

ART INVESTOR

The next big thing in sculptors

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Alex Seton's exhibition will strengthen his place in the art world

ONLY time will tell whether an artist can survive changing tastes within a fickle market.

Many have said it is art market hype that drives an artist's career at its inception — and to some degree this is true. But when the art hype has all but evaporated, artists are left to rely on their vision and physical talent to make any long-lasting impression.

One artist that looks destined for the long haul is 27-year-old Alex Seton, a sculptor who has formed a reputation based on an undeniable skill that is now being duly acknowledged by the broader art market.

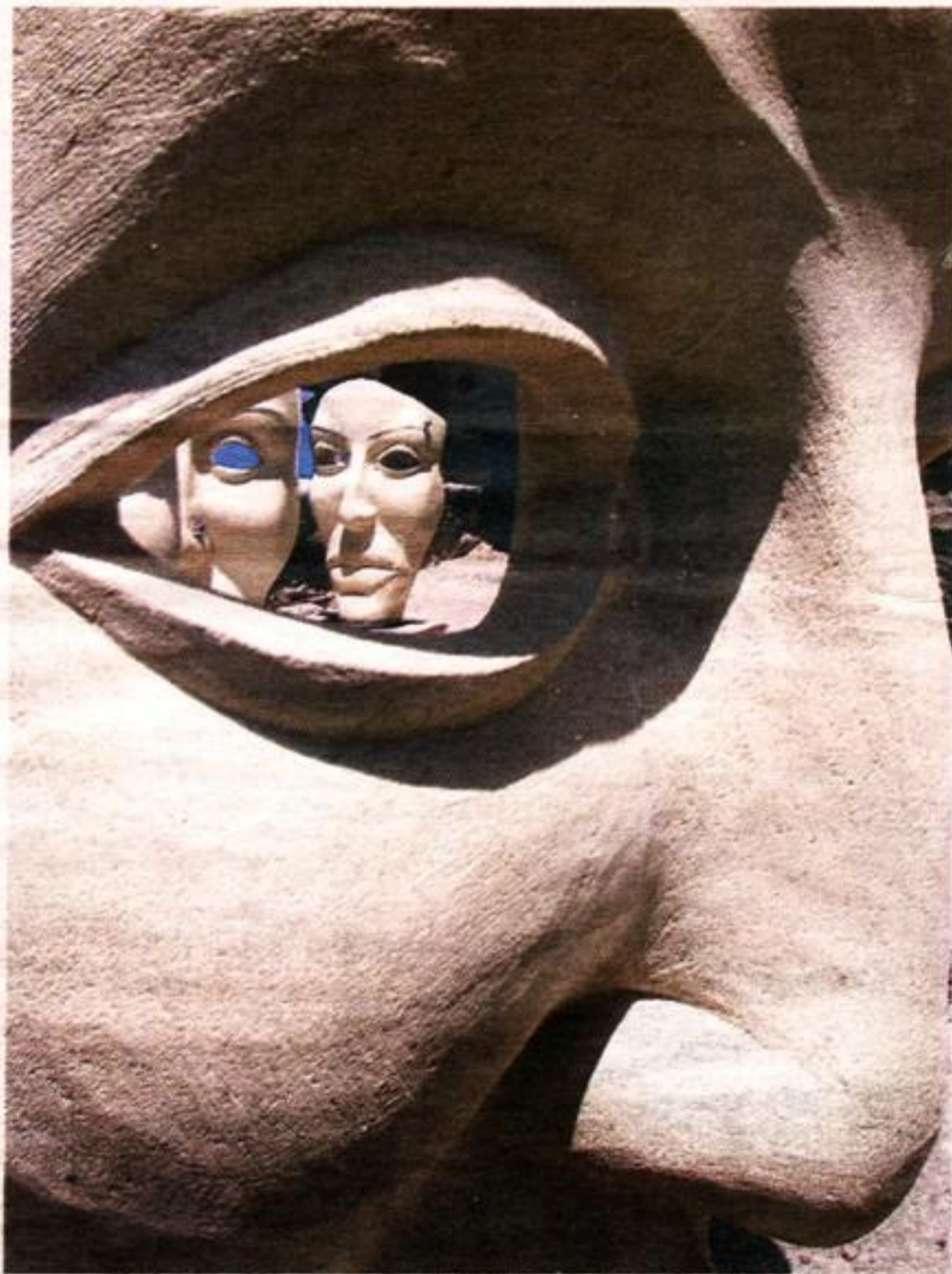
Among Australian collectors, there has been a steady and ever-growing interest in the field of sculpture during the past 20 years.

Although it is difficult to pinpoint what started the growth in this area, it is probably true to say that keen buyers and established dealers were aware of the saturation of the market with paintings towards the middle of the 1990s, and were looking for ways to invest elsewhere.

Sales of paintings dominated the art market for many years, with the highest recorded prices for works sold at auction still remaining in this field. Clever buyers have begun to diversify in their collecting habits, however, with sculpture seen as a strong complement to pictures.

Those looking to enhance Australian art collections would do well to look to newcomers such as Seton. Seton is experiencing the groundswell that goes with being described as the "next big thing". After teasing and wowing viewers with his craftsmanship in Sculpture by the Sea — the annual Bondi to Tamarama cliff-top sculpture-fest — for the past two years, high expectation is mounting around his upcoming solo exhibition with Barry Stern Galleries in Sydney during October.

Self-taught in carving, the gifted sculptor's predominantly marble



Quality: Seton has amazed many with works such as *Facial Reconstructing*



Impressive: Sculpture by the Sea wows beach-goers at Bondi

sculptures play on the theme of optical illusion and perception of surface. The real versus the artificial. The everyday object versus the art sculpture. Seton plays with our mind.

The success of the works lies in the viewer's confusion. His delicately crafted surfaces convince the public that what they are looking at is the real thing. He has transformed ordin-

ary jackets, cushions and even armchairs into life-size marble sculpture. People have accidentally flopped themselves down on his white marble beanbags — apparently, that hurts. Inspired by a typical foyer's leather bench, Seton has amazed and fooled many with the series, *Panopticon 2003* — white marble replicas of bench seating that fea-

tures the subtle backside imprint of a recent sitter. The initial work sold for \$4900, the latest work in the series sold earlier this year for an impressive but inexpensive \$7000.

From a collector's point of view, sculpture such as this should be investigated for various reasons. There will always be the allure of the solidity of a piece of sculpture and the facility with which it can be included in a home, office or outdoor environment. The right piece can make a striking statement, and is an unusual addition to a room. Another benefit when collecting in this category is the resilience of sculpture — a work cast in bronze or sculpted in marble is less likely to show the passage of time than a drawing or delicate canvas.

Carving quality marble is an expensive and time-consuming practice. But even as Seton's star rises, his works remain relatively affordable for the short term. During the past few years, Seton's prices have been steady at between \$1000 and \$7000 each — depending on the sheer size of the work. Last year the maquette (or small study) for *No 23* sold for \$1980. Its value has doubled.

As young as he is, Seton is no overnight success. His early awards and honorary mentions range from Art Express (1994) at the Art Gallery of NSW and its consequent tour to Japan. First prize in the Mosman Youth Art Prize (1996, 1997) and in 2002 he received *The Australian Unrepresented Sculptor Award* and *The Young Sculptor's Honourable Mention at Sculpture by the Sea*. In 2003, Seton received his biggest endorsement with the Art Gallery Society of NSW Prize, awarded by gallery director Edmund Capon.

Based on the strength and originality of his works and sheer determination, Seton has emerged from these various group exhibitions to create a strong following in Australia and overseas. In 2003, Seton was one of 15 sculptors who participated in the competitive Carlos III International Sculpture Symposium in Spain. Coming a commendable fourth, the sculptors worked to complete their 200x100x100cm blocks of stone in four weeks.

This is an impressive debut. If ever there was one of a group of Australian artists worth watching today, Seton is certainly in amongst it. His solo exhibition in October will only strengthen his place in contemporary Australian sculpture.

Sculpture by the Sea runs from October 28 to November 14

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