

The best of the rest actually the best

The Archibald Prize and its accompanying show ponies may be a circus but their rejects are still worth a look, writes Sebastian Smee

At the annual free-for-all that is the Archibald Prize, there is no shortage of bridesmaids: artists such as Robert Hannaford, Jenny Sages and Bill Leak who are selected year after year but never win. But perhaps the saddest bridesmaids of all are the two other competitions: the Wynne Prize and the Sulman Prize. In the twittering outcry that accompanies the Archibald, these two competitions are easily overlooked.

It's not hard to see why. A prize for portraiture is a fairly straightforward proposition, but there's no easy way to explain these attendant prizes. The Wynne is for the best "landscape painting of Australian scenery", but it may also be awarded to a figure sculpture. The Sulman, meanwhile, is best thought of as a prize for the leftovers. Strictly speaking, it's awarded to "the best subject painting, genre painting, or mural project by an Australian artist".

This year, in each of these categories, there are works that leave many of the Archibald entries for dead. The rooms in which the finalists hang, adjacent to those displaying the Archibald, are worth a closer look.

The annual Salon des Refuses at Sydney's S. H. Ervin Gallery is also worthy of a visit. This is a display of works rejected by the trustees of the Art Gallery of NSW but found worthy by the three judges of the salon, not just in the category of portraiture, but in the category of landscape too.

If there is a big story this year it is that the display of landscape paintings at the Salon des Refuses is noticeably superior to the selection for the Wynne. (It should, of course, be the other way around: the judges at the AGNSW have first dibs.)

I would not make any grand claims for the standard of the portraits hanging in this year's Salon des Refuses. But there is, as always, a handful that you can't believe were omitted by the Archibald judges.

One is Nicholas Harding's portrait of Ben



Good company: Salon des Refuses exhibit *Channel*, by John Bartley

Wynne Prize and Sulman Prize
Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney, until May 13
Salon des Refuses
S. H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney, until April 29

Quilty with his baby, Joe, a large, lively work that is far superior to the mannered portrait of Quilty by Cherry Hood preferred by the trustees.

Paul Procee's small portrait of Reid Carpenter was another gem: its rejection seemingly confirming the assumption of many Archibald aspirants that to be a contender you have to paint on a huge scale. Michael Bell's *Self-portrait with a Carrot* was, similarly, streets ahead of most of the finalists in the Archibald. But the best of the rejects was probably John R. Walker's powerful portrait of Jeremy Nelson. Walker has applied the paint with a fidgety hand, creating a nerve-racking atmosphere of psychic pressure and a credible presence.

There are some very fine works in the Wynne over at the AGNSW. But taken together, too many rely on gimmicks and distinctly lack a sense of adventure.

For every work by a Joe Furlonger or a Walker — immediate, responsive, powerful — there is a meretricious work made from



Fidgety: John R. Walker's portrait of Jeremy Nelson

Coke cans or a bloated painting in which the most distinctive feature is a dead-straight horizon line.

One whole room at the AGNSW, in fact, has been given over to these outsized paintings that seem to regard landscape as a portal to spiritual, enigmatic states of mind. Their signature tick is emptiness. Of them, I liked Chris Langlois's *Night Ocean 1st Variation* and John Beard's *After Adraga*.

But I was underwhelmed by the winner, Philip Wolfhagen, a good painter who risks turning his fondness for empty, weather-filled landscapes into a nerveless manner.

I thought the best of the finalists was an unfashionably realist streetscape by Xu Wang. In flavourful contrast to the bloated romanticisms, Wang's modestly scaled depiction of King Street in Sydney's Newtown is packed with visual information: shop signs, awnings, cars and clouds. The row of buildings has a jaunty lean to it, and the whole thing is brilliantly observed.

There is nothing better in the landscape category at the S. H. Ervin Gallery, and yet the overall standard is conspicuously higher. Most of the artists in the selection veer towards poetic abstraction, a response to the landscape with strong pedigree in Australia.

Peter Sharp and Ross Laurie have produced powerful, abstracted works in which

texture, off-centre compositions and fine-tuned colour all play a part.

Just as absorbing were works by John Bartley and Brett McMahon. But Elisabeth Cummings's *Tea-Tree Swamp — South Stradbroke* seemed to me the pick of the bunch: specific, gorgeous and humming with a sense of place.

Limited space at the S. H. Ervin Gallery means that its Salon des Refuses does not extend to rejected entries from the Sulman. But three paintings hanging in the Sulman deserve singling out.

One is Nicholas Harding's *Beach Life (Blue Chair and Figure)*, an image of beachside torpor bathed in lush, drenching light. Another is Furlonger's *Old Man in His Room*. The tallest painting in any of the categories, this bold, blockish image of a clown is utterly entrancing.

And finally, Peter Godwin's *The Blue Curtain/Studio* is superb, an image as beautiful and ambiguous as any painting I have seen this year.

Such paintings remind us that without the anarchic free-for-all that is the annual Archibald, Wynne and Sulman circus, we might not get to see these examples of real, passionate painting fresh off the easel in our public galleries.

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