

here's looking at you

Adelaide artist Annette Bezor is known for her beautiful big heads. From Vladimir Tretchikoff's iconic Chinese girl to supermodel Kate Moss, her fascination with beauty has spanned an almost 40-year career, and luckily for us, she's not done yet.

WORDS SKY HARRISON **PHOTOS** JOSIE WITHERS

The first thing you notice when you step into Annette Bezor's home in Adelaide's eastern suburbs is the colour. That and the big heads. Her colourful, iconic images of stretched female faces look out at you from almost every wall and, thanks to her line of limited edition cushions, they even stare at you from the couches.

"It feels a bit like a shrine to myself which can be a bit embarrassing, but I'm really lacking storage so I have to use the walls," she says over a pot of green tea.

Lauded as one of Australia's most successful artists, Annette is widely known for her 'big heads'. Not her own – with a career approaching the 40-year mark, she exudes well-earned confidence rather than egotism – but her artworks of female faces that have been enlarged and distorted, boldly coloured and often obscured by textures, veils and shapes.

The subjects meet the gaze of the viewer, refusing to be passive recipients in the viewing process. It's a technique that raises all sorts of questions about how we look at women, how we construct beauty and how women are represented in the mass media. But studying them from the comfort of her couch, what strikes you most is how beautiful the paintings are as objects in themselves. The colours draw you in as much as the women's gazes, and the layering of gold-leaf, lacework and saturated colours are as stunning as they are symbols of deeper meaning.

"I remember making a conscious decision to make beautiful pictures," Annette says. "When I was younger, I wanted to paint beautiful things so people would stand there long enough to really look at it. That was when it was really important that I say something, but now I think if people look at them and all they see is the beauty, then that's fine by me."

On paper, Annette's career reads as an enviable litany of major art

gallery shows and collections. Graduating from the South Australian School of Art in 1977, her first major painting after graduation was picked up by the National Gallery of Victoria and she soon found herself featured in the Sydney Biennale and represented by Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Sydney. Her work features in collections in the Art Gallery of SA, National Gallery of Victoria, Art Gallery of NSW and Auckland City Gallery, among many others. She's been a finalist in the coveted Archibald Prize (in 2005 for a self-portrait) and last year was a finalist in the Sir John Sulman Prize at the Art Gallery of NSW and the Arthur Guy Memorial Painting Prize at Bendigo Art Gallery.

Her latest solo exhibition, *Inscrutable*, opens at Australian Galleries in Sydney on 25 March, and her work is included in their Melbourne and Sydney group exhibitions this month. A survey of her work has been touring since its launch at Coff's Harbour Regional Gallery last June.

It wasn't until her twenties, though, that art and painting came into her life. "I come from a very working class household, there was no art in the home, I never had art classes, I didn't do art at school," she says. "The fact that I found out I could paint was the most marvellous thing that could ever happen to me."

Interestingly, it was at art school that Annette made the discovery – she went because she ended up following her friends there. After graduation, she spent a year in London "seeing as much free art as possible", then joined art collective Roundspace in the city on her return to Adelaide.

"It was the first collective in South Australia, possibly Australia, and my studio was upstairs under corrugated iron. It was hot as hell. And I painted a painting that was like nothing I'd ever done before; I don't know how it happened, it just came out."

That painting – *The Snake Is Dead* – was the one picked up by the National Gallery of Victoria, kickstarting her career. Then, in 1987, a six-month residency in Paris changed her life forever.

“I fell in love with Paris, so that became my focus. It cut through my career. I would gather information and do sketches in my apartments and I’d come back here and make them into paintings... it would be fine, things would sell, people were still aware of me, but my heart was somewhere else.”

It took until 1999 for Annette to return full-time to Adelaide, when she teamed up with Greenaway Gallery, and then cemented her return by buying her 1920s home. It was love at first sight, though her love affair with the place couldn’t begin until 2002, when it came onto the market. Stepping inside, it’s easy to see why she loves it – with its high ceilings, ornate details and pretty windows, it’s reminiscent of a Parisien apartment.

Even so, she resists the urge to feel that she’s put down roots. “All my furniture is secondhand. I’ve always been ready to move, even though I’m not moving. I don’t want to feel attached to the furniture, it could all be picked up by Vinnies tomorrow.”

Q&A

Looking over your career, where do you feel you’re at with your art now? I’m very happy right now. I’m doing work that has integrity. There was a period... I think almost every artist who’s been successful suffers at some point from that success and starts creating things for the demand. I was guilty of that for a very short time, until you realise what’s happening and put a stop to it. I determined that I’d never let anything leave my studio that wasn’t really good, even if it is only my idea of good. There has to be some bonus in getting older and that kind of peace about things will only come if you really are doing something that you enjoy. It also has to contribute. I don’t know how my work contributes exactly but I do know sometimes people absolutely love a work so much.

“You start with an idea and that’s fabulous, and then the end result is often fabulous, it’s the in between that requires a lot of willpower and a certain discipline.”

You don’t necessarily get that feedback from people except for at a gallery opening, perhaps. People don’t give you feedback in Australia, not really. It comes from clients every now and then. I had to borrow works for my survey show and three of my clients wouldn’t release their work even when I offered to lend them something else, because they couldn’t bear to be without them. Also, not much of my work comes onto the secondary market, so that’s a good indication that people like it.

Do you have a clear process you follow when starting a painting or series? Painting is a lot of hackwork. You start with an idea and that’s fabulous, and then the end result is often fabulous, it’s the in between that requires a lot of willpower and a certain discipline. You have to keep the end result in mind. It’s joyous and boring – I listen to lots of talking books when I’m working.

What do you do if a painting isn’t working? You’ve got to have failures. You do grit your teeth but I think laterally all the time. I’ve got a lot of techniques under my belt, so I have things that I can try and I really enjoy the process. I don’t get defeated by a painting. At the end, if I think it’s a failure, it’s potentially because of my mindset. I’ve learned now not to bin it. There’s a roll from 12 months ago I’m about to look at to see what I think and there might be something good in there.

The theme of female beauty and how we construct it runs through much of your work. Is that a conscious decision? Most artists have obsessions they deal with all their lives. The women’s art movement was very big when I was in art school, it was a huge influence, and women in my life have been a huge influence. I have some fabulous male friends but I’ve never had strong male role models, so I’ve gravitated towards talking about women because it’s something I know. The passion to talk about women has always been there.

You started out doing quite narrative work. How did the shift to a more a figurative style happen? I painted a piece called *Paradise Confined* which is really an environmental piece. It’s quite an amazing work but it was getting too preachy, so then I decided to move to things that have a story behind them but you don’t have to understand it.



Clockwise from top left: Annette’s living room; among the artworks that adorn her walls is Face Value KM featuring Kate Moss; many of the artworks feature lace and veils; Annette’s studio; essential tools; from the Lookers series; Annette with a super-sized cushion for her latest exhibition, Inscrutable.



Annette in front of her most recent painting, mimicking the pose of the model in Edouard Manet's *Olympia*, a painting that inspired her in her early days as an artist. "She was the first nude model who gazed directly at the viewer, before that they always allowed you to look at them."



So the story is more for you as a starting point? I get a bee in my bonnet about something and that will be the theme of that series but it's not necessarily obvious to someone else; I need that stimulus as a starting point. I don't always know what it means. I asked a psychologist friend about a painting I have with yellow dots over a slightly angry face and the psychologist said, "I don't know, I just think you're obfuscating the fact that she's fucking angry". I do a lot of obfuscating. There's scrim and net and a lot of hidden things and if I don't understand something, I figure it's just an expression of my personality. I'm a lot like that. I wear makeup, I'm always going to dye my hair, you won't see me walking down the street in trackie dacks. I'm a construction and that's like the work, really.

Last year you released a range of limited edition prints and cushions. How did that come about? It was a very nice joke for a friend. One of my girlfriends kept saying to me to make some cushions. So when she was going to Bali, I said to another friend, "Let's make some cushions, we'll invite her over and just have them on the couch". I lived with them for a bit and everyone who came here just loved them. The other thing I love about them is, they're friendly. They're beautiful and people feel comfortable with them and they can have amazing imagery in their homes that they're comfortable with. When you walk into an art gallery there's something about the space that makes people stiffen up and also makes them feel a bit stupid. You might look at a painting and think 'I love that' but people then go, 'Oh God, what does it mean?'. So the atmosphere of art galleries can sometimes make people feel a little stupid, especially when the meaning of the art is not immediately accessible.

It's a very self-conscious experience for a lot of people, especially if they don't have the language to express it. The thing is, not enough people say to the viewers, "You don't have to know what it's about". You like it or don't like it and that's enough. I do know the language but I can still feel like that when I walk into places. I don't really like very narrative work that's easily accessible or work that's too didactic. I moved away from really narrative pieces for just that reason.

Where do you think you'll head with your career? I might be heading towards more abstraction. One of my favourite artists is Aboriginal artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye. I saw her retrospective at Tandanya and I was blown over by her later work. Ultimately, if you break my work down, it's all about colour. Emily Kame Kngwarreye's colour doesn't need to say anything, it just did it for me. So when I can't paint a straight line anymore, it'll just have colour. My next show will have some work more approaching abstraction in it, with some figurative pieces, so I'm already thinking ahead. I want to get looser rather than tighter. ♦

bezor.com.au



A few of her favourite things

White horse

The things that are precious have memories attached. It makes you feel warm because of the story and that memory. I've had this since the mid-80s and it gives me a feeling of peace. I was driving at dusk and I saw a flash of white and it was this horse glowing in the moonlight in a shed. I knocked on the door to find out what it was. It had a damaged nose. It turned out the guy made them for a furniture place, it was meant to be a zebra. He sold it to me and repaired the nose and I've had it ever since.

Little dog

When I got the keys to my house, I bought a bottle of Champagne, sat on the floor and celebrated my purchase and the little dog was left here. I just think it's the cutest thing in the world. It's made of stone but it has a little soul to me, it's the soul of the house.

Latest work

I'm always in love with my latest successful painting. At the moment I'm in love with this one. I've done a lot of green heads and that was the last one. I didn't like it very much, so it hung around. It wasn't that it was a bad painting, there was just something about it that wasn't working. And then I started working with the gold leaf for the Sydney show, and I'd done other dot paintings and it was just a thought and it worked.

Coloured glassware

They make me happy, though I'm not happy having to wash them! I started collecting them fairly recently, once I had room to spread them out. I love the resonance of the colours and the combination of them together.



WATCH

Click through to watch a video of Annette in action.

The Female Body in Western Culture

I've had this since 1985. It's been a phenomenal book for me. Many titles of my work have come from this and I still use it. If I'm looking for a title, I go [opens a page] "Talk to me". I gave a talk when I had some prints released at the Art Gallery of SA, which is unusual for me but I felt brave that night. I read from this book as it's been quite important to me. It's not something I could ever throw away, there are too many memories attached and I'm still using it.

Painting stool

My painting stool was left in one of my group studios, so I found it there. It's been around for a very long time. It would look amazing scraped back and painted but I could never do it.

Bubby

My cat Bubby is at least 16, she looks like an old bag of bones now and I adore her. She's very shy. She would be my very favourite thing that I would, in a fire, rescue before my paintings.

Palette table

This is amazing, it's a work of art in itself. My father made it for me as the perfect height for a sitting-down painting table, about 10 years ago; there's years of work on it.

Cushions

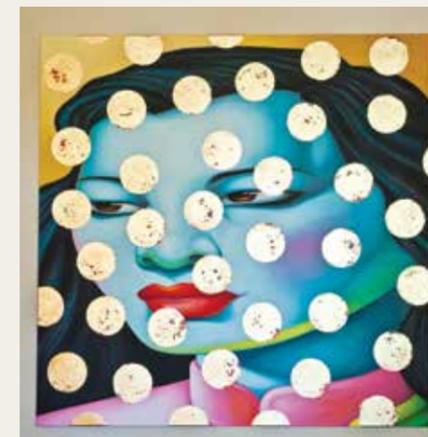
I didn't expect to have an emotional attachment to the cushions when we started making them, until I realised it was a way of having my older work around me. It's a way of me living with images I no longer own.



White horse



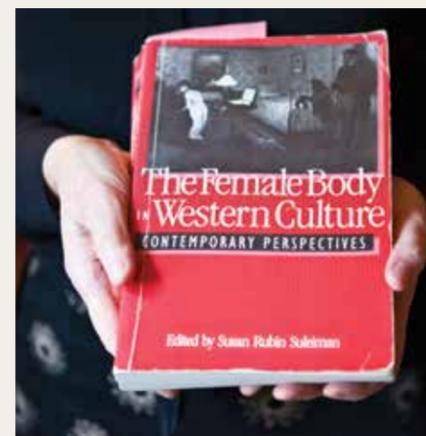
Little dog



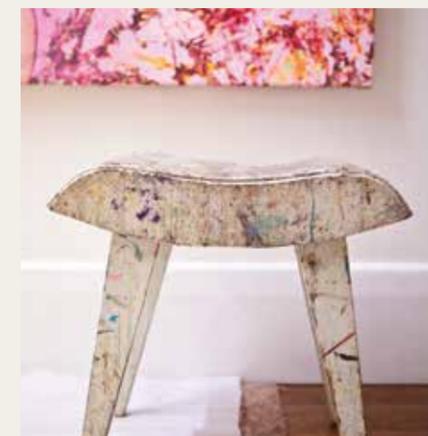
Latest work



Coloured glassware



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Painting stool



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Palette table



Cushions