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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
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 innovation of this popular survey, which finished last week, let me reflecting my impressions of the past 12 months. In my mind, 2005 seemed like a rich year for art, but this was not reflected in the S.H. Ervin show. There were strong works by established figures, such as John Fair-Smith, James McDonald and Joe King, and impressive contributions by emerging artists such as Maria Kostal, Nigel Milson, Juliana Barrillii and Brett McMahon, but certainly no surprises.

The only eyebrow-raising were the omissions, including William Robinson, Mike Murphy and Alex Seton. One missed David Arpden, who died earlier this year, and James Gorman, who is 20 years old and still having strong. Margaret Olley might have had a claim as well. With the publication of a biography and shows in Sydney, Melbourne, Launceston and the Peranakan, 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 exhibition.

The outstanding painting at the S.H. Ervin was probably Large Green Interior (Vouevor de Chant) 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 hibernating for years, but he has no profit; he shows with the small-scale Delancey Gallery, and there is no publicity machine working on his behalf. It 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 in any indication, they will wait until the prices have become astronomical.

One of this year's notable acquisitions by the AGNSW was Elizabeth Hensleigh's Arkaroo lake scene, bought from the Salon des Barbeuses exhibition by curator Barry Pearce after it had been rejected by the Wynne Prize by the AGNSW Trustees. This was a typically ironic touch into the collection for an artist who has been virtually 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 Posswchluss was knocked back, and others are still pending. It seems strange that such a rigorous process is conducted with inexpensive local works, while some artists are squeezed out by second-rate pieces by international superstars.

I don't include the Ci Twainly update in that category. Despite the controversy at the beginning of this year, there's enough merit in this work to justify its place in the collection. I can't say the same about works by Eugenio Polito, 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 Debrah Edwards deserve a vote of confidence for their curation, which should not be mistaken for conservatism. Edwards's grand project this year was the Marquise 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 Coddington Smith and Joan Bellicke, allowing a unique opportunity to compare the achievements of Australia's leading women artists.

Bellicke, who was so admired by her contemporaries, was disappointing. Her references to classical mythology, sexualised and other constructed. Yet there was enough in her show at the S.H. Ervin to suggest why she stood out from peers who were doubling 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 reality 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
Big impressions ... (left to right) a figurehead from the Les Genies de la Mer exhibition; Arikaree landscape by Elizabeth Cummins; Unidentified by Bill Henson; and Tjampurr by Yamimba 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 Venise Biennale. The Museum of Contemporary Art red-covered painting (part of) in this year’s Prime Ministers' 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 24. 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 fanciful 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, Monet, and Barnett Newman. The only problem is that these pictures would have to be flagged 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 earned the idea.

This made me think of a recent statement by Mikhail Prokhorov, the high-flying director of the Hermitage Museum, who threatened to ban tourists to countries that hold works in lieu of unpaid international debts. According to Prokhorov, 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, the fine would have been crossed, with potentially disastrous consequences. When we start turning the national 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.