

Visual art

Illusions of reality in the little details

Sculptors deliver fabulous visions in marble and miniature, writes JOHN McDONALD.

Alexander Seton: Stay on Message
Maunsell Wickes at Barry Stern Galleries,
until November 26

Ron Robertson-Swann: Assemblage
Michael Carr Art Dealer, until November 26

Sculpture by the Sea
Bondi, until Sunday

The 10th Annual Miniature Show
Defiance Gallery, until November 26

Karl Wiebke: Painting
Liverpool Street Gallery, until November 24

There are extraordinary things out there in cyberspace, even a piece of propaganda for a proposed art-school merger, written in the language of the Woodstock generation. Last week, an anonymous posting on the website of the UNSW College of Fine Arts urged students to "share the love" with their peers at the National Art School, who are resisting the idea of being swallowed by their rivals from the other side of Oxford Street. "This is a merger," it whispers, "a sharing, caring, beautiful thing."

I spoke at a rally last week at the National Art School, in which the posting's blissed-out vision of a "huge art and design institution" was seen to give a pretty clear indication of the college's plans for the school, should it become supreme ruler. It would spell the end of the school's hard-won independence and a unique educational philosophy that emphasises the value of drawing and a grounding in art history.

If this doesn't sound revolutionary, it is really a mark of how far the other Sydney art schools have departed from these standards. Every institution will tell you of its commitment to drawing and art history, but the school practises what it preaches. The school has had 10 precious years of independence, since it was prised from the clutches of TAFE by the then incoming Premier, Bob Carr, who last week launched Deborah Beck's history of the site, *Hope in Hell*.

Shifting political tides have left the National Art School on the verge of being sold to one of two remaining suitors: the



Playful ... *The Navigator* by Ron Robertson-Swann.

University of NSW and Macquarie University. Macquarie University is the obvious choice – it is the only major university in Sydney not affiliated with an art school and it has a good record of allowing satellite institutions to maintain their identities. It is also financially healthy. On the other hand, if UNSW had another art school it would be a mere administrative convenience to turn two into one and call it a great opportunity. Last week's bizarre web posting virtually admits this is the plan.

Rumour has it that Macquarie's offer is superior to that of UNSW, so the choice does not seem difficult. So if UNSW

manages to win the race, supporters of the National Art School have every right to feel aggrieved.

From the world of art politics to Karl Wiebke's amazing show at Liverpool Street Gallery. With a one-hair brush, Wiebke (born 1944) has created a series of abstract pictures that appear to be woven rather than painted. Up close, the illusion is dispelled, but one marvels at the mind-bending, eye-straining labour involved. Each canvas takes months to complete and has its own uncanny beauty. What is impressive is not simply Wiebke's patience, but his ability to orchestrate these threads

of paint to create underlying rhythms. The process might seem clinical if the sensual nature of the work did not undermine its fantasy of order and method. The viewer can hardly fail to be seduced by Wiebke's feel for colour and his tremulous line.

This is the final weekend of the ninth annual Sculpture by the Sea, attracting tens of thousands of visitors to the walk between Bondi and Tamarama; and the last week of the 10th Annual Miniature Show at Defiance Gallery, the cultural hotspot of Enmore.

At the recent Sculpture by the Sea Conference at the Art Gallery of NSW, the federal Minister for Communication and the Arts, Helen Coonan, praised this event for generating a vast number of "bed nights" and a concomitant windfall in tourist dollars. She also noted that government arts funding now exists "at record levels". It almost makes one believe that the two observations are connected.

I'm afraid the "record levels" are not much of an achievement, because every kind of funding is set at record levels and provides a mere subsistence. It would be more impressive if Coonan could announce that the Government has created an environment in which corporate sponsorship and private philanthropy have reached record levels, in line with the massive increase in personal wealth enjoyed by the upper echelons of this society. Instead, the "strong economy" the senator sees as the precondition for a cultural renaissance has led to record levels of greed and stinginess.

In corporate Australia the arts are often perceived as frivolous or elitist and the money is channelled into necessities such as luxury cars and racehorses. In a different world, an event such as Sculpture by the Sea would be overwhelmed with sponsorship offers. Instead, it limps along, hanging out for the big sponsor – this year, Lexus – that gets the show up and running. Matters may be gradually improving but David Handley and his team have shown unbelievable persistence to keep staging an event that is now an annual highlight of the cultural calendar.

Sculpture by the Sea has 110 works this year; Defiance's Miniature Show squeezes 140 works into one room. The only rule is that sculptures must fit within an imaginary 150mm cube. The rest is up to the individual sculptors, who form a Who's Who of the profession. As usual, the level of skill and imagination is exceptional. Some artists see this as an



Carved ... Alexander Seton's marble *Blue Electric Eagle Day* and *USB Stone* (below).

opportunity to step out of their usual stylistic guises, others create perfect shrunken versions of signature pieces.

Ron Robertson-Swann, probably Australia's senior living sculptor, has taken a more perverse route. His piece in the Miniature Show, *Square Off*, is a classic work of welded metal abstraction, painted the same vivid yellow as his public sculpture *Vault* (1980). At the same time, in a solo exhibition with Michael Carr, Robertson-Swann is showing a body of work he calls his *Assemblage* – a series of paintings, small narrative sculptures and works that are not quite sculpture and not quite painting.

For those who see Robertson-Swann (born 1941) as a "heavy metal boy" or a diehard formalist, these works will be an eye-opener. They are playful and inventive, full of private jokes and a love for the mysterious object that verges on surrealism. Yet they do not represent

a new direction for the artist; they are the things he has been making for the sheer pleasure of it when he reaches the point of exhaustion with his more conventional sculptures. Consequently, this exhibition is a one-off, a glimpse of another side of Robertson-Swann, as though he wants to show he is aware of the traps into which so many avant-garde purists fall. For when an artist takes himself too seriously, he runs a risk of self-parody.

This is not a charge that could be laid at the door of Alexander Seton, who at the age of 27 is everyone's choice for the young artist most rapidly on his way to the top. Seton's contribution to the Miniature Show is a *USB Stone* – a sculpted marble cushion with USB sockets, a plug and even an instruction manual. He has a set of these stones in his solo show at Maunsell Wickes, along with a few other show-stoppers, such as *Blue Electric Eagle Day* – a plate of sushi in

which every element is made out of different kinds of marble. Two bent chopsticks play out the conceit that this is a plate of food left over after the atomic bomb has been dropped.

Another work, *The Razor*, is a piece of tiled bathroom floor, with a lacy bra and knickers, a real razor blade and a few watery bloodstains. It is left to the viewer to figure out the tragic narrative behind this scenario, made almost entirely from a single piece of marble.

Seton is a very clever artist – probably too clever by half, in the estimation of more conventional carvers. The elaborate trompe-l'oeil of his earlier subjects, in which he made marble resemble pliable materials such as cushions or leather boots, has moved onto a new plane with this exhibition. Seton has the wit to dream up these miraculous objects and the skill to execute them with the most exacting realism.

He is a detail freak, treading a path that Ricky Swallow has trailblazed, but doing it with a brilliance that seems – like a marble plate of sushi – almost too good to be true.

