

Visual art

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Hanging offences

You can't second-guess judges on who'll make the final cut, writes JOHN McDONALD.

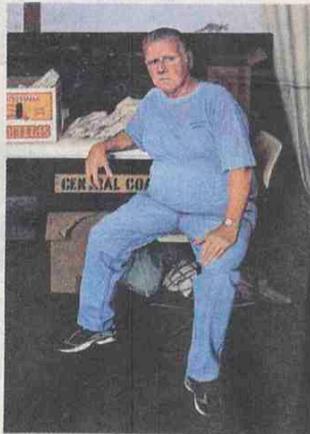
Salon des Refusés 2005
SH Ervin Gallery. Until June 19

Sulman and Wynne prizes
Art Gallery of NSW. Until July 3

Until well into the 20th century, rambling group exhibitions were the norm. One-man shows were comparatively rare, and generally held as tributes to recently deceased masters. It was only with the growth of the commercial gallery system that artists became accustomed to having an entire room to themselves, and to the luxury of being able to arrange the display of their own work in the most sympathetic manner. This has led to some artists becoming so attuned to the possibilities of presentation that they think in terms of exhibitions rather than individual works.

The abstract painter Robert Jacks once told me he was not certain about the quality of every single piece, but he always knew how to hang a show. The same might be said of Brett McMahon, whose current exhibition at the Ray Hughes Gallery (until Tuesday) is a perfect example of a show that is more than the sum of its parts. On one wall there are 75 small panels packed tightly together. Taken one by one, many of these panels are nondescript or repetitive, but the overall effect is awesome. The rest of the display uses repeated abstract motifs to build a kind of orchestrated rhythm between paintings.

At Stella Downer Fine Art in the Dank Street complex, the Sri Lankan artist Anoma Wijewardene achieves a similar effect on a much more compact scale (until May 14). Wijewardene has based a series of watercolour and pastel works on the poems of Rainer Maria Rilke, with the relevant passages quoted on panels next to the pictures (see Open Gallery, right). The works are lyrical abstractions, but with small patches collaged onto or cut out of the surfaces, like windows to another world. Each piece has its own introspective dimension, but it is the



cumulative effect of the paintings that gives this show its character.

Transplant one work from McMahon or Wijewardene's exhibitions into the Wynne or Sulman prizes at the Art Gallery of NSW, or the Salon des Refusés at the SH Ervin Gallery, and they would almost certainly get lost in the hubbub. To succeed in these riotous group exhibitions, one needs to make a clear, precise statement. A picture need not be bigger or brighter than anything else, it is enough that there is a hook that will catch the judges' attention.

This usually takes the form of a signature style. For instance, although Nicholas Harding's Archibald entry is an unconventional depiction of the veteran painter Bob Dickerson, with his head bobbing above the water of a swimming pool, Harding's heavily encrusted surfaces are instantly recognisable to the AGNSW Trustees. With familiarity comes a degree of sympathy, and the painting was included in the show. One suspects that only afterwards, when the entire Archibald was hung, did

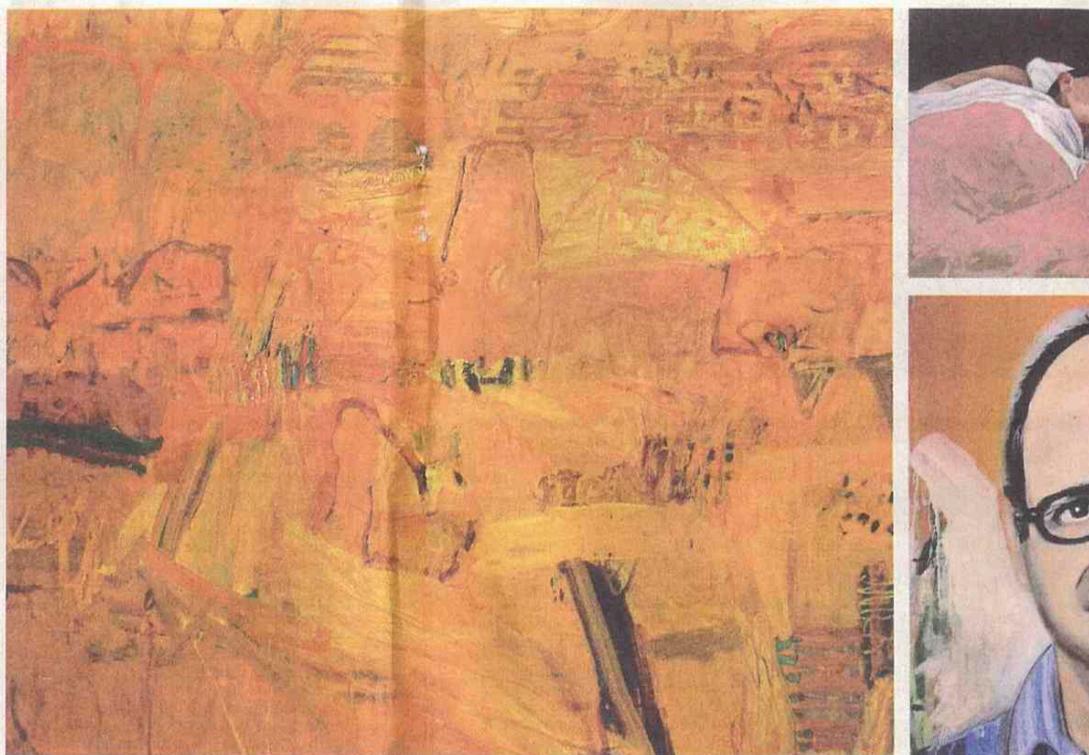
the Trustees start to appreciate the off-beat nature of the portrait, and it finished as official "runner-up" to John Olsen's *Self Portrait Janus Faced*.

Had a less distinctive artist painted the same image, there is no guarantee it would have been selected. And so it is that a lot of very good pictures are dumped from the annual Archibald, Wynne and Sulman prizes, for lack of that spark of recognition that wins the artist a second look from the judges.

This does not apply in the case of the Sulman Prize, which is judged every year by a distinguished artist. This time it was Mike Parr, who has recently stopped trying to shock his audience, and invited them to shock him, by zapping him with an electric current during a performance at Artspace. Apparently the gallery did not advertise this event, otherwise it might have made too great a drain on the power grid.

The bad news is that the electric shock therapy doesn't seem to have succeeded. It is almost redundant to say that the 2005 Sulman looks like a dog's breakfast – it looks like that every year. Yet it may be unfair to lay the blame solely at Parr's door, because a judge is only as good as the quality of the entries, and who knows what horrors and what treasures were omitted? It was pleasing to see works by artists such as Joanna Braithwaite, G.W. Bot, Guan Wei, Alan Jones, Andrew Sullivan and Michael Bell, but there were a lot of very odd inclusions, in various shades of morbidity and mediocrity. It was also good to see a first-timer win, although Sandro Nocentini's *My son has two mothers* may be more interesting for its tale of postmodern parenting than as a painting. With its blank-faced figures and stage-set backdrop, the work remained a slightly wooden and confusing allegory.

Jenny Sages was a worthy winner of this year's Wynne Prize for landscape with *The road to Utopia*, but her entry of last year – a much more ambitious, more abstract painting – was rejected from both the Wynne and the Salon des Refusés. Sages may owe her triumph this year to a



more conservative approach to subject matter, even if this gives a false impression of the way her work has developed in recent times. She is still showing us a landscape of dry, tufty grass, but in this year's entry, it is unmistakably grass, not a series of abstract scratches and scourings that capture the spirit rather than the literal appearance of the land.

The Wynne cannot have been an easy choice this year, with half a dozen reasonably strong contenders. Yet the really outstanding alternative never made it into the gallery. One glance at Elisabeth Cummings's *Arkaroola landscape* in the Salon des Refusés, and I experienced my annual dose of amazement and bewilderment that this work could have been omitted from the Wynne while so many lesser pieces made the cut. Had I been Robert Langdon, of *The Da Vinci Code*, I would have said: "What the!"

Cummings flirts with abstraction but never relinquishes her hold on the natural world. Her work takes a little time to

A matter of judgement: Andrew Sullivan's *Portrait of Tom Donohue* (far left); Elisabeth Cummings's *Arkaroola landscape* (main); Jonathan Nichols's *Two heads (Harris and Browne)* (top right); Michael Bell's *Portrait of Sister Victoire* (bottom right).

reveal its subtleties, but *Arkaroola landscape* is so obviously a major picture that one can only assume it was whistled past the Trustees while they were enjoying a smoko. There is nothing in the Wynne to match its complex play of translucent layers of rusty red that speak so eloquently of the harshness and visual beauty of the Outback.

The Cummings is a special case, but one could make quite a list of works in the Salon des Refusés that deserved inclusion in the Archibald or Wynne. The other truly jaw-dropping discovery was Judy Cassab's *Portrait of John Olsen*. How could the Trustees resist including a work by one of Australia's best-known portraitists, (and a former Trustee), which depicted the eventual winner of this year's prize? Even though the judges should always take quality as their sole criterion for inclusion or

rejection, in Cassab's case her relegation is almost an act of disrespect. It would be hard to argue that her portrait was inferior to many that were included.

Among others who might be considered unlucky, one can single out Catherine Abel, for *The lyrebird and the lily*, a sumptuous, decorative portrait of the singer Katie Noonan. With a nod and a wink to the Douanier Rousseau, Abel depicts her subject reclining in a jungle landscape, wearing a white evening gown. The neat touch is that Noonan is pregnant, and Abel has made her pregnancy utterly glamorous.

On the other hand, Salvatore Zofrea's portrait of Sister Victoire, AM of Darlinghurst is a no-frills image of a strong personality in the midst of the inner-city streets where she works. This is probably one of Zofrea's best portraits, and a cruel omission from this year's Archibald. Fate