A brilliance that defies fashion

Mania for the new should not detract from fine works produced by artists with a long track record, writes JOHN MCDONALD.

On those rare weekends when this column gets out of the museums and spends time in the commercial galleries, the competition for a mention is fierce. People are always asking, “What are you writing about next week?” If the answer is something like “Kevin Connor and Elisabeth Cummings”, a standard comeback is “Oh, why don’t you write about somebody new?”

Therein lies the rub, as Hamlet said, for the mania for the new is one of the great blights on the contemporary art scene. An artist may be new but not necessarily good. Furthermore, what seems to be new is often nothing but a rehash of something that was done 50 years ago and conveniently forgotten. Rather than a triumph of art we celebrate a failure of short-term memory. Even a brilliant debut can be deceptive, for the history of art is littered with false starts and unfulfilled promise.

An obsession with newness, combined with an unwillingness to look conscientiously at paintings, has become characteristic of the trustees of the Art Gallery of NSW in their choice of winners for the Archibald and Wynne prizes. After looking at their selections of recent years, any artist on the far side of 50 might decide it is hardly worth entering these competitions any more.

Connor (born 1932) and Cummings (1934) are two artists who have most right to feel aggrieved about the judges’ decisions, although neither would ever make a fuss. In Connor’s case, he probably had the outstanding entry in this year’s Wynne Prize, which was awarded to Sam Leach for a painting flagrantly in breach of the rules. Connor may even have been lucky with his self-portrait in the Archibald – a withdrawn, introverted painting that kept getting better with each viewing.

At least Connor gets his work hung. On two occasions, in 2005 and 2009, Cummings had a work rejected from the Wynne Prize, only to shine in the Salon des Refusés. In an embarr
drawing called Interior (1980), has the unctuous quality we associate with a draughtsman such as Donald Friend. It reveals a natural graphic talent poised on the brim of improvisation. The rest of this brilliant, busy collection, shows Cummings working against that natural bent, making life more difficult for herself. This is precisely the process that artists such as Friend and Brett Whiteley were unable to sustain.

Every John Olsen has been through periods where his graphic instincts have led him into areas where the pictures became easy and repetitious. Maybe Cummings has maintained her edge because she has never been feted like her male counterparts, who are represented in every public collection. Maybe it is because she has always put the demands of her art before her career. The most certain reason is that she actually enjoys the difficulty of grappling with the problems that arise with any piece that leads into uncharted territory. This enjoyment, for both artist and viewer, should never be underestimated.

The result is a body of work that keeps asking questions, experimenting, shifting and evolving. Frequently these shifts have been in response to a different medium. Her etchings tend to be dense and multi-layered, while some of her works in pencil, ink wash and gouache barely grace the surface of the paper. The show is mainly landscape, with a selection of interiors and still lifes, but every piece has a strongly abstract dimension, as if the subject matter were only the starting point for a composition.

Every artist seeks his or her own truth, although a philosopher will tell you art has no truth-value per se. This is why an artist such as Cummings rarely seems to recognize a dividing line between figurative and abstraction. What she is seeking cannot be summed up in a tidy proposition but is vagueness makes it feel no less real or close at hand.

Fuan Macleod (born 1956) is another painter whose work appears to be evolving in ways beyond his immediate control. His exhibitions at Watts Gallery, inspired by a trip to Antarctica with fellow painter Neil Fraser and photographer Tim Chong, while Fraser's paintings, shown recently at Philip Bacon Galleries in Brisbane, take a highly dramatic, panoramic approach to this landscape, Macleod has used the Antarctic as a stage set for his inner drama.

The starkness of this frozen environment is perfectly suited to Macleod's rugged style of painting. The dark, anonymous figure that features in so many of his works seems right at home in a landscape of sea, sky, ice and gravel. In other hands, a sole figure would be reduced to insignificance by towering cliffs of blue-tinged ice. In Macleod's case, these shadowy monoliths seem only to reflect the greater darkness within the silhouette.

Having said that, the last painting in the show, Tracks feels less imposing than some of the smaller works such as Jacket and Figure and Boat in a. As the scale increases, there is an opposing diminution of content.

This has been a tragic time for Watts Gallery, with the death of July 4 of gallerist Ingar Jegge. We can only hope that the gallery recovers from this blow.

Waltzing Matilda...Sue Macleod

Life Jacket (2010); (top left) Contour's Curve; Light, Right
Street (2006-08)