

The Scotsman
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A new exhibition showcases the work of Scotland's latest artistic wunderkind. You'll need a magnifying glass, not only to appreciate the fine draughtsmanship of Paul Chiappe, but just to see it in the first place, discovers Tim Cornwell

UNTITLED 23, in the artist Paul Chiappe's new collection, shows the sideways look of a grinning boy. Most of the image has been whited out, in the style of an Andy Warhol print, but in grey and white. Shadow leaves the suggestion of features, with a sinister, sneering twist to mouth and eyes.

Untitled 23 has the look of a full-size canvas, an image that could easily run to a metre wide. Actually it comes in at 4mm square, like several other works in Chiappe's new London show, often with faces that are barely 1mm wide. His gallery has bought several magnifying glasses to go with the display.

Chiappe was declared a "darling of the art world" by the Edinburgh press last year. He carried off two top prizes at Edinburgh College of Art's degree show on the strength of his miniature, meticulous pencil drawings. They included the college's centenary prize for the best work by a graduating student.

Now he's moving to the next stage in his professional career. His first solo exhibition in London opens tomorrow at the Madder139 Gallery. One Scottish collector has already walked in and reserved five works, the gallery said this week.

Meanwhile Kaleidoscope, an exhibition at the National Galleries of Scotland of recently bought works on paper, opens on 15 July. Chiappe's Untitled 6, newly acquired for Scotland, appears alongside works ranging from a watercolour by EA Walton to John Byrne's pastel portrait of Tilda Swinton.

In October Chiappe will be showing at the Scope Art Fair, at Lord's Cricket Ground, part of the affiliated exhibitions running near the Frieze Art Fair.

Chiappe's most striking images are his tiny pencil portraits of pinched, hollow-faced and scowling children. Untitled 6 is a pastiche of a period school photograph. He worked on the drawing over about three months at ECA.

The teachers are smudged away, and the children in pinnies and collars are clutching themselves, as if gnawed with hunger, with odd, misshapen expressions under glaring eyebrows. On closer examination, the little rows of faces include Laurel and Hardy, in bowlers.

Chiappe has gone for extremes in his new London exhibition. One work in the show is a huge linen piece that's 225 by 175cm – roughly two metres wide – of a single head blown up from an earlier drawing.

"It's the extreme scale to some of the tiny ones I've got where most of the faces are under one millimetre," he says. "Those ones I usually do with the naked eye though I recently invested in a microscope to go even smaller."

He found the microscope too difficult on the first attempt, because "you see the point of the pencil shaking".

Chiappe, from Glenrothes in Fife, became seriously interested in art at the age of about 16. His sister Antonia, three years younger, followed him to Edinburgh College of Art, where her fine silver wire creations were considered a highlight of this summer's degree show.

"I've always done quite realistic drawings," he says. "I remember even in primary school meticulously

copying images for art class. I would end up drawing dolphins and things from wildlife books. Basically, anything I would draw I'd make sure it was as realistic as possible."

His drawings are labour-intensive, built up with dots, though recently he has used an airbrush to try and speed things up.

The first school photographs that caught his eye were in local newspapers such as the Glenrothes Gazette, which people had sent in to try and trace old friends. "That's where I got interested in the subject of schools and classrooms," he says. "It is quite dark, but there is a humorous side to it."

While he works from prints, including vintage portraits he finds on Google, his drawings are originals, though he works hard to produce something "photographic". Untitled 6 took him about three months. "I usually start by drawing out the layout, and work into that. All of them are slightly changed from the original, adding an extra figure, taking people away, changing the tone, blurring the photograph."

"I tend to work very slowly, to try not to breathe too much when I'm producing the piece so my hand's not shaking all over the place. It's a very long process," he says. "The tiny single heads, you do need a magnifying glass to look at them. Some of them are so small that people can't even see them using a magnifying glass, but they are actually there."

- Kaleidoscope is at the Royal Scottish Academy lower galleries, Edinburgh, 15 July until 21 September.

<http://thescotsman.scotsman.com/features/Small-wonder--Paul-Chiappe.4268317.jp>