



# DINA BRODSKY: CAPTURING THE WORLD IN MINIATURE

**D**ina Brodsky (b. 1981) creates miniatures that are monumental in impact. These oil paintings, usually smaller than a coaster, offer such an array of visual information that, even when magnified, they continue to inspire awe. Just as Northern Renaissance masters did centuries ago, Brodsky applies multiple layers of glazing that impart a beautiful sense of luminosity and a dreamy depth of field.

The sylvan, pastoral, or deserted-city scenes Brodsky depicts are portals to actual places and moments. When she happens upon them, she is literally stopped in her tracks, compelled to record them on the spot. It takes Brodsky roughly nine hours, spread over approximately three days, to complete one drawing from life. Once back at home, she uses it to create an oil painting of the same scene. Taken on site, her documentary photographs serve as quick references to help with composing or discerning a silhouette. But it is always those long hours of drawing — of seeing things she had not noticed initially — that ultimately render her final paintings so impactful.

Each of Brodsky's sketchbooks doubles as a personal journal: her illegible cursive writing may surround some of its drawings, which she embellishes with watercolor or gouache. Some of these volumes have traced her journeys along English and Icelandic country roads,

paths by the Danube river, and the streets of Oxford, Prague, and Siena — to name just a few destinations. Brodsky keeps her itineraries simple: "I pick a river and go towards the sea, so it slopes a little bit downhill. I am not much of a biker: I'm a drawer and watcher," she explains while gazing from her Long Island City (Queens) apartment toward a stunning view of Manhattan.

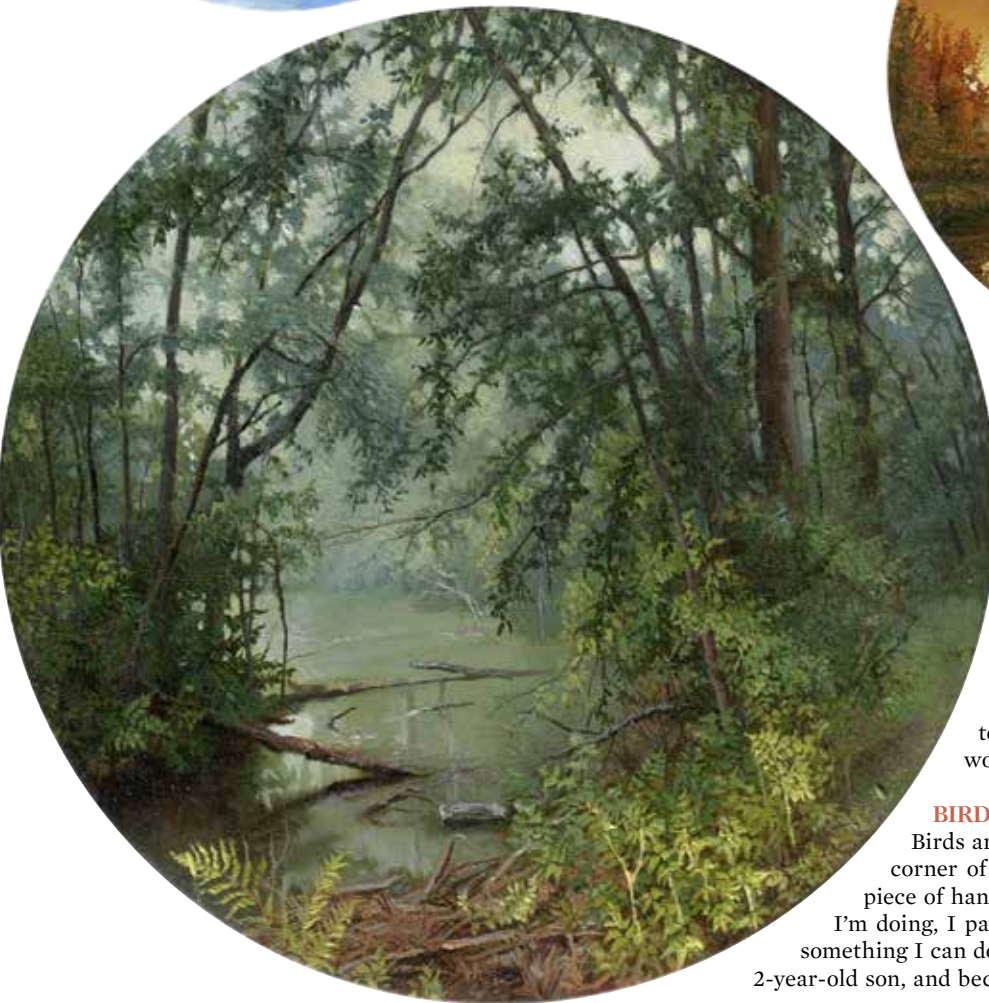
For an ongoing series of *tondo* paintings on copper titled *Cycling Guide to Lilliput*, Brodsky consulted sketches from her latest excursion from Passau (Germany) to Prague. The results were well received during a show last spring at London's Pontone Gallery, and now



One of Dina Brodsky's sketchbooks from Barcelona, 2014, not for sale



(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP) *Cycling Guide to Lilliput 74*, 2017, oil on copper, 5 in. (diameter), Pontone Gallery, London ■ *Cycling Guide to Lilliput 99*, 2017, oil on copper, 2 1/2 in. (diameter), private collection ■ *Cycling Guide to Lilliput 76*, 2017, oil on copper, 5 in. (diameter), Pontone Gallery, London ■ *Cycling Guide to Lilliput 68*, 2017, oil on copper, 2 4/5 in. (diameter), Pontone Gallery, London



Garvey|Simon (New York City) is exhibiting more works. These include some new tondos, mostly landscapes; recent pen-and-ink drawings that sustain her *Secret Life of Trees* series (previously shown at New York's Bernarducci Meisel Gallery); and watercolor-and-gouache works from the ongoing *Bird by Bird* series. Dealer Elizabeth Garvey plans to highlight the *Bird by Bird* works more extensively sometime next year. Though Brodsky normally exhibits all of her work unframed, Garvey|Simon has opted to show the oil tondos in white mats with dark wooden frames.

#### **BIRD BY BIRD**

Birds are good for transitions. Sitting at home on the corner of her couch, Brodsky paints a bird on a little piece of handmade paper. "Every time I don't know what I'm doing, I paint a bunch of birds," she explains. "It's also something I can do during a toddler nap." Since the birth of her 2-year-old son, and because she will soon have a second child, Brod-

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*Bird by Bird: Two Blackbirds*, 2018, watercolor and gouache on paper, 6 x 5 1/4 in., private collection

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sky has put away her oils and other toxic materials. Instead she uses watercolor and gouache to depict birds ranging from the common pigeon to the exotic quetzal. Occasionally she brings her son to the Central Park Zoo so she can sketch from life.

Like her oil works, these watercolor-and-gouache paintings feature numerous thin layers of glazing. Brodsky starts with watercolor, slowly adding gouache for opacity, then applies watercolor glazes between, allowing each layer to dry before applying the next. It takes her approximately 25 hours to complete one bird, and the result is mesmerizing, conjuring a tender sense of awe at nature's beauty.

Yet unlike her trees, which are drawn primarily from life, Brodsky's birds are mostly painted from images given to her by professional photographers. In addition, people who follow her on Instagram have sent along their own photos for her to paint. Each bird reflects a per-

sonal story. One woman called attention to a bird she had fed while recovering from brain surgery. Another sent photos of a long-loved pet cockatoo that had died. Others relay poems and quotations connected to the birds they ask her to paint.

Brodsky titled her series not from Anne Lamott's renowned book *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, but from a 1966 poem by Pablo Neruda: "I've wandered the world in search of life: bird by bird I've come to know the earth..." ("The Poet Says Goodbye to the Birds"). These paintings have fostered an online community and even a dedicated Instagram account (@birdbybirdproject).

#### **A LOVER OF LIFE**

Born in Minsk, Belarus, Brodsky left there with her family in 1989, shortly before the Iron Curtain fell. As refugees living temporarily in



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*Bird by Bird: White-Tailed Hillstar, 2018,*  
watercolor and gouache on paper, 5 1/2 x 4 3/4  
in., Garvey|Simon, New York City

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such European cities as Vienna and Rome, they endured the trying process of securing essential documents before eventually settling in Boston in 1991. Although this was surely nerve-wracking for her parents, Brodsky has fond memories of that period: “As a kid it was fantastic, probably the best time of my childhood.”

Perhaps it was that experience that sparked Brodsky’s passion for travel. Yet she half-jokingly attributes her adventurous spirit and her focus on one subject at a time (e.g., trees, birds) to “a lack of imagination.” Brodsky does not imagine what might go wrong during her journeys, instead representing what she sees with precision, letting the scenery around her signal what she might paint. “I don’t have very many new ideas [for new bodies of work]. I have one idea every year or two, and all have come [while I’m] alone on a bicycle abroad,” she explains. Brodsky says she rarely depicts people, partly because

she wants to differentiate herself from her younger sister, Maya, an accomplished figure and portrait painter.

Though it helps that she has nearly perfect eyesight and has mastered the smallest brushes available, Brodsky has always felt more comfortable making small images. Smiling, she recalls her first art teacher, a Bohemian friend of her mother’s who ran a little art school: “He gave me this huge easel and huge piece of paper, and I drew something really tiny in one corner.” After several unsuccessful attempts at a larger scale, “He told my mom he was incapable of teaching me.” To this day, Brodsky’s paintings rarely measure larger than five inches in diameter; indeed, they have actually grown smaller over time. She was introduced to miniatures by the art history professor Walter Denny, then encouraged to paint them by her plein air instructor, Bill Paterson. Both taught at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst, where Brodsky earned her B.F.A. degree.



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*Secret Life of Trees*  
83, 10 April 2016,  
oil and ballpoint pen  
on paper, 7 x 5 in.,  
private collection

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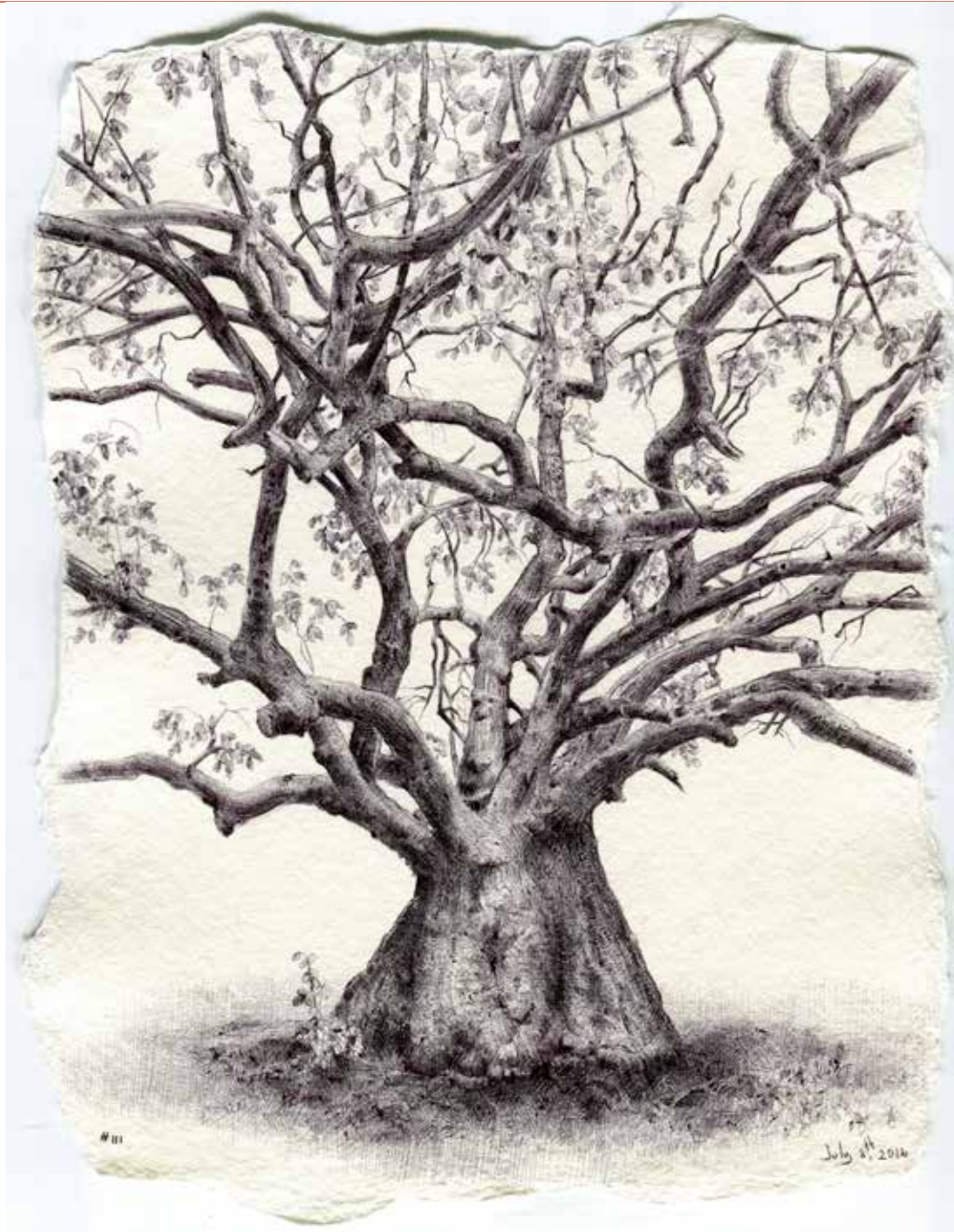
When she first visited Florence, at age 24, she was immediately enthralled by an exhibition of medieval illuminated manuscripts, and especially the miniaturist brothers Herman, Paul, and Johan Limbourg, active between 1385 and 1416. “When I saw their paintings in real life, I thought they were amazing,” Brodsky recalls. She admired immediately how miniatures can pull us into a universe that becomes even more fascinating because it is small enough to fit into the palm of our hand. This effect can truly feel magical.

If time travel were possible, Brodsky could easily imagine herself as a medieval illuminator. Yet her style also evokes such 19th-century Hudson River School painters as Frederic Edwin Church, and also such

Tonalists as George Inness. Other strong influences include Northern Renaissance masters like the brothers van Eyck (Jan, Hubert, and Lambert), Hans Holbein the Younger, and Pieter Bruegel, as well as various 17th-century Dutch landscapists. “Along with their enormous skill, I admire their idiosyncrasies,” Brodsky notes. “The Northern Renaissance produced some of the strangest and most beautiful paintings ever. The subjects those artists addressed were mostly religious or commissioned (for wealthy merchants), but within those parameters they let their creativity run wild, in a way I feel was unique in art history.”

By the time she turned 20, Brodsky had already trekked around Europe several times and sold a series of miniatures through a Boston





*Secret Life of Trees 111, 8*  
July 2016, ballpoint pen  
on paper, 8 x 6 in., private  
collection

gallery. “I remember the gallerist called me and said ‘Your painting has sold.’ I was so excited. It sold for \$600 and he gave me a check for \$300. It was much more money than I made waitressing for an entire week,” she laughs. Eventually Brodsky sold enough paintings to fund her first year of graduate study at the New York Academy of Art. There she was powerfully influenced by realist painters like Martha Martha Erlebacher, Vincent Desiderio, and Wade Schuman. “Wade has a genuinely original mind, which I actually don’t have myself,” she notes self-deprecatingly. “I really appreciate how you can almost see the wheels in his brain spinning.”

Brodsky feels that life has been kind to her. She has been able to sell her art consistently, except in the aftermath of the 2008 recession, yet even that slowdown taught her to hustle: it was then she turned Instagram to her advantage because miniatures so ideally suit its intimate format. Today Brodsky devotes considerable time to her son, her husband, and his two children from a previous marriage; now they look forward to the arrival of another child. “This is a time in life

when not many things get done for myself, and that is OK because I had a lot of time to do so before,” she muses. Having said that, Brodsky somehow manages to co-curate exhibitions of contemporary realist art (thus far at galleries in New York City and Denver), and recently started co-hosting the *Art Grind* podcast.

As if echoing the final line of Neruda’s poem, “Immobility never held me down,” Brodsky says she enjoys painting at home. “My studio is the corner of that couch. Before I got married, it was the corner of a much smaller couch. I can’t imagine what I would do if I had more space. But what I could use is 800 more years: to make more paintings, cycle around more countries, have more kids, and curate more shows.” ●

**Milene J. Fernandez** is a writer, editor, photographer, and arts & culture contributor to *The Epoch Times* and *Epoch Media Group* in New York. She is particularly interested in artists’ studio practices and reviewing exhibitions.