.

The nineteenth-century German captions were translated by Lilian Barton and University of Auckland translator Melanie Wittwer to produce the first publication in English. Aboriginal Studies Press has produced a finely illustrated volume, a volume which has retained its power to convey the freshness and wonder of Australian Aboriginal life during the nineteenth century.

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