

Arkadia's Landscape by Elizabeth Cummings

"The Year in Art survey left me doubting my impressions of the past 12 months. In my mind, 2005 seemed like a vibrant year for art." John McDonald's review of the year in visual art, p18

Contact us

Editor Helen Anderson 9282 1761
spectrum@smh.com.au (no attachments)

Deputy editor Fiona McGill

Literary editor Malcolm Knox

The Planner theplanner@smh.com.au

Display advertising Sharni Montgomery

Phone: 9282 3248 Fax: 9282 1782

smontgomery@mail.fairfax.com.au

Entertainment advertising

Anya Fransman: afransman@mail.fairfax.com.au

Phone: 9282 2526 Fax: 9282 3332

Feedback: readerlink@smh.com.au

Phone: 9282 1569 Fax: 9282 3253

Cover illustration by Greg Bakes

CORRECTION

In the December 10 Architecture & Design column, the designer of the sculpture garden at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, was incorrectly attributed. It was designed by Harry Howard and Associates in 1978-9.

Spectrum

4 THE HOT SEAT

Penny Chapman's island drama; Big Questions

6 COVER STORY

Our critics choose the best albums of 2005

8 LIFE ETC

FEATURES Bridget Jones's diary; Stephen Lacey's family hits the road; The Planner; The Interactive Cook serves seafood; A festive Full Bottle; Fashion's white Christmas

14 BOOKS & IDEAS

REVIEWS *Tête-à-Tête* by Hazel Rowley; *Santa - A Life* by Jeremy Seal; *A Fair Field and No Favour - The Ashes 2005* by Gideon Haigh

18 VISUAL ART

John McDonald looks back at a year in the galleries

20 ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Film reviews - *The Legend of Zorro* and *Mrs Henderson Presents*; Saucy sounds of the Darkness

23 GIANT HOLIDAY CROSSWORD

24 ENTERTAINMENT GUIDE

Sydney's blockbuster ad guide to arts and entertainment

33 PUZZLES

All your favourites, including crosswords and Sudoku

34 TELEVISION

Ruth Ritchie reviews the week in TV; plus your television program guide



"Judi Dench strides through *Mrs Henderson Presents* like a force of nature, a more modern Lady Bracknell, with fewer manners but a sparkling sense of fun. Dench is, more than ever, magnificent." Film review, p21



**SPECTRUM
LATE EDITION
AVAILABLE SATURDAY**
New book and film reviews,
new arts and entertainment

Visual art

YEAR IN REVIEW

The guiding lights

From blockbusters to local galleries, JOHN McDONALD assembles his greatest hits and memories.

Every December, the S.H. Ervin Gallery stages a show called *The Year in Art*, bringing together the "greatest hits" from the commercial galleries and alternative spaces. The most recent incarnation of this popular survey, which finished last week, left me doubting my impressions of the past 12 months. In my mind, 2005 seemed like a vibrant year for art, but this was not reflected in the S.H. Ervin show. There were strong works by established figures, such as John Firth-Smith, Euan Macleod and Jan King, and impressive contributions by emerging artists such as Maria Kontis, Nigel Milsom, Juliana Bartuiliin and Brett McMahon, but certainly no surprises.

The only eyebrow-raisers were the omissions, including William Robinson, Idris Murphy and Alex Seton. One missed David Aspdon, who died earlier this year, and James Gleeson, who is 90 years old and still going strong. Margaret Olley might have had a claim as well. With the publication of a biography and shows in Sydney, Brisbane, Newcastle, Lismore and Mornington Peninsula, she has had the year of her life.

The photography was especially weak and gimmicky – a shame, in the same year that Bill Henson broke all box-office records for a photography exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW and the National Gallery of Victoria. One could have put together a more impressive selection with pictures taken by Fairfax staff photographers, where there is no shortage of talent and artistic ambition.

The outstanding painting at the S.H. Ervin was probably *Large Green Interior (Souvenir de Ghent)* by Peter Godwin, an artist who has re-emerged after a couple of decades in the wilderness. There is a traditional quality to Godwin's work, with its limited repertoire of interiors and still lifes, but his paintings have struck a chord with local collectors.

Godwin's work has been incubating for years, but he has no profile; he shows with the small-scale Defiance Gallery, and there is no publicity machine working on his behalf. His is a rare case where the art does all the

talking, and people seem to be listening. How long will it take the public galleries to catch up? If Bill Robinson's track record is any indication, they will wait until the prices have become exorbitant.

One of this year's notable acquisitions by the AGNSW was Elisabeth Cummings's *Arkaroolla landscape*, bought from the Salon des Refusés exhibition by curator Barry Pearce after it had been rejected from the Wynne Prize by the AGNSW Trustees. This

The most astonishing show was at the national maritime museum.



was a suitably ironic path into the collection for an artist who has been shamefully ignored for years. Pearce told me that it can be a battle to get works into the collection, and the Cummings was apparently no exception. In the past few months a proposed acquisition by James Powditch was knocked back, and others are still pending. It seems strange that such a rigorous process is enforced with inexpensive local works, while vast sums are squandered on second-rate pieces by international superstars.

I don't include the Cy Twombly triptych in that category. Despite the controversy at the beginning of this year, there's enough merit in that work to justify its place in the collection. I can't say the same about works by Sigmar Polke, Gilbert and George, Rachel Whiteread, Gerhard Richter and several others that look like the leftovers from the Christmas sales.

In the area of Australian art, AGNSW curators such as Pearce and Deborah Edwards deserve a vote of confidence for their conscientiousness, which should not be mistaken for conservatism. Edwards's grand project this year was the Margaret Preston retrospective, which gave us the very last word on this important artist. Serendipity dictated that in 2005 we were also able to view retrospectives by Grace Cossington Smith and Jean Bellette, allowing a unique opportunity to compare the achievements of Australia's leading women artists. It was fascinating how tastes divided into Preston and Cossington Smith camps.

Bellette, who was so admired by her contemporaries, was disappointing. Her references to classical mythology seemed dated and rather constricted. Yet there was enough in her show at the S.H. Ervin to suggest why she stood out from peers who were dabbling in neo-romantic imagery or abstraction.

One still encounters that politically correct demand that works by women make up at least 50 per cent of all group exhibitions that rely on public funding. But the fatuity of affirmative action is shown up by the fact that most of the exhibitions I reviewed this year have been by women. Not only have the big retro-



spectives been by female artists, but many of the best solo exhibitions in the commercial galleries. A lot of good shows went unreviewed, but it would be criminal not to mention Shona Wilson's survey at the Manly Art Gallery and Museum, and Mary Tonkin's landscapes at Australian Galleries. Neither of these artists was represented in the S.H. Ervin's *The Year in Art*.

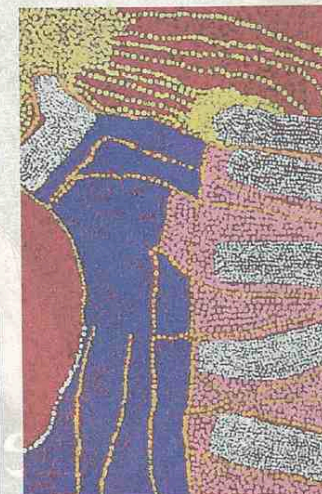
Among the Ervin's other notable omissions were the paintings of Pilawuk Regina Wilson and Yannima Tommy Watson, who had two of the stand-out exhibitions by indigenous artists – both at Agathon Gallery. Nor was there anything by Rosella Namok, the young Lockhart River painter who showed with

Hogarth Galleries, or the bark painters from Maningrida, seen in a dazzling show at Annandale Galleries. The most senior of those artists, John Mawurndjul, was given the unique honour of a retrospective at the Tinguely Museum in Basel, Switzerland – the first time an Australian artist has enjoyed a full-scale survey in continental Europe. The exhibition travels to the Sprengel Museum in Hanover next year, but no Australian venue has so far agreed to take the show. If nothing happens, this will be a national shame and embarrassment.

It has been a relatively quiet year for international exhibitions, with the Edvard Munch show at the National Gallery of Victoria and

Pissarro: *The First Impressionist*, still running at the AGNSW, being the two most impressive events. The NGV's *Dutch Masters* was the most expensive import of 2005, but it was a show in which an almost arbitrary collection of Dutch paintings was enlivened by a handful of masterworks. I look forward to the next collaboration between the NGV and the touring agency, Art Exhibitions Australia – *Picasso and Dora Maar* – which promises a more focused experience.

It is almost redundant to say that the annual hullabaloo about the Archibald Prize grew even more hysterical this year, despite the fact that John Olsen was one of the most obvious winners in recorded history. The



Big impressions ... (left to right) a figurehead from the *Les Genies de la Mer* exhibition; *Arkaroola landscape* by Elisabeth Cummings; *Untitled* by Bill Henson; and *Tjangara Nuguluringu* by Yannima Tommy Watson.

other great popular art event was *Sculpture by the Sea*, which continues to attract many thousands of visitors to Bondi, regardless of the usual mad scramble for sponsorship.

Ricky Swallow flew the Australian flag with some distinction at the Venice Biennale. The Museum of Contemporary Art rediscovered painting (sort of) in this year's *Primavera* survey of young artists. The Powerhouse Museum brought us *Greek Treasures*; a roller-coaster overview of international design; and a brilliant survey of Japanese fashion, which continues until January 29. The most astonishing exhibition of the year was at the Australian National Maritime Museum: *Les Genies de la Mer*, a collection of monumental wooden sculptures from the golden age of French naval glory.

The National Portrait Gallery continued its charmed existence, with uniformly good responses to its shows, and the allocation of \$76 million for a new building. By contrast, the National Gallery of Australia remained in the doldrums. The new director, Ron Radford, held us in suspense for 10 months before unveiling his "vision" for the Gallery, which proved to be more fanfare than substance. The one rabbit Radford pulled out of his hat was a proposal for using the government's Future Fund for public service superannuation to buy multi-million dollar paintings by modernists such as Kandinsky,

Mondrian and Barnett Newman. The only problem is that these pictures would have to be flogged some day to realise a profit on the investment. The Minister for Finance and Administration, Nick Minchin, showed more museological finesse than the NGA director, when he canned the idea.

This made me think of a recent statement by Mikhail Piotrovsky, the high-flying director of the Hermitage Museum, who threatened to ban loans to countries that hold works in lieu of unpaid international debts. According to Piotrovsky, governments must learn to understand that "art is not a commercial commodity".

This is not to deny the strength of the art market, merely to draw an inviolable distinction between works held in trust by public institutions, and those that are bought and sold by wealthy individuals. If the government had agreed to Radford's proposal about the Future Fund, that line would have been crossed, with potentially dangerous consequences. When we start totting up the resale value of works in our national collections we are putting a price on our patrimony. One of the qualities that makes art a special kind of commodity – and sends the value of private works soaring – is that the very best of it cannot be exchanged for cash. Thankfully, 2005 won't go down in art history as the year we sold the farm.