

From the Collection



Sarah Munro, Socket 2003. Oil paint digitally printed onto shaped polyester foam with a fibreglass shell. 2500 x 2000 x 250mm

Sarah Munro completed her Doctorate in Fine Arts at The University of Auckland's Elam School of Fine Arts in 2005 and was the Frances Hodgkins Fellow at the University of Otago the following year.

As a multi-media artist, she oscillates in her work between two and three dimensions and encompasses several art disciplines including painting, sculpture, photography and digital technology. Bought for the University of Auckland's Art Collection in 2003, *Socket*

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, puttied 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 dispensed 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